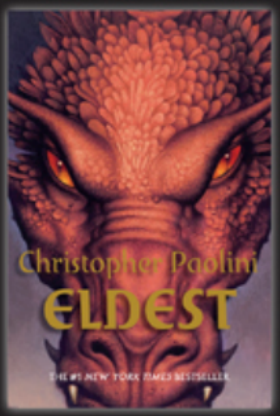
CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI

ERAGON · ELDEST
BRISINGR · INHERITANCE



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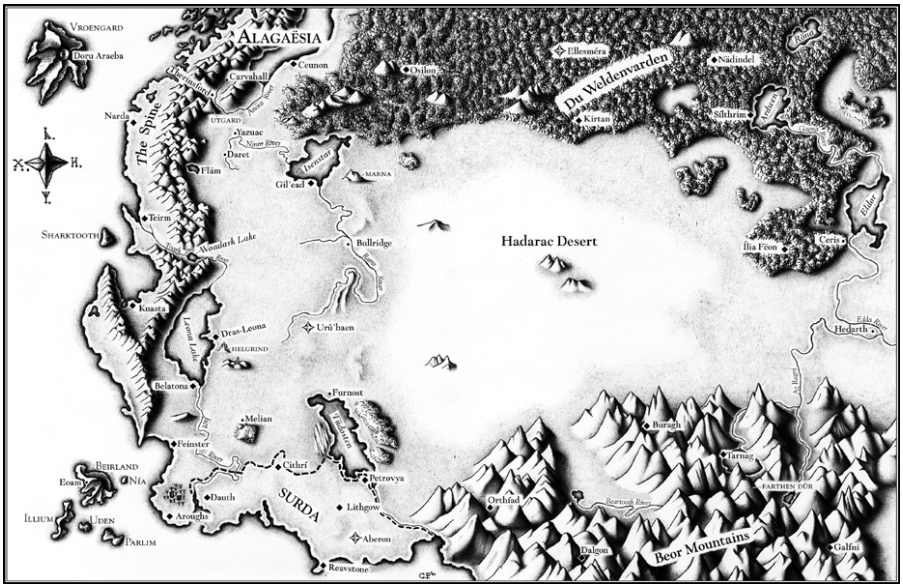

Vroengard
Doru Araeba
Alagaësia
Ceunon
Carvahall
Thurinsford
Narda
The Spine
Utgard
Yazuac
Daret
Flām
Isenstar
Gil'ead
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Teirm
Sharktooth
Woodark Lake
Bullridge
Kuasta
Leona Lake
Dras-Leona
Helgrind
Urū'baen
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Surda
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Ilia Fēon
Ceris
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Buragh
Tarnag
Farthen Dūr
Orthíad
Beartooth River
Dalgon
Beor Mountains
Galfní

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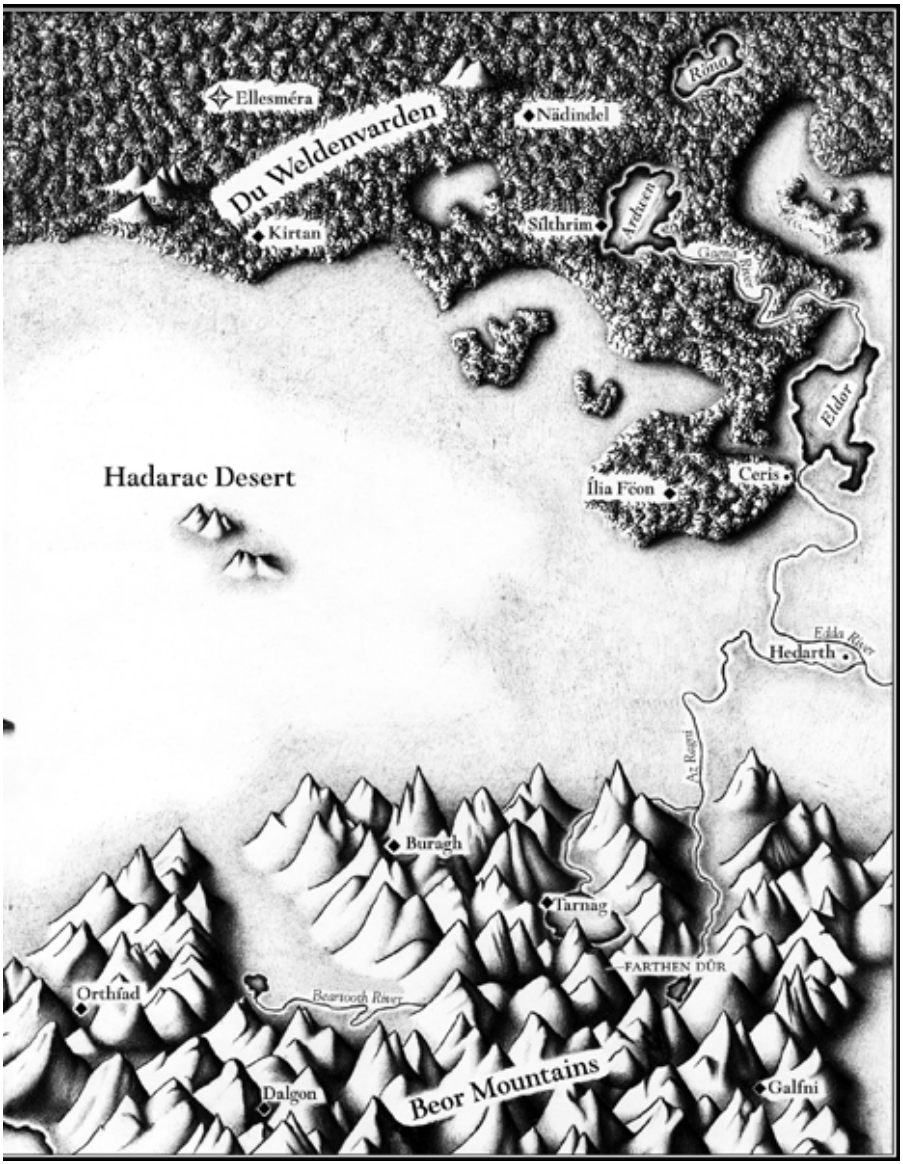
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Ceris
Edda River
Hedarth
Az Ragni
Buragh
Tarnag
FARTHEN DÛR
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Beartooth River
Dalgon
Beor Mountains
Galfni

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Christopher Paolini
ERAGON
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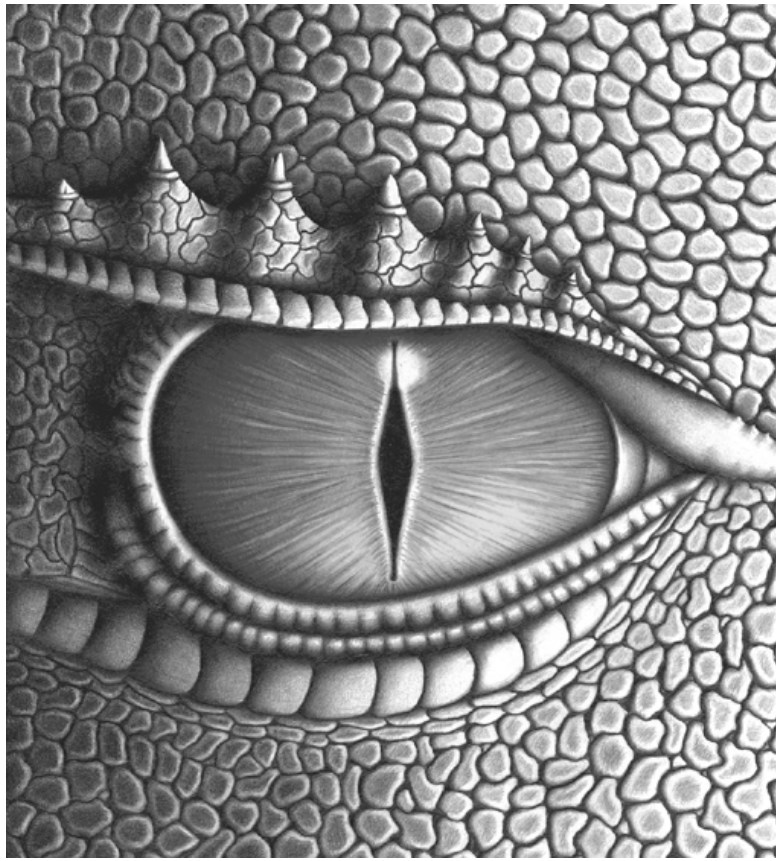

ERAGON

BOOK I IN THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

Christopher Paolini

ALFRED A. KNOPF
NEW YORK

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This book is dedicated to my mom, for showing me the magic in the world;
to my dad, for revealing the man behind the curtain.
And also to my sister, Angela, for helping when I'm "blue."

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Prologue: Shade of Fear

Wind howled through the night, carrying a scent that would change the world. A tall Shade lifted his head and sniffed the air. He looked human except for his crimson hair and maroon eyes.

He blinked in surprise. The message had been correct: they were here. Or was it a trap? He weighed the odds, then said icily, "Spread out; hide behind trees and bushes. Stop whoever is coming … or die."

Around him shuffled twelve Urgals with short swords and round iron shields painted with black symbols. They resembled men with bowed legs and thick, brutish arms made for crushing. A pair of twisted horns grew above their small ears. The monsters hurried into the brush, grunting as they hid. Soon the rustling quieted and the forest was silent again.

The Shade peered around a thick tree and looked up the trail. It was too dark for any human to see, but for him the faint moonlight was like sunshine streaming between the trees; every detail was clear and sharp to his searching gaze. He remained unnaturally quiet, a long pale sword in his hand. A wire-thin scratch curved down the blade. The weapon was thin enough to slip between a pair of ribs, yet stout enough to hack through the hardest armor.

The Urgals could not see as well as the Shade; they groped like blind beggars, fumbling with their weapons. An owl screeched, cutting through the silence. No one relaxed until the bird flew past. Then the monsters shivered in the cold night; one snapped a twig with his heavy boot. The Shade hissed in anger, and the Urgals shrank back, motionless. He suppressed his distaste—they smelled like fetid meat—and turned away. They were tools, nothing more.

The Shade forced back his impatience as the minutes became hours. The scent must have wafted far ahead of its owners. He did not let the Urgals get up or warm themselves. He denied himself those luxuries, too, and stayed behind the tree, watching the trail. Another gust of wind rushed through the forest. The smell was stronger this time. Excited, he lifted a thin lip in a snarl.

"Get ready," he whispered, his whole body vibrating. The tip of his sword moved in small circles. It had taken many plots and much pain to bring himself to this moment. It would not do to lose control now.

Eyes brightened under the Urgals' thick brows, and the creatures gripped their weapons tighter. Ahead of them, the Shade heard a clink as something hard struck a loose stone. Faint smudges emerged from the darkness and advanced down the trail.

Three white horses with riders cantered toward the ambush, their heads held high and proud, their coats rippling in the moonlight like liquid silver.

On the first horse was an elf with pointed ears and elegantly slanted eyebrows. His build was slim but strong, like a rapier. A powerful bow was slung on his back. A sword pressed against his side opposite a quiver of arrows fletched with swan feathers.

The last rider had the same fair face and angled features as the other. He carried a long spear in his right hand and a white dagger at his belt. A helm of extraordinary craftsmanship, wrought with amber and gold, rested on his head.

Between these two rode a raven-haired elven lady, who surveyed her surroundings with poise. Framed by long black locks, her deep eyes shone with a driving force. Her clothes were unadorned, yet her beauty was undiminished. At her side was a sword, and on her back a long bow with a quiver. She carried in her lap a pouch that she frequently looked at, as if to reassure herself that it was still there.

One of the elves spoke quietly, but the Shade could not hear what was said. The lady answered with obvious authority, and her guards switched places. The one wearing the helm took the lead, shifting his spear to a readier grip. They passed the Shade's hiding place and the first few Urgals without suspicion.

The Shade was already savoring his victory when the wind changed direction and swept toward the elves, heavy with the Urgals' stench. The horses snorted with alarm and tossed their heads. The riders stiffened, eyes flashing from side to side, then wheeled their mounts around and galloped away.

The lady's horse surged forward, leaving her guards far behind. Forsaking their hiding, the Urgals stood and released a stream of black arrows. The Shade jumped out from behind the tree, raised his right hand, and shouted, "Garjzla!"

A red bolt flashed from his palm toward the elven lady, illuminating the trees with a bloody light. It struck her steed, and the horse toppled with a high-pitched squeal, plowing into the ground chest-first. She leapt off the animal with inhuman speed, landed lightly, then glanced back for her guards.

The Urgals' deadly arrows quickly brought down the two elves. They fell from the noble horses, blood pooling in the dirt. As the Urgals rushed to the slain elves, the Shade screamed, "After her! She is the one I want!" The monsters grunted and rushed down the trail.

A cry tore from the elf's lips as she saw her dead companions. She took a step toward them, then cursed her enemies and bounded into the forest.

While the Urgals crashed through the trees, the Shade climbed a

piece of granite that jutted above them. From his perch he could see all of the surrounding forest. He raised his hand and uttered, “Istalrí boetk!” and a quarter-mile section of the forest exploded into flames. Grimly he burned one section after another until there was a ring of fire, a half-league across, around the ambush site. The flames looked like a molten crown resting on the forest. Satisfied, he watched the ring carefully, in case it should falter.

The band of fire thickened, contracting the area the Urgals had to search. Suddenly, the Shade heard shouts and a coarse scream. Through the trees he saw three of his charges fall in a pile, mortally wounded. He caught a glimpse of the elf running from the remaining Urgals.

She fled toward the craggy piece of granite at a tremendous speed. The Shade examined the ground twenty feet below, then jumped and landed nimbly in front of her. She skidded around and sped back to the trail. Black Urgal blood dripped from her sword, staining the pouch in her hand.

The horned monsters came out of the forest and hemmed her in, blocking the only escape routes. Her head whipped around as she tried to find a way out. Seeing none, she drew herself up with regal disdain. The Shade approached her with a raised hand, allowing himself to enjoy her helplessness.

“Get her.”

As the Urgals surged forward, the elf pulled open the pouch, reached into it, and then let it drop to the ground. In her hands was a large sapphire stone that reflected the angry light of the fires. She raised it over her head, lips forming frantic words. Desperate, the Shade barked, “Garjzla!”

A ball of red flame sprang from his hand and flew toward the elf, fast as an arrow. But he was too late. A flash of emerald light briefly illuminated the forest, and the stone vanished. Then the red fire smote her and she collapsed.

The Shade howled in rage and stalked forward, flinging his sword at a tree. It passed halfway through the trunk, where it stuck, quivering. He shot nine bolts of energy from his palm—which killed the Urgals instantly—then ripped his sword free and strode to the elf.

Prophecies of revenge, spoken in a wretched language only he knew, rolled from his tongue. He clenched his thin hands and glared at the sky. The cold stars stared back, unwinking, otherworldly watchers. Disgust curled his lip before he turned back to the unconscious elf.

Her beauty, which would have entranced any mortal man, held no charm for him. He confirmed that the stone was gone, then retrieved his horse from its hiding place among the trees. After tying the elf

onto the saddle, he mounted the charger and made his way out of the woods.

He quenched the fires in his path but left the rest to burn.

Discovery

Eragon knelt in a bed of trampled reed grass and scanned the tracks with a practiced eye. The prints told him that the deer had been in the meadow only a half-hour before. Soon they would bed down. His target, a small doe with a pronounced limp in her left forefoot, was still with the herd. He was amazed she had made it so far without a wolf or bear catching her.

The sky was clear and dark, and a slight breeze stirred the air. A silvery cloud drifted over the mountains that surrounded him, its edges glowing with ruddy light cast from the harvest moon cradled between two peaks. Streams flowed down the mountains from stolid glaciers and glistening snowpacks. A brooding mist crept along the valley's floor, almost thick enough to obscure his feet.

Eragon was fifteen, less than a year from manhood. Dark eyebrows rested above his intense brown eyes. His clothes were worn from work. A hunting knife with a bone handle was sheathed at his belt, and a buckskin tube protected his yew bow from the mist. He carried a wood-frame pack.

The deer had led him deep into the Spine, a range of untamed mountains that extended up and down the land of Alagaësia. Strange tales and men often came from those mountains, usually boding ill. Despite that, Eragon did not fear the Spine—he was the only hunter near Carvahall who dared track game deep into its craggy recesses.

It was the third night of the hunt, and his food was half gone. If he did not fell the doe, he would be forced to return home empty handed. His family needed the meat for the rapidly approaching winter and could not afford to buy it in Carvahall.

Eragon stood with quiet assurance in the dusky moonlight, then strode into the forest toward a glen where he was sure the deer would rest. The trees blocked the sky from view and cast feathery shadows on the ground. He looked at the tracks only occasionally; he knew the way.

At the glen, he strung his bow with a sure touch, then drew three arrows and nocked one, holding the others in his left hand. The moonlight revealed twenty or so motionless lumps where the deer lay in the grass. The doe he wanted was at the edge of the herd, her left foreleg stretched out awkwardly.

Eragon slowly crept closer, keeping the bow ready. All his work of the past three days had led to this moment. He took a last steadying breath and—an explosion shattered the night.

The herd bolted. Eragon lunged forward, racing through the grass as a fiery wind surged past his cheek. He slid to a stop and loosed an arrow at the bounding doe. It missed by a finger's breadth and hissed into darkness. He cursed and spun around, instinctively nocking another arrow.

Behind him, where the deer had been, smoldered a large circle of grass and trees. Many of the pines stood bare of their needles. The grass outside the charring was flattened. A wisp of smoke curled in the air, carrying a burnt smell. In the center of the blast radius lay a polished blue stone. Mist snaked across the scorched area and swirled insubstantial tendrils over the stone.

Eragon watched for danger for several long minutes, but the only thing that moved was the mist. Cautiously, he released the tension from his bow and moved forward. Moonlight cast him in pale shadow as he stopped before the stone. He nudged it with an arrow, then jumped back. Nothing happened, so he warily picked it up.

Nature had never polished a stone as smooth as this one. Its flawless surface was dark blue, except for thin veins of white that spiderwebbed across it. The stone was cool and frictionless under his fingers, like hardened silk. Oval and about a foot long, it weighed several pounds, though it felt lighter than it should have.

Eragon found the stone both beautiful and frightening. *Where did it come from? Does it have a purpose?* Then a more disturbing thought came to him: *Was it sent here by accident, or am I meant to have it?* If he had learned anything from the old stories, it was to treat magic, and those who used it, with great caution.

But what should I do with the stone? It would be tiresome to carry, and there was a chance it was dangerous. It might be better to leave it behind. A flicker of indecision ran through him, and he almost dropped it, but something stayed his hand. *At the very least, it might pay for some food,* he decided with a shrug, tucking the stone into his pack.

The glen was too exposed to make a safe camp, so he slipped back into the forest and spread his bedroll beneath the upturned roots of a fallen tree. After a cold dinner of bread and cheese, he wrapped himself in blankets and fell asleep, pondering what had occurred.

The sun rose the next morning with a glorious conflagration of pink and yellow. The air was fresh, sweet, and very cold. Ice edged the streams, and small pools were completely frozen over. After a breakfast of porridge, Eragon returned to the glen and examined the charred area. The morning light revealed no new details, so he started for home.

The rough game trail was faintly worn and, in places, nonexistent. Because it had been forged by animals, it often backtracked and took long detours. Yet for all its flaws, it was still the fastest way out of the mountains.

The Spine was one of the only places that King Galbatorix could not call his own. Stories were still told about how half his army disappeared after marching into its ancient forest. A cloud of misfortune and bad luck seemed to hang over it. Though the trees grew tall and the sky shone brightly, few people could stay in the Spine for long without suffering an accident. Eragon was one of those few—not through any particular gift, it seemed to him, but because of persistent vigilance and sharp reflexes. He had hiked in the mountains for years, yet he was still wary of them. Every time he thought they had surrendered their secrets, something happened to upset his understanding of them—like the stone's appearance.

He kept up a brisk pace, and the leagues steadily disappeared. In late evening he arrived at the edge of a precipitous ravine. The Anora River rushed by far below, heading to Palancar Valley. Gorged with hundreds of tiny streams, the river was a brute force, battling against the rocks and boulders that barred its way. A low rumble filled the air.

He camped in a thicket near the ravine and watched the moonrise before going to bed.

It grew colder over the next day and a half. Eragon traveled quickly and saw little of the wary wildlife. A bit past noon, he heard the Igualda Falls blanketing everything with the dull sound of a thousand splashes. The trail led him onto a moist slate outcropping, which the river sped past, flinging itself into empty air and down mossy cliffs.

Before him lay Palancar Valley, exposed like an unrolled map. The base of the Igualda Falls, more than a half-mile below, was the northernmost point of the valley. A little ways from the falls was Carvahall, a cluster of brown buildings. White smoke rose from the chimneys, defiant of the wilderness around it. At this height, farms

were small square patches no bigger than the end of his finger. The land around them was tan or sandy, where dead grass swayed in the wind. The Anora River wound from the falls toward Palancar's southern end, reflecting great strips of sunlight. Far in the distance it flowed past the village Therinsford and the lonely mountain Utgard. Beyond that, he knew only that it turned north and ran to the sea.

After a pause, Eragon left the outcropping and started down the trail, grimacing at the descent. When he arrived at the bottom, soft dusk was creeping over everything, blurring colors and shapes into gray masses. Carvahall's lights shimmered nearby in the twilight; the houses cast long shadows. Aside from Therinsford, Carvahall was the only village in Palancar Valley. The settlement was secluded and surrounded by harsh, beautiful land. Few traveled here except merchants and trappers.

The village was composed of stout log buildings with low roofs—some thatched, others shingled. Smoke billowed from the chimneys, giving the air a woody smell. The buildings had wide porches where people gathered to talk and conduct business. Occasionally a window brightened as a candle or lamp was lit. Eragon heard men talking loudly in the evening air while wives scurried to fetch their husbands, scolding them for being late.

Eragon wove his way between the houses to the butcher's shop, a broad, thick-beamed building. Overhead, the chimney belched black smoke.

He pushed the door open. The spacious room was warm and well lit by a fire snapping in a stone fireplace. A bare counter stretched across the far side of the room. The floor was strewn with loose straw. Everything was scrupulously clean, as if the owner spent his leisure time digging in obscure crannies for minuscule pieces of filth. Behind the counter stood the butcher Sloan. A small man, he wore a cotton shirt and a long, bloodstained smock. An impressive array of knives swung from his belt. He had a sallow, pockmarked face, and his black eyes were suspicious. He polished the counter with a ragged cloth.

Sloan's mouth twisted as Eragon entered. "Well, the mighty hunter joins the rest of us mortals. How many did you bag this time?"

"None," was Eragon's curt reply. He had never liked Sloan. The butcher always treated him with disdain, as if he were something unclean. A widower, Sloan seemed to care for only one person—his daughter, Katrina, on whom he doted.

"I'm amazed," said Sloan with affected astonishment. He turned his back on Eragon to scrape something off the wall. "And that's your reason for coming here?"

"Yes," admitted Eragon uncomfortably.

"If that's the case, let's see your money." Sloan tapped his fingers

when Eragon shifted his feet and remained silent. “Come on—either you have it or you don’t. Which is it?”

“I don’t really have any money, but I do—”

“What, no money?” the butcher cut him off sharply. “And you expect to buy meat! Are the other merchants giving away their wares? Should I just hand you the goods without charge? Besides,” he said abruptly, “it’s late. Come back tomorrow with money. I’m closed for the day.”

Eragon glared at him. “I can’t wait until tomorrow, Sloan. It’ll be worth your while, though; I found something to pay you with.” He pulled out the stone with a flourish and set it gently on the scarred counter, where it gleamed with light from the dancing flames.

“Stole it is more likely,” muttered Sloan, leaning forward with an interested expression.

Ignoring the comment, Eragon asked, “Will this be enough?”

Sloan picked up the stone and gauged its weight speculatively. He ran his hands over its smoothness and inspected the white veins. With a calculating look, he set it down. “It’s pretty, but how much is it worth?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Eragon, “but no one would have gone to the trouble of shaping it unless it had some value.”

“Obviously,” said Sloan with exaggerated patience. “But how much value? Since you don’t know, I suggest that you find a trader who does, or take my offer of three crowns.”

“That’s a miser’s bargain! It must be worth at least ten times that,” protested Eragon. Three crowns would not even buy enough meat to last a week.

Sloan shrugged. “If you don’t like my offer, wait until the traders arrive. Either way, I’m tired of this conversation.”

The traders were a nomadic group of merchants and entertainers who visited Carvahall every spring and winter. They bought whatever excess the villagers and local farmers had managed to grow or make, and sold what they needed to live through another year: seeds, animals, fabric, and supplies like salt and sugar.

But Eragon did not want to wait until they arrived; it could be a while, and his family needed the meat now. “Fine, I accept,” he snapped.

“Good, I’ll get you the meat. Not that it matters, but where did you find this?”

“Two nights ago in the Spine—”

“Get out!” demanded Sloan, pushing the stone away. He stomped furiously to the end of the counter and started scrubbing old bloodstains off a knife.

“Why?” asked Eragon. He drew the stone closer, as if to protect it

from Sloan's wrath.

"I won't deal with anything you bring back from those damned mountains! Take your sorcerer's stone elsewhere." Sloan's hand suddenly slipped and he cut a finger on the knife, but he seemed not to notice. He continued to scrub, staining the blade with fresh blood.

"You refuse to sell to me!"

"Yes! Unless you pay with coins," Sloan growled, and hefted the knife, sidling away. "Go, before I make you!"

The door behind them slammed open. Eragon whirled around, ready for more trouble. In stomped Horst, a hulking man. Sloan's daughter, Katrina—a tall girl of sixteen—trailed behind him with a determined expression. Eragon was surprised to see her; she usually absented herself from any arguments involving her father. Sloan glanced at them warily, then started to accuse Eragon. "He won't—"

"Quiet," announced Horst in a rumbling voice, cracking his knuckles at the same time. He was Carvahall's smith, as his thick neck and scarred leather apron attested. His powerful arms were bare to the elbow; a great expanse of hairy muscular chest was visible through the top of his shirt. A black beard, carelessly trimmed, roiled and knotted like his jaw muscles. "Sloan, what have you done now?"

"Nothing." He gave Eragon a murderous gaze, then spat, "This … *boy* came in here and started badgering me. I asked him to leave, but he won't budge. I even threatened him and he still ignored me!" Sloan seemed to shrink as he looked at Horst.

"Is this true?" demanded the smith.

"No!" replied Eragon. "I offered this stone as payment for some meat, and he accepted it. When I told him that I'd found it in the Spine, he refused to even touch it. What difference does it make where it came from?"

Horst looked at the stone curiously, then returned his attention to the butcher. "Why won't you trade with him, Sloan? I've no love for the Spine myself, but if it's a question of the stone's worth, I'll back it with my own money."

The question hung in the air for a moment. Then Sloan licked his lips and said, "This is my own store. I can do whatever I want."

Katrina stepped out from behind Horst and tossed back her auburn hair like a spray of molten copper. "Father, Eragon *is* willing to pay. Give him the meat, and then we can have supper."

Sloan's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Go back to the house; this is none of your business.… I said *go!*" Katrina's face hardened, then she marched out of the room with a stiff back.

Eragon watched with disapproval but dared not interfere. Horst tugged at his beard before saying reproachfully, "Fine, you can deal with me. What were you going to get, Eragon?" His voice reverberated

through the room.

"As much as I could."

Horst pulled out a purse and counted out a pile of coins. "Give me your best roasts and steaks. Make sure that it's enough to fill Eragon's pack." The butcher hesitated, his gaze darting between Horst and Eragon. "Not selling to me would be a very bad idea," stated Horst.

Glowering venomously, Sloan slipped into the back room. A frenzy of chopping, wrapping, and low cursing reached them. After several uncomfortable minutes, he returned with an armful of wrapped meat. His face was expressionless as he accepted Horst's money, then proceeded to clean his knife, pretending that they were not there.

Horst scooped up the meat and walked outside. Eragon hurried behind him, carrying his pack and the stone. The crisp night air rolled over their faces, refreshing after the stuffy shop.

"Thank you, Horst. Uncle Garrow will be pleased."

Horst laughed quietly. "Don't thank me. I've wanted to do that for a long time. Sloan's a vicious troublemaker; it does him good to be humbled. Katrina heard what was happening and ran to fetch me. Good thing I came—the two of you were almost at blows. Unfortunately, I doubt he'll serve you or any of your family the next time you go in there, even if you do have coins."

"Why did he explode like that? We've never been friendly, but he's always taken our money. And I've never seen him treat Katrina that way," said Eragon, opening the top of the pack.

Horst shrugged. "Ask your uncle. He knows more about it than I do."

Eragon stuffed the meat into his pack. "Well, now I have one more reason to hurry home … to solve this mystery. Here, this is rightfully yours." He proffered the stone.

Horst chuckled. "No, you keep your strange rock. As for payment, Albriech plans to leave for Feinster next spring. He wants to become a master smith, and I'm going to need an assistant. You can come and work off the debt on your spare days."

Eragon bowed slightly, delighted. Horst had two sons, Albriech and Baldor, both of whom worked in his forge. Taking one's place was a generous offer. "Again, thank you! I look forward to working with you." He was glad that there was a way for him to pay Horst. His uncle would never accept charity. Then Eragon remembered what his cousin had told him before he had left on the hunt. "Roran wanted me to give Katrina a message, but since I can't, can you get it to her?"

"Of course."

"He wants her to know that he'll come into town as soon as the merchants arrive and that he will see her then."

"That all?"

Eragon was slightly embarrassed. “No, he also wants her to know that she is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen and that he thinks of nothing else.”

Horst’s face broke into a broad grin, and he winked at Eragon. “Getting serious, isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir,” Eragon answered with a quick smile. “Could you also give her my thanks? It was nice of her to stand up to her father for me. I hope that she isn’t punished because of it. Roran would be furious if I got her into trouble.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Sloan doesn’t know that she called me, so I doubt he’ll be too hard on her. Before you go, will you sup with us?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. Garrow is expecting me,” said Eragon, tying off the top of the pack. He hoisted it onto his back and started down the road, raising his hand in farewell.

The meat slowed him down, but he was eager to be home, and renewed vigor filled his steps. The village ended abruptly, and he left its warm lights behind. The pearlescent moon peeked over the mountains, bathing the land in a ghostly reflection of daylight. Everything looked bleached and flat.

Near the end of his journey, he turned off the road, which continued south. A simple path led straight through waist-high grass and up a knoll, almost hidden by the shadows of protective elm trees. He crested the hill and saw a gentle light shining from his home.

The house had a shingled roof and a brick chimney. Eaves hung over the whitewashed walls, shadowing the ground below. One side of the enclosed porch was filled with split wood, ready for the fire. A jumble of farm tools cluttered the other side.

The house had been abandoned for half a century when they moved in after Garrow’s wife, Marian, died. It was ten miles from Carvahall, farther than anyone else’s. People considered the distance dangerous because the family could not rely on help from the village in times of trouble, but Eragon’s uncle would not listen.

A hundred feet from the house, in a dull-colored barn, lived two horses—Birka and Brugh—with chickens and a cow. Sometimes there was also a pig, but they had been unable to afford one this year. A wagon sat wedged between the stalls. On the edge of their fields, a thick line of trees traced along the Anora River.

He saw a light move behind a window as he wearily reached the porch. “Uncle, it’s Eragon. Let me in.” A small shutter slid back for a second, then the door swung inward.

Garrow stood with his hand on the door. His worn clothes hung on him like rags on a stick frame. A lean, hungry face with intense eyes gazed out from under graying hair. He looked like a man who had

been partly mummified before it was discovered that he was still alive. “Roran’s sleeping,” was his answer to Eragon’s inquiring glance.

A lantern flickered on a wood table so old that the grain stood up in tiny ridges like a giant fingerprint. Near a woodstove were rows of cooking utensils tacked onto the wall with homemade nails. A second door opened to the rest of the house. The floor was made of boards polished smooth by years of tramping feet.

Eragon pulled off his pack and took out the meat. “What’s this? Did you buy meat? Where did you get the money?” asked his uncle harshly as he saw the wrapped packages.

Eragon took a breath before answering. “No, Horst bought it for us.”

“You let him pay for it? I told you before, I won’t beg for our food. If we can’t feed ourselves, we might as well move into town. Before you can turn around twice, they’ll be sending us used clothes and asking if we’ll be able to get through the winter.” Garrow’s face paled with anger.

“I didn’t accept charity,” snapped Eragon. “Horst agreed to let me work off the debt this spring. He needs someone to help him because Albriech is going away.”

“And where will you get the time to work for him? Are you going to ignore all the things that need to be done here?” asked Garrow, forcing his voice down.

Eragon hung his bow and quiver on hooks beside the front door. “I don’t know how I’ll do it,” he said irritably. “Besides, I found something that could be worth some money.” He set the stone on the table.

Garrow bowed over it: the hungry look on his face became ravenous, and his fingers moved with a strange twitch. “You found this in the Spine?”

“Yes,” said Eragon. He explained what had happened. “And to make matters worse, I lost my best arrow. I’ll have to make more before long.” They stared at the stone in the near darkness.

“How was the weather?” asked his uncle, lifting the stone. His hands tightened around it like he was afraid it would suddenly disappear.

“Cold,” was Eragon’s reply. “It didn’t snow, but it froze each night.”

Garrow looked worried by the news. “Tomorrow you’ll have to help Roran finish harvesting the barley. If we can get the squash picked, too, the frost won’t bother us.” He passed the stone to Eragon. “Here, keep it. When the traders come, we’ll find out what it’s worth. Selling it is probably the best thing to do. The less we’re involved with magic, the better.… Why did Horst pay for the meat?”

It took only a moment for Eragon to explain his argument with Sloan. “I just don’t understand what angered him so.”

Garrow shrugged. “Sloan’s wife, Ismira, went over the Igualda Falls a year before you were brought here. He hasn’t been near the Spine since, nor had anything to do with it. But that’s no reason to refuse payment. I think he wanted to give you trouble.”

Eragon swayed blearily and said, “It’s good to be back.” Garrow’s eyes softened, and he nodded. Eragon stumbled to his room, pushed the stone under his bed, then fell onto the mattress. *Home*. For the first time since before the hunt, he relaxed completely as sleep overtook him.

At dawn the sun's rays streamed through the window, warming Eragon's face. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up on the edge of the bed. The pine floor was cold under his feet. He stretched his sore legs and rubbed his back, yawning.

Beside the bed was a row of shelves covered with objects he had collected. There were twisted pieces of wood, odd bits of shells, rocks that had broken to reveal shiny interiors, and strips of dry grass tied into knots. His favorite item was a root so convoluted he never tired of looking at it. The rest of the room was bare, except for a small dresser and nightstand.

He pulled on his boots and stared at the floor, thinking. This was a special day. It was near this very hour, sixteen years ago, that his mother, Selena, had come home to Carvahall alone and pregnant. She had been gone for six years, living in the cities. When she returned, she wore expensive clothes, and her hair was bound by a net of pearls. She had sought out her brother, Garrow, and asked to stay with him until the baby arrived. Within five months her son was born. Everyone was shocked when Selena tearfully begged Garrow and Marian to raise him. When they asked why, she only wept and said, "I must." Her pleas had grown increasingly desperate until they finally agreed. She named him Eragon, then departed early the next morning and never returned.

Eragon still remembered how he had felt when Marian told him the story before she died. The realization that Garrow and Marian were not his real parents had disturbed him greatly. Things that had been permanent and unquestionable were suddenly thrown into doubt. Eventually he had learned to live with it, but he always had a nagging suspicion that he had not been good enough for his mother. *I'm sure there was a good reason for what she did; I only wish I knew what it was*.

One other thing bothered him: Who was his father? Selena had told no one, and whoever it might be had never come looking for Eragon. He wished that he knew who it was, if only to have a name. It would be nice to know his heritage.

He sighed and went to the nightstand, where he splashed his face, shivering as the water ran down his neck. Refreshed, he retrieved the stone from under the bed and set it on a shelf. The morning light caressed it, throwing a warm shadow on the wall. He touched it one more time, then hurried to the kitchen, eager to see his family. Garrow and Roran were already there, eating chicken. As Eragon

greeted them, Roran stood with a grin.

Roran was two years older than Eragon, muscular, sturdy, and careful with his movements. They could not have been closer even if they had been real brothers.

Roran smiled. “I’m glad you’re back. How was the trip?”

“Hard,” replied Eragon. “Did Uncle tell you what happened?” He helped himself to a piece of chicken, which he devoured hungrily.

“No,” said Roran, and the story was quickly told. At Roran’s insistence, Eragon left his food to show him the stone. This elicited a satisfactory amount of awe, but Roran soon asked nervously, “Were you able to talk with Katrina?”

“No, there wasn’t an opportunity after the argument with Sloan. But she’ll expect you when the traders come. I gave the message to Horst; he will get it to her.”

“You told Horst?” said Roran incredulously. “That was private. If I wanted everyone to know about it, I could have built a bonfire and used smoke signals to communicate. If Sloan finds out, he won’t let me see her again.”

“Horst will be discreet,” assured Eragon. “He won’t let anyone fall prey to Sloan, least of all you.” Roran seemed unconvinced, but argued no more. They returned to their meals in the taciturn presence of Garrow. When the last bites were finished, all three went to work in the fields.

The sun was cold and pale, providing little comfort. Under its watchful eye, the last of the barley was stored in the barn. Next, they gathered prickly vined squash, then the rutabagas, beets, peas, turnips, and beans, which they packed into the root cellar. After hours of labor, they stretched their cramped muscles, pleased that the harvest was finished.

The following days were spent pickling, salting, shelling, and preparing the food for winter.

Nine days after Eragon’s return, a vicious blizzard blew out of the mountains and settled over the valley. The snow came down in great sheets, blanketing the countryside in white. They only dared leave the house for firewood and to feed the animals, for they feared getting lost in the howling wind and featureless landscape. They spent their time huddled over the stove as gusts rattled the heavy window shutters. Days later the storm finally passed, revealing an alien world of soft white drifts.

“I’m afraid the traders may not come this year, with conditions this bad,” said Garrow. “They’re late as it is. We’ll give them a chance and wait before going to Carvahall. But if they don’t show soon, we’ll have to buy any spare supplies from the townspeople.” His countenance was resigned.

They grew anxious as the days crept by without sign of the traders. Talk was sparse, and depression hung over the house.

On the eighth morning, Roran walked to the road and confirmed that the traders had not yet passed. The day was spent readying for the trip into Carvahall, scrounging with grim expressions for saleable items. That evening, out of desperation, Eragon checked the road again. He found deep ruts cut into the snow, with numerous hoofprints between them. Elated, he ran back to the house whooping, bringing new life to their preparations.

They packed their surplus produce into the wagon before sunrise. Garrow put the year's money in a leather pouch that he carefully fastened to his belt. Eragon set the wrapped stone between bags of grain so it would not roll when the wagon hit bumps.

After a hasty breakfast, they harnessed the horses and cleared a path to the road. The traders' wagons had already broken the drifts, which sped their progress. By noon they could see Carvahall.

In daylight, it was a small earthy village filled with shouts and laughter. The traders had made camp in an empty field on the outskirts of town. Groups of wagons, tents, and fires were randomly spread across it, spots of color against the snow. The troubadours' four tents were garishly decorated. A steady stream of people linked the camp to the village.

Crowds churned around a line of bright tents and booths clogging the main street. Horses whinnied at the noise. The snow had been pounded flat, giving it a glassy surface; elsewhere, bonfires had melted it. Roasted hazelnuts added a rich aroma to the smells wafting around them.

Garrow parked the wagon and picketed the horses, then drew coins from his pouch. "Get yourselves some treats. Roran, do what you want, only be at Horst's in time for supper. Eragon, bring that stone and come with me." Eragon grinned at Roran and pocketed the money, already planning how to spend it.

Roran departed immediately with a determined expression on his face. Garrow led Eragon into the throng, shouldering his way through the bustle. Women were buying cloth, while nearby their husbands examined a new latch, hook, or tool. Children ran up and down the road, shrieking with excitement. Knives were displayed here, spices there, and pots were laid out in shiny rows next to leather harnesses.

Eragon stared at the traders curiously. They seemed less prosperous than last year. Their children had a frightened, wary look, and their clothes were patched. The gaunt men carried swords and daggers with a new familiarity, and even the women had poniards belted at their

waists.

What could have happened to make them like this? And why are they so late? wondered Eragon. He remembered the traders as being full of good cheer, but there was none of that now. Garrow pushed down the street, searching for Merlock, a trader who specialized in odd trinkets and pieces of jewelry.

They found him behind a booth, displaying brooches to a group of women. As each new piece was revealed, exclamations of admiration followed. Eragon guessed that more than a few purses would soon be depleted. Merlock seemed to flourish and grow every time his wares were complimented. He wore a goatee, held himself with ease, and seemed to regard the rest of the world with slight contempt.

The excited group prevented Garrow and Eragon from getting near the trader, so they settled on a step and waited. As soon as Merlock was unoccupied, they hurried over.

"And what might you sirs want to look at?" asked Merlock. "An amulet or trinket for a lady?" With a twirl he pulled out a delicately carved silver rose of excellent workmanship. The polished metal caught Eragon's attention, and he eyed it appreciatively. The trader continued, "Not even three crowns, though it has come all the way from the famed craftsmen of Belatona."

Garrow spoke in a quiet voice. "We aren't looking to buy, but to sell." Merlock immediately covered the rose and looked at them with new interest.

"I see. Maybe, if this item is of any value, you would like to trade it for one or two of these exquisite pieces." He paused for a moment while Eragon and his uncle stood uncomfortably, then continued, "You did *bring* the object of consideration?"

"We have it, but we would rather show it to you elsewhere," said Garrow in a firm voice.

Merlock raised an eyebrow, but spoke smoothly. "In that case, let me invite you to my tent." He gathered up his wares and gently laid them in an iron-bound chest, which he locked. Then he ushered them up the street and into the temporary camp. They wound between the wagons to a tent removed from the rest of the traders'. It was crimson at the top and sable at the bottom, with thin triangles of colors stabbing into each other. Merlock untied the opening and swung the flap to one side.

Small trinkets and strange pieces of furniture, such as a round bed and three seats carved from tree stumps, filled the tent. A gnarled dagger with a ruby in the pommel rested on a white cushion.

Merlock closed the flap and turned to them. "Please, seat yourselves." When they had, he said, "Now show me why we are meeting in private." Eragon unwrapped the stone and set it between

the two men. Merlock reached for it with a gleam in his eye, then stopped and asked, “May I?” When Garrow indicated his approval, Merlock picked it up.

He put the stone in his lap and reached to one side for a thin box. Opened, it revealed a large set of copper scales, which he set on the ground. After weighing the stone, he scrutinized its surface under a jeweler’s glass, tapped it gently with a wooden mallet, and drew the point of a tiny clear stone over it. He measured its length and diameter, then recorded the figures on a slate. He considered the results for a while. “Do you know what this is worth?”

“No,” admitted Garrow. His cheek twitched, and he shifted uncomfortably on the seat.

Merlock grimaced. “Unfortunately, neither do I. But I can tell you this much: the white veins are the same material as the blue that surrounds them, only a different color. What that material might be, though, I haven’t a clue. It’s harder than any rock I have seen, harder even than diamond. Whoever shaped it used tools I have never seen—or magic. Also, it’s hollow.”

“What?” exclaimed Garrow.

An irritated edge crept into Merlock’s voice. “Did you ever hear a rock sound like this?” He grabbed the dagger from the cushion and slapped the stone with the flat of the blade. A pure note filled the air, then faded away smoothly. Eragon was alarmed, afraid that the stone had been damaged. Merlock tilted the stone toward them. “You will find no scratches or blemishes where the dagger struck. I doubt I could do anything to harm this stone, even if I took a hammer to it.”

Garrow crossed his arms with a reserved expression. A wall of silence surrounded him. Eragon was puzzled. *I knew that the stone appeared in the Spine through magic, but made by magic? What for and why?* He blurted, “But what is it worth?”

“I can’t tell you that,” said Merlock in a pained voice. “I am sure there are people who would pay dearly to have it, but none of them are in Carvahall. You would have to go to the southern cities to find a buyer. This is a curiosity for most people—not an item to spend money on when practical things are needed.”

Garrow stared at the tent ceiling like a gambler calculating the odds. “Will you buy it?”

The trader answered instantly, “It’s not worth the risk. I might be able to find a wealthy buyer during my spring travels, but I can’t be certain. Even if I did, you wouldn’t be paid until I returned next year. No, you will have to find someone else to trade with. I am curious, however … Why did you insist on talking to me in private?”

Eragon put the stone away before answering. “Because,” he glanced at the man, wondering if he would explode like Sloan, “I found this in

the Spine, and folks around here don't like that."

Merlock gave him a startled look. "Do you know why my fellow merchants and I were late this year?"

Eragon shook his head.

"Our wanderings have been dogged with misfortune. Chaos seems to rule Alagaësia. We could not avoid illness, attacks, and the most cursed black luck. Because the Varden's attacks have increased, Galbatorix has forced cities to send more soldiers to the borders, men who are needed to combat the Urgals. The brutes have been migrating southeast, toward the Hadarac Desert. No one knows why and it wouldn't concern us, except that they're passing through populated areas. They've been spotted on roads and near cities. Worst of all are reports of a Shade, though the stories are unconfirmed. Not many people survive such an encounter."

"Why haven't we heard of this?" cried Eragon.

"Because," said Merlock grimly, "it only began a few months ago. Whole villages have been forced to move because Urgals destroyed their fields and starvation threatens."

"Nonsense," growled Garrow. "We haven't seen any Urgals; the only one around here has his horns mounted in Morn's tavern."

Merlock arched an eyebrow. "Maybe so, but this is a small village hidden by mountains. It's not surprising that you've escaped notice. However, I wouldn't expect that to last. I only mentioned this because strange things are happening here as well if you found such a stone in the Spine." With that sobering statement, he bid them farewell with a bow and slight smile.

Garrow headed back to Carvahall with Eragon trailing behind. "What do you think?" asked Eragon.

"I'm going to get more information before I make up my mind. Take the stone back to the wagon, then do what you want. I'll meet you for dinner at Horst's."

Eragon dodged through the crowd and happily dashed back to the wagon. Trading would take his uncle hours, time that he planned to enjoy fully. He hid the stone under the bags, then set out into town with a cocky stride.

He walked from one booth to another, evaluating the goods with a buyer's eye, despite his meager supply of coins. When he talked with the merchants, they confirmed what Merlock had said about the instability in Alagaësia. Over and over the message was repeated: last year's security has deserted us; new dangers have appeared, and nothing is safe.

Later in the day he bought three sticks of malt candy and a small piping-hot cherry pie. The hot food felt good after hours of standing in the snow. He licked the sticky syrup from his fingers regretfully,

wishing for more, then sat on the edge of a porch and nibbled a piece of candy. Two boys from Carvahall wrestled nearby, but he felt no inclination to join them.

As the day descended into late afternoon, the traders took their business into people's homes. Eragon was impatient for evening, when the troubadours would come out to tell stories and perform tricks. He loved hearing about magic, gods, and, if they were especially lucky, the Dragon Riders. Carvahall had its own storyteller, Brom—a friend of Eragon's—but his tales grew old over the years, whereas the troubadours always had new ones that he listened to eagerly.

Eragon had just broken off an icicle from the underside of the porch when he spotted Sloan nearby. The butcher had not seen him, so Eragon ducked his head and bolted around a corner toward Morn's tavern.

The inside was hot and filled with greasy smoke from sputtering tallow candles. The shiny-black Urgal horns, their twisted span as great as his outstretched arms, were mounted over the door. The bar was long and low, with a stack of staves on one end for customers to carve. Morn tended the bar, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The bottom half of his face was short and mashed, as if he had rested his chin on a grinding wheel. People crowded solid oak tables and listened to two traders who had finished their business early and had come in for beer.

Morn looked up from a mug he was cleaning. "Eragon! Good to see you. Where's your uncle?"

"Buying," said Eragon with a shrug. "He's going to be a while."

"And Roran, is he here?" asked Morn as he swiped the cloth through another mug.

"Yes, no sick animals to keep him back this year."

"Good, good."

Eragon gestured at the two traders. "Who are they?"

"Grain buyers. They bought everyone's seed at ridiculously low prices, and now they're telling wild stories, expecting us to believe them."

Eragon understood why Morn was so upset. *People need that money. We can't get by without it.* "What kind of stories?"

Morn snorted. "They say the Varden have formed a pact with the Urgals and are massing an army to attack us. *Supposedly*, it's only through the grace of our king that we've been protected for so long—as if Galbatorix would care if we burned to the ground.… Go listen to them. I have enough on my hands without explaining their lies."

The first trader filled a chair with his enormous girth; his every movement caused it to protest loudly. There was no hint of hair on his face, his pudgy hands were baby smooth, and he had pouting lips that

curled petulantly as he sipped from a flagon. The second man had a florid face. The skin around his jaw was dry and corpulent, filled with lumps of hard fat, like cold butter gone rancid. Contrasted with his neck and jowls, the rest of his body was unnaturally thin.

The first trader vainly tried to pull back his expanding borders to fit within the chair. He said, "No, no, you don't understand. It is only through the king's unceasing efforts on your behalf that you are able to argue with us in safety. If he, in all his wisdom, were to withdraw that support, woe unto you!"

Someone hollered, "Right, why don't you also tell us the Riders have returned and you've each killed a hundred elves. Do you think we're children to believe in your tales? We can take care of ourselves." The group chuckled.

The trader started to reply when his thin companion intervened with a wave of his hand. Gaudy jewels flashed on his fingers. "You misunderstand. We know the Empire cannot care for each of us personally, as you may want, but it can keep Urgals and other abominations from overrunning this," he searched vaguely for the right term, "place."

The trader continued, "You're angry with the Empire for treating people unfairly, a legitimate concern, but a government cannot please everyone. There will inevitably be arguments and conflicts. However, the majority of us have nothing to complain about. Every country has some small group of malcontents who aren't satisfied with the balance of power."

"Yeah," called a woman, "if you're willing to call the Varden small!"

The fat man sighed. "We already explained that the Varden have no interest in helping you. That's only a falsehood perpetuated by the traitors in an attempt to disrupt the Empire and convince us that the real threat is inside—not outside—our borders. All they want to do is overthrow the king and take possession of our land. They have spies everywhere as they prepare to invade. You never know who might be working for them."

Eragon did not agree, but the traders' words were smooth, and people were nodding. He stepped forward and said, "How do you know this? I can say that clouds are green, but that doesn't mean it's true. Prove you aren't lying." The two men glared at him while the villagers waited silently for the answer.

The thin trader spoke first. He avoided Eragon's eyes. "Aren't your children taught respect? Or do you let boys challenge men whenever they want to?"

The listeners fidgeted and stared at Eragon. Then a man said, "Answer the question."

"It's only common sense," said the fat one, sweat beading on his

upper lip. His reply riled the villagers, and the dispute resumed.

Eragon returned to the bar with a sour taste in his mouth. He had never before met anyone who favored the Empire and tore down its enemies. There was a deep-seated hatred of the Empire in Carvahall, almost hereditary in nature. The Empire never helped them during harsh years when they nearly starved, and its tax collectors were heartless. He felt justified in disagreeing with the traders regarding the king's mercy, but he did speculate about the Varden.

The Varden were a rebel group that constantly raided and attacked the Empire. It was a mystery who their leader was or who had formed them in the years following Galbatorix's rise to power over a century ago. The group had garnered much sympathy as they eluded Galbatorix's efforts to destroy them. Little was known about the Varden except that if you were a fugitive and had to hide, or if you hated the Empire, they would accept you. The only problem was finding them.

Morn leaned over the bar and said, "Incredible, isn't it? They're worse than vultures circling a dying animal. There's going to be trouble if they stay much longer."

"For us or for them?"

"Them," said Morn as angry voices filled the tavern. Eragon left when the argument threatened to become violent. The door thudded shut behind him, cutting off the voices. It was early evening, and the sun was sinking rapidly; the houses cast long shadows on the ground. As Eragon headed down the street, he noticed Roran and Katrina standing in an alley.

Roran said something Eragon could not hear. Katrina looked down at her hands and answered in an undertone, then leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed him before darting away. Eragon trotted to Roran and teased, "Having a good time?" Roran grunted noncommittally as he paced away.

"Have you heard the traders' news?" asked Eragon, following. Most of the villagers were indoors, talking to traders or waiting until it was dark enough for the troubadours to perform.

"Yes." Roran seemed distracted. "What do you think of Sloan?"

"I thought it was obvious."

"There'll be blood between us when he finds out about Katrina and me," stated Roran. A snowflake landed on Eragon's nose, and he looked up. The sky had turned gray. He could think of nothing appropriate to say; Roran was right. He clasped his cousin on the shoulder as they continued down the byway.

Dinner at Horst's was hearty. The room was full of conversation and laughter. Sweet cordials and heavy ales were consumed in copious amounts, adding to the boisterous atmosphere. When the plates were

empty, Horst's guests left the house and strolled to the field where the traders were camped. A ring of poles topped with candles had been stuck into the ground around a large clearing. Bonfires blazed in the background, painting the ground with dancing shadows. The villagers slowly gathered around the circle and waited expectantly in the cold.

The troubadours came tumbling out of their tents, dressed in tasseled clothing, followed by older and more stately minstrels. The minstrels provided music and narration as their younger counterparts acted out the stories. The first plays were pure entertainment: bawdy and full of jokes, pratfalls, and ridiculous characters. Later, however, when the candles sputtered in their sockets and everyone was drawn together into a tight circle, the old storyteller Brom stepped forward. A knotted white beard rippled over his chest, and a long black cape was wrapped around his bent shoulders, obscuring his body. He spread his arms with hands that reached out like talons and recited thus:

"The sands of time cannot be stopped. Years pass whether we will them or not … but we can remember. What has been lost may yet live on in memories. That which you will hear is imperfect and fragmented, yet treasure it, for without you it does not exist. I give you now a memory that has been forgotten, hidden in the dreamy haze that lies behind us."

His keen eyes inspected their interested faces. His gaze lingered on Eragon last of all.

"Before your grandfathers' fathers were born, and yea, even before their fathers, the Dragon Riders were formed. To protect and guard was their mission, and for thousands of years they succeeded. Their prowess in battle was unmatched, for each had the strength of ten men. They were immortal unless blade or poison took them. For good only were their powers used, and under their tutelage tall cities and towers were built out of the living stone. While they kept peace, the land flourished. It was a golden time. The elves were our allies, the dwarves our friends. Wealth flowed into our cities, and men prospered. But weep … for it could not last."

Brom looked down silently. Infinite sadness resonated in his voice.

"Though no enemy could destroy them, they could not guard against themselves. And it came to pass at the height of their power that a boy, Galbatorix by name, was born in the province of Inzilbêth, which is no more. At ten he was tested, as was the custom, and it was found that great power resided in him. The Riders accepted him as their own.

"Through their training he passed, exceeding all others in skill. Gifted with a sharp mind and strong body, he quickly took his place

among the Riders' ranks. Some saw his abrupt rise as dangerous and warned the others, but the Riders had grown arrogant in their power and ignored caution. Alas, sorrow was conceived that day.

"So it was that soon after his training was finished, Galbatorix took a reckless trip with two friends. Far north they flew, night and day, and passed into the Urgals' remaining territory, foolishly thinking their new powers would protect them. There on a thick sheet of ice, unmelted even in summer, they were ambushed in their sleep. Though his friends and their dragons were butchered and he suffered great wounds, Galbatorix slew his attackers. Tragically, during the fight a stray arrow pierced his dragon's heart. Without the arts to save her, she died in his arms. Then were the seeds of madness planted."

The storyteller clasped his hands and looked around slowly, shadows flickering across his worn face. The next words came like the mournful toll of a requiem.

"Alone, bereft of much of his strength and half mad with loss, Galbatorix wandered without hope in that desolate land, seeking death. It did not come to him, though he threw himself without fear against any living thing. Urgals and other monsters soon fled from his haunted form. During this time he came to realize that the Riders might grant him another dragon. Driven by this thought, he began the arduous journey, on foot, back through the Spine. Territory he had soared over effortlessly on a dragon's back now took him months to traverse. He could hunt with magic, but often-times he walked in places where animals did not travel. Thus when his feet finally left the mountains, he was close to death. A farmer found him collapsed in the mud and summoned the Riders.

"Unconscious, he was taken to their holdings, and his body healed. He slept for four days. Upon awakening he gave no sign of his fevered mind. When he was brought before a council convened to judge him, Galbatorix demanded another dragon. The desperation of the request revealed his dementia, and the council saw him for what he truly was. Denied his hope, Galbatorix, through the twisted mirror of his madness, came to believe it was the Riders' fault his dragon had died. Night after night he brooded on that and formulated a plan to exact revenge."

Brom's words dropped to a mesmerizing whisper.

"He found a sympathetic Rider, and there his insidious words took root. By persistent reasoning and the use of dark secrets learned from a Shade, he inflamed the Rider against their elders. Together they treacherously lured and killed an elder. When the foul deed was done, Galbatorix turned on his ally and slaughtered him without warning. The Riders found him, then, with blood dripping from his hands. A scream tore from his lips, and he fled into the night. As he was

cunning in his madness, they could not find him.

"For years he hid in wastelands like a hunted animal, always watching for pursuers. His atrocity was not forgotten, but over time searches ceased. Then through some ill fortune he met a young Rider, Morzan—strong of body, but weak of mind. Galbatorix convinced Morzan to leave a gate unbolted in the citadel Ilirea, which is now called Urû'baen. Through this gate Galbatorix entered and stole a dragon hatchling.

"He and his new disciple hid themselves in an evil place where the Riders dared not venture. There Morzan entered into a dark apprenticeship, learning secrets and forbidden magic that should never have been revealed. When his instruction was finished and Galbatorix's black dragon, Shruikan, was fully grown, Galbatorix revealed himself to the world, with Morzan at his side. Together they fought any Rider they met. With each kill their strength grew. Twelve of the Riders joined Galbatorix out of desire for power and revenge against perceived wrongs. Those twelve, with Morzan, became the Thirteen Forsworn. The Riders were unprepared and fell beneath the onslaught. The elves, too, fought bitterly against Galbatorix, but they were overthrown and forced to flee to their secret places, from whence they come no more.

"Only Vrael, leader of the Riders, could resist Galbatorix and the Forsworn. Ancient and wise, he struggled to save what he could and keep the remaining dragons from falling to his enemies. In the last battle, before the gates of Doru Araeba, Vrael defeated Galbatorix, but hesitated with the final blow. Galbatorix seized the moment and smote him in the side. Grievously wounded, Vrael fled to Utgard Mountain, where he hoped to gather strength. But it was not to be, for Galbatorix found him. As they fought, Galbatorix kicked Vrael in the fork of his legs. With that underhanded blow, he gained dominance over Vrael and removed his head with a blazing sword.

"Then as power rushed through his veins, Galbatorix anointed himself king over all Alagaësia.

"And from that day, he has ruled us."

With the completion of the story, Brom shuffled away with the troubadours. Eragon thought he saw a tear shining on his cheek. People murmured quietly to each other as they departed. Garrow said to Eragon and Roran, "Consider yourselves fortunate. I have heard this tale only twice in my life. If the Empire knew that Brom had recited it, he would not live to see a new month."

The evening after their return from Carvahall, Eragon decided to test the stone as Merlock had. Alone in his room, he set it on his bed and laid three tools next to it. He started with a wooden mallet and lightly tapped the stone. It produced a subtle ringing. Satisfied, he picked up the next tool, a heavy leather hammer. A mournful peal reverberated when it struck. Lastly, he pounded a small chisel against it. The metal did not chip or scratch the stone, but it produced the clearest sound yet. As the final note died away, he thought he heard a faint squeak.

Merlock said the stone was hollow; there could be something of value inside. I don't know how to open it, though. There must have been a good reason for someone to shape it, but whoever sent the stone into the Spine hasn't taken the trouble to retrieve it or doesn't know where it is. But I don't believe that a magician with enough power to transport the stone wouldn't be able to find it again. So was I meant to have it? He could not answer the question. Resigned to an unsolvable mystery, he picked up the tools and returned the stone to its shelf.

That night he was abruptly roused from sleep. He listened carefully. All was quiet. Uneasy, he slid his hand under the mattress and grasped his knife. He waited a few minutes, then slowly sank back to sleep.

A squeak pierced the silence, tearing him back to wakefulness. He rolled out of bed and yanked the knife from its sheath. Fumbling with a tinderbox, he lit a candle. The door to his room was closed. Though the squeak was too loud for a mouse or rat, he still checked under the bed. Nothing. He sat on the edge of the mattress and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Another squeak filled the air, and he started violently.

Where was the noise coming from? Nothing could be in the floor or walls; they were solid wood. The same went for his bed, and he would have noticed if anything had crawled into his straw mattress during the night. His eyes settled on the stone. He took it off the shelf and absently cradled it as he studied the room. A squeak rang in his ears and reverberated through his fingers; it came from the stone.

The stone had given him nothing but frustration and anger, and now it would not even let him sleep! It ignored his furious glare and sat solidly, occasionally peeping. Then it gave one very loud squeak and fell silent. Eragon warily put it away and got back under the sheets. Whatever secret the stone held, it would have to wait until morning.

The moon was shining through his window when he woke again.

The stone was rocking rapidly on the shelf, knocking against the wall. It was bathed in cool moonlight that bleached its surface. Eragon jumped out of bed, knife in hand. The motion stopped, but he remained tense. Then the stone started squeaking and rocking faster than ever.

With an oath, he began dressing. He did not care how valuable the stone might be; he was going to take it far away and bury it. The rocking stopped; the stone became quiet. It quivered, then rolled forward and dropped onto the floor with a loud thump. He inched toward the door in alarm as the stone wobbled toward him.

Suddenly a crack appeared on the stone. Then another and another. Transfixed, Eragon leaned forward, still holding the knife. At the top of the stone, where all the cracks met, a small piece wobbled, as if it were balanced on something, then rose and toppled to the floor. After another series of squeaks, a small dark head poked out of the hole, followed by a weirdly angled body. Eragon gripped the knife tighter and held very still. Soon the creature was all the way out of the stone. It stayed in place for a moment, then skittered into the moonlight.

Eragon recoiled in shock. Standing in front of him, licking off the membrane that encased it, was a dragon.

The dragon was no longer than his forearm, yet it was dignified and noble. Its scales were deep sapphire blue, the same color as the stone. But not a stone, he realized, an egg. The dragon fanned its wings; they were what had made it appear so contorted. The wings were several times longer than its body and ribbed with thin fingers of bone that extended from the wing's front edge, forming a line of widely spaced talons. The dragon's head was roughly triangular. Two diminutive white fangs curved down out of its upper jaw. They looked very sharp. Its claws were also white, like polished ivory, and slightly serrated on the inside curve. A line of small spikes ran down the creature's spine from the base of its head to the tip of its tail. A hollow where its neck and shoulders joined created a larger-than-normal gap between the spikes.

Eragon shifted slightly, and the dragon's head snapped around. Hard, ice-blue eyes fixed on him. He kept very still. It might be a formidable enemy if it decided to attack.

The dragon lost interest in Eragon and awkwardly explored the room, squealing as it bumped into a wall or furniture. With a flutter of wings, it leapt onto the bed and crawled to his pillow, squeaking. Its mouth was open pitifully, like a young bird's, displaying rows of pointed teeth. Eragon sat cautiously on the end of the bed. The dragon smelled his hand, nibbled his sleeve. He pulled his arm back.

A smile tugged at Eragon's lips as he looked at the small creature. Tentatively, he reached out with his right hand and touched its flank. A blast of icy energy surged into his hand and raced up his arm, burning in his veins like liquid fire. He fell back with a wild cry. An iron clang filled his ears, and he heard a soundless scream of rage. Every part of his body seared with pain. He struggled to move, but was unable to. After what seemed like hours, warmth seeped back into his limbs, leaving them tingling. Shivering uncontrollably, he pushed himself upright. His hand was numb, his fingers paralyzed. Alarmed, he watched as the middle of his palm shimmered and formed a diffused white oval. The skin itched and burned like a spider bite. His heart pounded frantically.

Eragon blinked, trying to understand what had occurred. Something brushed against his consciousness, like a finger trailing over his skin. He felt it again, but this time it solidified into a tendril of thought through which he could feel a growing curiosity. It was as if an invisible wall surrounding his thoughts had fallen away, and he was

now free to reach out with his mind. He was afraid that without anything to hold him back, he would float out of his body and be unable to return, becoming a spirit of the ether. Scared, he pulled away from the contact. The new sense vanished as if he had closed his eyes. He glared suspiciously at the motionless dragon.

A scaly leg scraped against his side, and he jerked back. But the energy did not shock him again. Puzzled, he rubbed the dragon's head with his right hand. A light tingling ran up his arm. The dragon nuzzled him, arching its back like a cat. He slid a finger over its thin wing membranes. They felt like old parchment, velvety and warm, but still slightly damp. Hundreds of slender veins pulsed through them.

Again the tendril touched his mind, but this time, instead of curiosity, he sensed an overpowering, ravenous hunger. He got up with a sigh. This was a dangerous animal, of that he was sure. Yet it seemed so helpless crawling on his bed, he could only wonder if there was any harm in keeping it. The dragon wailed in a reedy tone as it looked for food. Eragon quickly scratched its head to keep it quiet. *I'll think about this later*, he decided, and left the room, carefully closing the door.

Returning with two strips of dried meat, he found the dragon sitting on the windowsill, watching the moon. He cut the meat into small squares and offered one to the dragon. It smelled the square cautiously, then jabbed its head forward like a snake and snatched the meat from his fingers, swallowing it whole with a peculiar jerk. The dragon prodded Eragon's hand for more food.

He fed it, careful to keep his fingers out of the way. By the time there was only one square left, the dragon's belly was bulging. He proffered the last piece; the dragon considered it for a moment, then lazily snapped it up. Done eating, it crawled onto his arm and curled against his chest. Then it snorted, a puff of dark smoke rising from its nostrils. Eragon looked at it with wonder.

Just when he thought the dragon was asleep, a low humming came from its vibrating throat. Gently, he carried it to the bed and set it by his pillow. The dragon, eyes closed, wrapped its tail around the bedpost contentedly. Eragon lay next to it, flexing his hand in the near darkness.

He faced a painful dilemma: By raising a dragon, he could become a Rider. Myths and stories about Riders were treasured, and being one would automatically place him among those legends. However, if the Empire discovered the dragon, he and his family would be put to death unless he joined the king. No one could—or would—help them. The simplest solution was just to kill the dragon, but the idea was repugnant, and he rejected it. Dragons were too revered for him to even consider that. *Besides, what could betray us?* he thought. *We live in*

a remote area and have done nothing to draw attention.

The problem was convincing Garrow and Roran to let him keep the dragon. Neither of them would care to have a dragon around. *I could raise it in secret. In a month or two it will be too large for Garrow to get rid of, but will he accept it? Even if he does, can I get enough food for the dragon while it's hiding? It's no larger than a small cat, but it ate an entire handful of meat! I suppose it'll be able to hunt for itself eventually, but how long until then? Will it be able to survive the cold outside?* All the same, he wanted the dragon. The more he thought about it, the surer he was. However things might work out with Garrow, Eragon would do everything he could to protect it. Determined, he fell asleep with the dragon cradled against him.

When dawn came, the dragon was sitting atop his bedpost, like an ancient sentinel welcoming the new day. Eragon marveled at its color. He had never seen such a clear, hard blue. Its scales were like hundreds of small gemstones. He noticed that the white oval on his palm, where he had touched the dragon, had a silvery sheen. He hoped he could hide it by keeping his hands dirty.

The dragon launched off the post and glided to the floor. Eragon gingerly picked it up and left the quiet house, pausing to grab meat, several leather strips, and as many rags as he could carry. The crisp morning was beautiful; a fresh layer of snow covered the farm. He smiled as the small creature looked around with interest from the safety of his arms.

Hurrying across the fields, he walked silently into the dark forest, searching for a safe place for the dragon to stay. Eventually he found a rowan tree standing alone on a barren knoll, its branches snow-tipped gray fingers that reached toward the sky. He set the dragon down by the base of the trunk and shook the leather onto the ground.

With a few deft movements, he made a noose and slipped it over the dragon's head as it explored the snowy clumps surrounding the tree. The leather was worn, but it would hold. He watched the dragon crawl around, then untied the noose from its neck and fashioned a makeshift harness for its legs so the dragon would not strangle itself. Next he gathered an armful of sticks and built a crude hut high in the branches, layering the inside with rags and stashing the meat. Snow fell on his face as the tree swayed. He hung more rags over the front of the shelter to keep heat inside. Pleased, he surveyed his work.

"Time to show you your new home," he said, and lifted the dragon up into the branches. It wriggled, trying to get free, then clambered into the hut, where it ate a piece of meat, curled up, and blinked coyly at him. "You'll be fine as long as you stay in here," he instructed. The dragon blinked again.

Sure that it had not understood him, Eragon groped with his mind

until he felt the dragon's consciousness. Again he had the terrible feeling of *openness*—of a space so large it pressed down on him like a heavy blanket. Summoning his strength, he focused on the dragon and tried to impress on it one idea: *Stay here*. The dragon stopped moving and cocked its head at him. He pushed harder: *Stay here*. A dim acknowledgment came tentatively through the link, but Eragon wondered if it really understood. *After all, it's only an animal*. He retreated from the contact with relief and felt the safety of his own mind envelop him.

Eragon left the tree, casting glances backward. The dragon stuck its head out of the shelter and watched with large eyes as he left.

After a hurried walk home, he sneaked back into his room to dispose of the egg fragments. He was sure Garrow and Roran would not notice the egg's absence—it had faded from their thoughts after they learned it could not be sold. When his family got up, Roran mentioned that he had heard some noises during the night but, to Eragon's relief, did not pursue the issue.

Eragon's enthusiasm made the day go by quickly. The mark on his hand proved easy to hide, so he soon stopped worrying about it. Before long he headed back to the rowan, carrying sausages he had pilfered from the cellar. With apprehension, he approached the tree. *Is the dragon able to survive outside in winter?*

His fears were groundless. The dragon was perched on a branch, gnawing on something between its front legs. It started squeaking excitedly when it saw him. He was pleased to see that it had remained in the tree, above the reach of large predators. As soon as he dropped the sausages at the base of the trunk, the dragon glided down. While it voraciously tore apart the food, Eragon examined the shelter. All the meat he had left was gone, but the hut was intact, and tufts of feathers littered the floor. *Good. It can get its own food*.

It struck him that he did not know if the dragon was a he or a she. He lifted and turned it over, ignoring its squeals of displeasure, but was unable to find any distinguishing marks. *It seems like it won't give up any secrets without a struggle*.

He spent a long time with the dragon. He untied it, set it on his shoulder, and went to explore the woods. The snow-laden trees watched over them like solemn pillars of a great cathedral. In that isolation, Eragon showed the dragon what he knew about the forest, not caring if it understood his meaning. It was the simple act of sharing that mattered. He talked to it continuously. The dragon gazed back at him with bright eyes, drinking in his words. For a while he just sat with it resting in his arms and watched it with wonder, still stunned by recent events. Eragon started for home at sunset, conscious of two hard blue eyes drilling into his back, indignant at being left

behind.

That night he brooded about all the things that could happen to a small and unprotected animal. Thoughts of ice storms and vicious animals tormented him. It took hours for him to find sleep. His dreams were of foxes and black wolves tearing at the dragon with bloody teeth.

In the sunrise glow, Eragon ran from the house with food and scraps of cloth—extra insulation for the shelter. He found the dragon awake and safe, watching the sunrise from high in the tree. He fervently thanked all the gods, known and unknown. The dragon came down to the ground as he approached and leapt into his arms, huddling close to his chest. The cold had not harmed it, but it seemed frightened. A puff of dark smoke blew out of its nostrils. He stroked it comfortingly and sat with his back to the rowan, murmuring softly. He kept still as the dragon buried its head in his coat. After a while it crawled out of his embrace and onto his shoulder. He fed it, then wrapped the new rags around the hut. They played together for a time, but Eragon had to return to the house before long.

A smooth routine was quickly established. Every morning Eragon ran out to the tree and gave the dragon breakfast before hurrying back. During the day he attacked his chores until they were finished and he could visit the dragon again. Both Garrow and Roran noted his behavior and asked why he spent so much time outside. Eragon just shrugged and started checking to make sure he was not followed to the tree.

After the first few days he stopped worrying that a mishap would befall the dragon. Its growth was explosive; it would soon be safe from most dangers. The dragon doubled in size in the first week. Four days later it was as high as his knee. It no longer fit inside the hut in the rowan, so Eragon was forced to build a hidden shelter on the ground. The task took him three days.

When the dragon was a fortnight old, Eragon was compelled to let it roam free because it needed so much food. The first time he untied it, only the force of his will kept it from following him back to the farm. Every time it tried, he pushed it away with his mind until it learned to avoid the house and its other inhabitants.

And he impressed on the dragon the importance of hunting only in the Spine, where there was less chance of being seen. Farmers would notice if game started disappearing from Palancar Valley. It made him feel both safer and uneasy when the dragon was so far away.

The mental contact he shared with the dragon waxed stronger each day. He found that although it did not comprehend words, he could communicate with it through images or emotions. It was an imprecise

method, however, and he was often misunderstood. The range at which they could touch each other's thoughts expanded rapidly. Soon Eragon could contact the dragon anywhere within three leagues. He often did so, and the dragon, in turn, would lightly brush against his mind. These mute conversations filled his working hours. There was always a small part of him connected to the dragon, ignored at times, but never forgotten. When he talked with people, the contact was distracting, like a fly buzzing in his ear.

As the dragon matured, its squeaks deepened to a roar and the humming became a low rumble, yet the dragon did not breathe fire, which concerned him. He had seen it blow smoke when it was upset, but there was never a hint of flame.

When the month ended, Eragon's elbow was level with the dragon's shoulder. In that brief span, it had transformed from a small, weak animal into a powerful beast. Its hard scales were as tough as chain-mail armor, its teeth like daggers.

Eragon took long walks in the evening with the dragon padding beside him. When they found a clearing, he would settle against a tree and watch the dragon soar through the air. He loved to see it fly and regretted that it was not yet big enough to ride. He often sat beside the dragon and rubbed its neck, feeling sinews and corded muscles flex under his hands.

Despite Eragon's efforts, the forest around the farm filled with signs of the dragon's existence. It was impossible to erase all the huge four-clawed footprints sunk deep in the snow, and he refused even to try to hide the giant dung heaps that were becoming far too common. The dragon had rubbed against trees, stripping off the bark, and had sharpened its claws on dead logs, leaving gashes inches deep. If Garrow or Roran went too far beyond the farm's boundaries, they would discover the dragon. Eragon could imagine no worse way for the truth to come out, so he decided to preempt it by explaining everything to them.

He wanted to do two things first, though: give the dragon a suitable name and learn more about dragons in general. To that end he needed to talk with Brom, master of epics and legends—the only places where dragonlore survived.

So when Roran went to get a chisel repaired in Carvahall, Eragon volunteered to go with him.

The evening before they left, Eragon went to a small clearing in the forest and called the dragon with his mind. After a moment he saw a fast-moving speck in the dusky sky. The dragon dived toward him, pulled up sharply, then leveled off above the trees. He heard a low-pitched whistle as air rushed over its wings. It banked slowly to his

left and spiraled gently down to the ground. The dragon back-flapped for balance with a deep, muffled *thwump* as it landed.

Eragon opened his mind, still uncomfortable with the strange sensation, and told the dragon that he was leaving. It snorted with unease. He attempted to soothe it with a calming mental picture, but the dragon whipped its tail, unsatisfied. He rested his hand on its shoulder and tried to radiate peace and serenity. Scales bumped under his fingers as he patted it gently.

A single word rang in his head, deep and clear.

Eragon.

It was solemn and sad, as if an unbreakable pact were being sealed. He stared at the dragon and a cold tingle ran down his arm.

Eragon.

A hard knot formed in his stomach as unfathomable sapphire eyes gazed back at him. For the first time he did not think of the dragon as an animal. It was something else, something … different. He raced home, trying to escape the dragon. *My dragon.*

Eragon.

Tea for Two

Roran and Eragon parted at the outskirts of Carvahall. Eragon walked slowly to Brom's house, engrossed in his thoughts. He stopped at the doorstep and raised his hand to knock.

A voice rasped, "What do you want, boy?"

He whirled around. Behind him Brom leaned on a twisted staff embellished with strange carvings. He wore a brown hooded robe like a friar. A pouch hung from the scuffed leather belt clasped around his waist. Above his white beard, a proud eagle nose hooked over his mouth and dominated his face. He peered at Eragon with deep-set eyes shadowed by a gnarled brow and waited for his reply.

"To get information," Eragon said. "Roran is getting a chisel fixed and I had free time, so I came to see if you could answer a few questions."

The old man grunted and reached for the door. Eragon noticed a gold ring on his right hand. Light glinted off a sapphire, highlighting a strange symbol carved on its face. "You might as well come in; we'll be talking awhile. Your questions never seem to end." Inside, the house was darker than charcoal, an acrid smell heavy in the air. "Now, for a light." Eragon heard the old man move around, then a low curse as something crashed to the floor. "Ah, here we go." A white spark flashed; a flame wavered into existence.

Brom stood with a candle before a stone fireplace. Stacks of books surrounded a high-backed, deeply carved wooden chair that faced the mantel; the four legs were shaped like eagle claws, and the seat and back were padded with leather embossed with a swirling rose pattern. A cluster of lesser chairs held piles of scrolls. Ink pots and pens were scattered across a writing desk. "Make room for yourself, but by the lost kings, be *careful*. This stuff is valuable."

Eragon stepped over pages of parchment covered with angular runes. He gently lifted cracking scrolls off a chair and placed them on the floor. A cloud of dust flew into the air as he sat. He stifled a sneeze.

Brom bent down and lit the fire with his candle. "Good! Nothing like sitting by a fire for conversation." He threw back his hood to reveal hair that was not white, but silver, then hung a kettle over the flames and settled into the high-backed chair.

"Now, what do you want?" He addressed Eragon roughly, but not unkindly.

"Well," said Eragon, wondering how best to approach the subject, "I

keep hearing about the Dragon Riders and their supposed accomplishments. Most everyone seems to want them to return, but I've never heard tell of how they were started, where the dragons came from, or what made the Riders special—aside from the dragons."

"A vast subject to tell about," grumbled Brom. He peered at Eragon alertly. "If I told you their whole story, we would still be sitting here when winter comes again. It will have to be reduced to a manageable length. But before we start properly, I need my pipe."

Eragon waited patiently as Brom tamped down the cardus weed. He liked Brom. The old man was irascible at times, but he never seemed to mind taking time for Eragon. Eragon had once asked him where he came from, and Brom had laughed, saying, "A village much like Carvahall, only not quite as interesting." Curiosity aroused, Eragon asked his uncle. But Garrow could only tell him that Brom had bought a house in Carvahall nearly fifteen years ago and had lived there quietly ever since.

Brom used a tinderbox to light the pipe. He puffed a few times, then said, "There … we won't have to stop, except for the tea. Now, about the Riders, or the Shur'tugal, as they are called by the elves. Where to start? They spanned countless years and, at the height of their power, held sway over twice the Empire's lands. Numerous stories have been told about them, most nonsense. If you believed everything said, you would expect them to have the powers of a lesser god. Scholars have devoted entire lives to separating these fictions from fact, but it's doubtful any of them will succeed. However, it isn't an impossible task if we confine ourselves to the three areas you specified: how the Riders began, why they were so highly regarded, and where dragons came from. I shall start with the last item." Eragon settled back and listened to the man's mesmerizing voice.

"Dragons have no beginning, unless it lies with the creation of Alagaësia itself. And if they have an end, it will be when this world perishes, for they suffer as the land does. They, the dwarves, and a few others are the true inhabitants of this land. They lived here before all others, strong and proud in their elemental glory. Their world was unchanging until the first elves sailed over the sea on their silver ships."

"Where did the elves come from?" interrupted Eragon. "And why are they called the fair folk? Do they really exist?"

Brom scowled. "Do you want your original questions answered or not? They won't be if you want to explore every obscure piece of knowledge."

"Sorry," said Eragon. He dipped his head and tried to look contrite.

"No, you're not," said Brom with some amusement. He shifted his gaze to the fire and watched it lick the underside of the kettle. "If you

must know, elves are not legends, and they are called the fair folk because they are more graceful than any of the other races. They come from what they call Alalëa, though none but they know what, or even where, it is.

"Now," he glared from under his bushy eyebrows to make sure there would be no more interruptions, "the elves were a proud race then, and strong in magic. At first they regarded dragons as mere animals. From that belief rose a deadly mistake. A brash elven youth hunted down a dragon, as he would a stag, and killed it. Outraged, the dragons ambushed and slaughtered the elf. Unfortunately, the bloodletting did not stop there. The dragons massed together and attacked the entire elven nation. Dismayed by the terrible misunderstanding, the elves tried to end the hostilities, but couldn't find a way to communicate with the dragons.

"Thus, to greatly abbreviate a complicated series of occurrences, there was a very long and very bloody war, which both sides later regretted. At the beginning the elves fought only to defend themselves, for they were reluctant to escalate the fighting, but the dragons' ferocity eventually forced them to attack for their own survival. This lasted for five years and would have continued for much longer if an elf called Eragon hadn't found a dragon egg." Eragon blinked in surprise. "Ah, I see you didn't know of your namesake," said Brom.

"No." The teakettle whistled stridently. *Why was I named after an elf?*

"Then you should find this all the more interesting," said Brom. He hooked the kettle out of the fire and poured boiling water into two cups. Handing one to Eragon, he warned, "These leaves don't need to steep long, so drink it quickly before it gets too strong." Eragon tried a sip, but scalded his tongue. Brom set his own cup aside and continued smoking the pipe.

"No one knows why that egg was abandoned. Some say the parents were killed in an elven attack. Others believe the dragons purposefully left it there. Either way, Eragon saw the value of raising a friendly dragon. He cared for it secretly and, in the custom of the ancient language, named him Bid'Daum. When Bid'Daum had grown to a good size, they traveled together among the dragons and convinced them to live in peace with the elves. Treaties were formed between the two races. To ensure that war would never break out again, they decided that it was necessary to establish the Riders.

"At first the Riders were intended merely as a means of communication between the elves and dragons. However, as time passed, their worth was recognized and they were given ever more authority. Eventually they took the island Vroengard for their home

and built a city on it—Doru Araeba. Before Galbatorix overthrew them, the Riders held more power than all the kings in Alagaësia. Now I believe I have answered two of your questions."

"Yes," said Eragon absently. It seemed like an incredible coincidence that he had been named after the first Rider. For some reason his name did not feel the same anymore. "What does *Eragon* mean?"

"I don't know," said Brom. "It's very old. I doubt anyone remembers except the elves, and fortune would have to smile greatly before you talked with one. It is a good name to have, though; you should be proud of it. Not everyone has one so honorable."

Eragon brushed the matter from his mind and focused on what he had learned from Brom; there was something missing. "I don't understand. Where were we when the Riders were created?"

"We?" asked Brom, raising an eyebrow.

"You know, all of us." Eragon waved his hands vaguely. "Humans in general."

Brom laughed. "We are no more native to this land than the elves. It took our ancestors another three centuries to arrive here and join the Riders."

"That can't be," protested Eragon. "We've always lived in Palancar Valley."

"That might be true for a few generations, but beyond that, no. It isn't even true for you, Eragon," said Brom gently. "Though you consider yourself part of Garrow's family, and rightly so, your sire was not from here. Ask around and you'll find many people who haven't been here that long. This valley is old and hasn't always belonged to us."

Eragon scowled and gulped at the tea. It was still hot enough to burn his throat. This was his home, regardless of who his father was! "What happened to the dwarves after the Riders were destroyed?"

"No one really knows. They fought with the Riders through the first few battles, but when it became clear Galbatorix was going to win, they sealed all the known entrances to their tunnels and disappeared underground. As far as I know, not one has been seen since."

"And the dragons?" he asked. "What of them? Surely they weren't all killed."

Brom answered sorrowfully, "That is the greatest mystery in Alagaësia nowadays: How many dragons survived Galbatorix's murderous slaughter? He spared those who agreed to serve him, but only the twisted dragons of the Forsworn would assist his madness. If any dragons aside from Shruikan are still alive, they have hidden themselves so they will never be found by the Empire."

So where did *my dragon come from?* wondered Eragon. "Were the

Urgals here when the elves came to Alagaësia?" he asked.

"No, they followed the elves across the sea, like ticks seeking blood. They were one of the reasons the Riders became valued for their battle prowess and ability to keep the peace.… Much can be learned from this history. It's a pity the king makes it a delicate subject," reflected Brom.

"Yes, I heard your story the last time I was in town."

"Story!" roared Brom. Lightning flashed in his eyes. "If it is a story, then the rumors of my death are true and you are speaking with a ghost! Respect the past; you never know how it may affect you."

Eragon waited until Brom's face mellowed before he dared ask, "How big were the dragons?"

A dark plume of smoke swirled above Brom like a miniature thunderstorm. "Larger than a house. Even the small ones had wingspans over a hundred feet; they never stopped growing. Some of the ancient ones, before the Empire killed them, could have passed for large hills."

Dismay swept through Eragon. *How can I hide my dragon in the years to come?* He raged silently, but kept his voice calm. "When did they mature?"

"Well," said Brom, scratching his chin, "they couldn't breathe fire until they were around five to six months old, which was about when they could mate. The older a dragon was, the longer it could breathe fire. Some of them could keep at it for minutes." Brom blew a smoke ring and watched it float up to the ceiling.

"I heard that their scales shone like gems."

Brom leaned forward and growled, "You heard right. They came in every color and shade. It was said that a group of them looked like a living rainbow, constantly shifting and shimmering. But who told you that?"

Eragon froze for a second, then lied, "A trader."

"What was his name?" asked Brom. His tangled eyebrows met in a thick white line; the wrinkles deepened on his forehead. Unnoticed, the pipe smoldered out.

Eragon pretended to think. "I don't know. He was talking in Morn's, but I never found out who he was."

"I wish you had," muttered Brom.

"He also said a Rider could hear his dragon's thoughts," said Eragon quickly, hoping that the fictitious trader would protect him from suspicion.

Brom's eyes narrowed. Slowly he took out a tinderbox and struck the flint. Smoke rose, and he took a long pull from the pipe, exhaling slowly. In a flat voice he said, "He was wrong. It isn't in any of the stories, and I know them all. Did he say anything else?"

Eragon shrugged. “No.” Brom was too interested in the trader for him to continue the falsehood. Casually he inquired, “Did dragons live very long?”

Brom did not respond at once. His chin sank to his chest while his fingers tapped the pipe thoughtfully, light reflecting off his ring. “Sorry, my mind was elsewhere. Yes, a dragon will live for quite a while, forever, in fact, as long as it isn’t killed and its Rider doesn’t die.”

“How does anyone know that?” objected Eragon. “If dragons die when their Riders do, they could only live to be sixty or seventy. You said during your … narration that Riders lived for hundreds of years, but that’s impossible.” It troubled him to think of outliving his family and friends.

A quiet smile curled Brom’s lips as he said slyly, “What is possible is subjective. Some would say that you cannot travel through the Spine and live, yet you do. It’s a matter of perspective. You must be very wise to know so much at such a young age.” Eragon flushed, and the old man chuckled. “Don’t be angry; you can’t be expected to know such things. You forget that the dragons were magical—they affected everything around them in strange ways. The Riders were closest to them and experienced this the most. The most common side effect was an extended life. Our king has lived long enough to make that apparent, but most people attribute it to his own magical abilities. There were also other, less noticeable changes. All the Riders were stronger of body, keener of mind, and truer of sight than normal men. Along with this, a human Rider would slowly acquire pointed ears, though they were never as prominent as an elf’s.”

Eragon had to stop his hand from reaching up to feel the tips of his ears. *How else will this dragon change my life? Not only has it gotten inside my head, but it’s altering my body as well!* “Were dragons very smart?”

“Didn’t you pay attention to what I told you earlier!” demanded Brom. “How could the elves form agreements and peace treaties with dumb brutes? They were as intelligent as you or I.”

“But they were animals,” persisted Eragon.

Brom snorted. “They were no more animals than we are. For some reason people praise everything the Riders did, yet ignore the dragons, assuming that they were nothing more than an exotic means to get from one town to another. They weren’t. The Riders’ great deeds were only possible because of the dragons. How many men would draw their swords if they knew a giant fire-breathing lizard—one with more natural cunning and wisdom than even a king could hope for—would soon be there to stop the violence? Hmm?” He blew another smoke ring and watched it waft away.

“Did you ever see one?”

“Nay,” said Brom, “it was long before my time.”

And now for a name. “I’ve been trying to recall the name of a certain dragon, but it keeps eluding me. I think I heard it when the traders were in Carvahall, but I’m not sure. Could you help me?”

Brom shrugged and quickly listed a stream of names. “There was Jura, Hírador, and Fundor—who fought the giant sea snake. Galzra, Briam, Ohen the Strong, Gretiem, Beroan, Roslarb …” He added many others. At the very end, he uttered so softly Eragon almost did not hear, “… and Saphira.” Brom quietly emptied his pipe. “Was it any of those?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Eragon. Brom had given him much to think about, and it was getting late. “Well, Roran’s probably finished with Horst. I should get back, though I’d rather not.”

Brom raised an eyebrow. “What, is that it? I expected to be answering your questions until he came looking for you. No queries about dragon battle tactics or requests for descriptions of breathtaking aerial combat? Are we done?”

“For now,” laughed Eragon. “I learned what I wanted to and more.” He stood and Brom followed.

“Very well, then.” He ushered Eragon to the door. “Goodbye. Take care. And don’t forget, if you remember who that trader was, tell me.”

“I will. Thank you.” Eragon stepped into the glaring winter sunlight, squinting. He slowly paced away, pondering what he had heard.

On the way home Roran said, “There was a stranger from Therinsford at Horst’s today.”

“What’s his name?” asked Eragon. He sidestepped a patch of ice and continued walking at a brisk pace. His cheeks and eyes burned from the cold.

“Dempton. He came here to have Horst forge him some sockets,” said Roran. His stocky legs plowed through a drift, clearing the way for Eragon.

“Doesn’t Therinsford have its own smith?”

“Yes,” replied Roran, “but he isn’t skilled enough.” He glanced at Eragon. With a shrug he added, “Dempton needs the sockets for his mill. He’s expanding it and offered me a job. If I accept, I’ll leave with him when he picks up the sockets.”

Millers worked all year. During winter they ground whatever people brought them, but in harvest season they bought grain and sold it as flour. It was hard, dangerous work; workers often lost fingers or hands to the giant millstones. “Are you going to tell Garrow?” asked Eragon.

“Yes.” A grimly amused smile played across Roran’s face.

“What for? You know what he thinks about us going away. It’ll only cause trouble if you say anything. Forget about it so we can eat tonight’s dinner in peace.”

“I can’t. I’m going to take the job.”

Eragon halted. “Why?” They faced each other, their breath visible in the air. “I know money is hard to come by, but we always manage to survive. You don’t have to leave.”

“No, I don’t. But the money is for myself.” Roran tried to resume walking, but Eragon refused to budge.

“What do you need it for?” he demanded.

Roran’s shoulders straightened slightly. “I want to marry.”

Bewilderment and astonishment overwhelmed Eragon. He remembered seeing Katrina and Roran kissing during the traders’ visit, but marriage? “Katrina?” he asked weakly, just to confirm. Roran nodded. “Have you asked her?”

“Not yet, but come spring, when I can raise a house, I will.”

“There’s too much work on the farm for you to leave now,” protested Eragon. “Wait until we’re ready for planting.”

“No,” said Roran, laughing slightly. “Spring’s the time I’ll be needed the most. The ground will have to be furrowed and sown. The crops must be weeded—not to mention all the other chores. No, this is the

best time for me to go, when all we really do is wait for the seasons to change. You and Garrow can make do without me. If all goes well, I'll soon be back working on the farm, with a wife."

Eragon reluctantly conceded that Roran made sense. He shook his head, but whether with amazement or anger, he knew not. "I guess I can only wish you the best of luck. But Garrow may take this with ill humor."

"We will see."

They resumed walking, the silence a barrier between them. Eragon's heart was disturbed. It would take time before he could look upon this development with favor. When they arrived home, Roran did not tell Garrow of his plans, but Eragon was sure that he soon would.

Eragon went to see the dragon for the first time since it had spoken to him. He approached apprehensively, aware now that it was an equal.

Eragon.

"Is that all you can say?" he snapped.

Yes.

His eyes widened at the unexpected reply, and he sat down roughly. *Now it has a sense of humor. What next?* Impulsively, he broke a dead branch with his foot. Roran's announcement had put him in a foul mood. A questioning thought came from the dragon, so he told it what had happened. As he talked his voice grew steadily louder until he was yelling pointlessly into the air. He ranted until his emotions were spent, then ineffectually punched the ground.

"I don't want him to go, that's all," he said helplessly. The dragon watched impassively, listening and learning. Eragon mumbled a few choice curses and rubbed his eyes. He looked at the dragon thoughtfully. "You need a name. I heard some interesting ones today; perhaps you'll like one." He mentally ran through the list Brom had given him until he found two names that struck him as heroic, noble, and pleasing to the ear. "What do you think of Vanilor or his successor, Eridor? Both were great dragons."

No, said the dragon. It sounded amused with his efforts. *Eragon.*

"That's *my* name; you can't have it," he said, rubbing his chin. "Well, if you don't like those, there are others." He continued through the list, but the dragon rejected every one he proposed. It seemed to be laughing at something Eragon did not understand, but he ignored it and kept suggesting names. "There was Ingothold, he slew the …" A revelation stopped him. *That's the problem! I've been choosing male names. You are a she!*

Yes. The dragon folded her wings smugly.

Now that he knew what to look for, he came up with half a dozen names. He toyed with Miremel, but that did not fit—after all, it was

the name of a brown dragon. Opheila and Lenora were also discarded. He was about to give up when he remembered the last name Brom had muttered. Eragon liked it, but would the dragon?

He asked.

"Are you Saphira?" She looked at him with intelligent eyes. Deep in his mind he felt her satisfaction.

Yes. Something clicked in his head and her voice echoed, as if from a great distance. He grinned in response. Saphira started humming.

A Miller-to-Be

The sun had set by the time dinner was served. A blustery wind howled outside, shaking the house. Eragon eyed Roran closely and waited for the inevitable. Finally: "I was offered a job at Therinsford's mill … which I plan to take."

Garrow finished his mouthful of food with deliberate slowness and laid down his fork. He leaned back in his chair, then interlaced his fingers behind his head and uttered one dry word, "Why?"

Roran explained while Eragon absently picked at his food.

"I see," was Garrow's only comment. He fell silent and stared at the ceiling. No one moved as they awaited his response. "Well, when do you leave?"

"What?" asked Roran.

Garrow leaned forward with a twinkle in his eye. "Did you think I would stop you? I'd hoped you would marry soon. It will be good to see this family growing again. Katrina will be lucky to have you." Astonishment raced over Roran's face, then he settled into a relieved grin. "So when do you leave?" Garrow asked.

Roran regained his voice. "When Dempton returns to get the sockets for the mill."

Garrow nodded. "And that will be in …?"

"Two weeks."

"Good. That will give us time to prepare. It'll be different to have the house to ourselves. But if nothing goes amiss, it shouldn't be for too long." He looked over the table and asked, "Eragon, did you know of this?"

He shrugged ruefully. "Not until today.… It's madness."

Garrow ran a hand over his face. "It's life's natural course." He pushed himself up from the chair. "All will be fine; time will settle everything. For now, though, let's clean the dishes." Eragon and Roran helped him in silence.

The next few days were trying. Eragon's temper was frayed. Except for curtly answering direct questions, he spoke with no one. There were small reminders everywhere that Roran was leaving: Garrow making him a pack, things missing from the walls, and a strange emptiness that filled the house. It was almost a week before he realized that distance had grown between Roran and him. When they spoke, the words did not come easily and their conversations were uncomfortable.

Saphira was a balm for Eragon's frustration. He could talk freely with her; his emotions were completely open to her mind, and she understood him better than anyone else. During the weeks before Roran's departure, she went through another growth spurt. She gained twelve inches at the shoulder, which was now higher than Eragon's. He found that the small hollow where her neck joined her shoulders was a perfect place to sit. He often rested there in the evenings and scratched her neck while he explained the meanings of different words. Soon she understood everything he said and frequently commented on it.

For Eragon, this part of his life was delightful. Saphira was as real and complex as any person. Her personality was eclectic and at times completely alien, yet they understood each other on a profound level. Her actions and thoughts constantly revealed new aspects of her character. Once she caught an eagle and, instead of eating it, released it, saying, *No hunter of the sky should end his days as prey. Better to die on the wing than pinned to the ground.*

Eragon's plan to let his family see Saphira was dispelled by Roran's announcement and Saphira's own cautionary words. She was reluctant to be seen, and he, partly out of selfishness, agreed. The moment her existence was divulged, he knew that shouts, accusations, and fear would be directed at him … so he procrastinated. He told himself to wait for a sign that it was the right time.

The night before Roran was to leave, Eragon went to talk with him. He stalked down the hallway to Roran's open door. An oil lamp rested on a nightstand, painting the walls with warm flickering light. The bedposts cast elongated shadows on empty shelves that rose to the ceiling. Roran—his eyes shaded and the back of his neck tense—was rolling blankets around his clothes and belongings. He paused, then picked up something from the pillow and bounced it in his hand. It was a polished rock Eragon had given him years ago. Roran started to tuck it into the bundle, then stopped and set it on a shelf. A hard lump formed in Eragon's throat, and he left.

Breakfast was cold, but the tea was hot. Ice inside the windows had melted with the morning fire and soaked into the wood floor, staining it with dark puddles. Eragon looked at Garrow and Roran by the kitchen stove and reflected that this would be the last time he saw them together for many months.

Roran sat in a chair, lacing his boots. His full pack rested on the floor next to him. Garrow stood between them with his hands stuck deep into his pockets. His shirt hung loosely; his skin looked drawn. Despite the young men's cajoling, he refused to go with them. When pressed for a reason, he only said that it was for the best.

"Do you have everything?" Garrow asked Roran.

"Yes."

He nodded and took a small pouch from his pocket. Coins clinked as he handed it to Roran. "I've been saving this for you. It isn't much, but if you wish to buy some bauble or trinket, it will suffice."

"Thank you, but I won't be spending my money on trifles," said Roran.

"Do what you will; it is yours," said Garrow. "I've nothing else to give you, except a father's blessing. Take it if you wish, but it is worth little."

Roran's voice was thick with emotion. "I would be honored to receive it."

"Then do, and go in peace," said Garrow, and kissed him on the forehead. He turned and said in a louder voice, "Do not think that I have forgotten you, Eragon. I have words for both of you. It's time I said them, as you are entering the world. Heed them and they will serve you well." He bent his gaze sternly on them. "First, let no one rule your mind or body. Take special care that your thoughts remain unfettered. One may be a free man and yet be bound tighter than a slave. Give men your ear, but not your heart. Show respect for those in power, but don't follow them blindly. Judge with logic and reason, but comment not.

"Consider none your superior, whatever their rank or station in life. Treat all fairly or they will seek revenge. Be careful with your money. Hold fast to your beliefs and others will listen." He continued at a slower pace, "Of the affairs of love … my only advice is to be honest. That's your most powerful tool to unlock a heart or gain forgiveness. That is all I have to say." He seemed slightly self-conscious of his speech.

He hoisted Roran's pack. "Now you must go. Dawn is approaching, and Dempton will be waiting."

Roran shouldered the pack and hugged Garrow. "I will return as soon as I can," he said.

"Good!" replied Garrow. "But now go and don't worry about us."

They parted reluctantly. Eragon and Roran went outside, then turned and waved. Garrow raised a bony hand, his eyes grave, and watched as they trudged to the road. After a long moment he shut the door. As the sound carried through the morning air, Roran halted.

Eragon looked back and surveyed the land. His eyes lingered on the lone buildings. They looked pitifully small and fragile. A thin finger of smoke trailing up from the house was the only proof that the snowbound farm was inhabited.

"There is our whole world," Roran observed somberly.

Eragon shivered impatiently and grumbled, "A good one too." Roran nodded, then straightened his shoulders and headed into his new future. The house disappeared from view as they descended the hill.

It was still early when they reached Carvahall, but they found the smithy doors already open. The air inside was pleasantly warm. Baldor slowly worked two large bellows attached to the side of a stone forge filled with sparkling coals. Before the forge stood a black anvil and an iron-bound barrel filled with brine. From a line of neck-high poles protruding from the walls hung rows of items: giant tongs, pliers, hammers in every shape and weight, chisels, angles, center punches, files, rasps, lathes, bars of iron and steel waiting to be shaped, vises, shears, picks, and shovels. Horst and Dempton stood next to a long table.

Dempton approached with a smile beneath his flamboyant red mustache. "Roran! I'm glad you came. There's going to be more work than I can handle with my new grindstones. Are you ready to go?"

Roran hefted his pack. "Yes. Do we leave soon?"

"I've a few things to take care of first, but we'll be off within the hour." Eragon shifted his feet as Dempton turned to him, tugging at the corner of his mustache. "You must be Eragon. I would offer you a job too, but Roran got the only one. Maybe in a year or two, eh?"

Eragon smiled uneasily and shook his hand. The man was friendly. Under other circumstances Eragon would have liked him, but right then, he sourly wished that the miller had never come to Carvahall. Dempton huffed. "Good, very good." He returned his attention to Roran and started to explain how a mill worked.

"They're ready to go," interrupted Horst, gesturing at the table

where several bundles rested. “You can take them whenever you want to.” They shook hands, then Horst left the smithy, beckoning to Eragon on the way out.

Interested, Eragon followed. He found the smith standing in the street with his arms crossed. Eragon thrust his thumb back toward the miller and asked, “What do you think of him?”

Horst rumbled, “A good man. He’ll do fine with Roran.” He absently brushed metal filings off his apron, then put a massive hand on Eragon’s shoulder. “Lad, do you remember the fight you had with Sloan?”

“If you’re asking about payment for the meat, I haven’t forgotten.”

“No, I trust you, lad. What I wanted to know is if you still have that blue stone.”

Eragon’s heart fluttered. *Why does he want to know? Maybe someone saw Saphira!* Struggling not to panic, he said, “I do, but why do you ask?”

“As soon as you return home, get rid of it.” Horst overrode Eragon’s exclamation. “Two men arrived here yesterday. Strange fellows dressed in black and carrying swords. It made my skin crawl just to look at them. Last evening they started asking people if a stone like yours had been found. They’re at it again today.” Eragon blanched. “No one with any sense said anything. They know trouble when they see it, but I could name a few people who will talk.”

Dread filled Eragon’s heart. Whoever had sent the stone into the Spine had finally tracked it down. Or perhaps the Empire had learned of Saphira. He did not know which would be worse. *Think! Think! The egg is gone. It’s impossible for them to find it now. But if they know what it was, it’ll be obvious what happened.… Saphira might be in danger!* It took all of his self-control to retain a casual air. “Thanks for telling me. Do you know where they are?” He was proud that his voice barely trembled.

“I didn’t warn you because I thought you needed to meet those men! Leave Carvahall. Go home.”

“All right,” said Eragon to placate the smith, “if you think I should.”

“I do.” Horst’s face softened. “I may be overreacting, but these strangers give me a bad feeling. It would be better if you stay home until they leave. I’ll try to keep them away from your farm, though it may not do any good.”

Eragon looked at him gratefully. He wished he could tell him about Saphira. “I’ll leave now,” he said, and hurried back to Roran. Eragon clasped his cousin’s arm and bade him farewell.

“Aren’t you going to stay awhile?” Roran asked with surprise.

Eragon almost laughed. For some reason, the question struck him as funny. “There’s nothing for me to do, and I’m not going to stand

around until you go."

"Well," said Roran doubtfully, "I guess this is the last time we'll see each other for a few months."

"I'm sure it won't seem that long," said Eragon hastily. "Take care and come back soon." He hugged Roran, then left. Horst was still in the street. Aware that the smith was watching, Eragon headed to the outskirts of Carvahall. Once the smithy was out of sight, he ducked behind a house and sneaked back through the village.

Eragon kept to the shadows as he searched each street, listening for the slightest noise. His thoughts flashed to his room, where his bow hung; he wished that it was in his hand. He prowled across Carvahall, avoiding everyone until he heard a sibilant voice from around a house. Although his ears were keen, he had to strain to hear what was being said.

"When did this happen?" The words were smooth, like oiled glass, and seemed to worm their way through the air. Underlying the speech was a strange hiss that made his scalp prickle.

"About three months ago," someone else answered. Eragon identified him as Sloan.

Shade's blood, he's telling them.… He resolved to punch Sloan the next time they met.

A third person spoke. The voice was deep and moist. It conjured up images of creeping decay, mold, and other things best left untouched. "Are you sure? We would hate to think you had made a mistake. If that were so, it would be most … unpleasant." Eragon could imagine only too well what they might do. Would anyone but the Empire dare threaten people like that? Probably not, but whoever sent the egg might be powerful enough to use force with impunity.

"Yeah, I'm sure. He had it then. I'm not lying. Plenty of people know about it. Go ask them." Sloan sounded shaken. He said something else that Eragon did not catch.

"They have been … rather uncooperative." The words were derisive. There was a pause. "Your information has been helpful. We will not forget you." Eragon believed him.

Sloan muttered something, then Eragon heard someone hurrying away. He peered around the corner to see what was happening. Two tall men stood in the street. Both were dressed in long black cloaks that were lifted by sheaths poking past their legs. On their shirts were insignias intricately wrought with silver thread. Hoods shaded their faces, and their hands were covered by gloves. Their backs were oddly humped, as though their clothes were stuffed with padding.

Eragon shifted slightly to get a better view. One of the strangers stiffened and grunted peculiarly to his companion. They both swiveled around and sank into crouches. Eragon's breath caught. Mortal fear

clenched him. His eyes locked onto their hidden faces, and a stifling power fell over his mind, keeping him in place. He struggled against it and screamed to himself, *Move!* His legs swayed, but to no avail. The strangers stalked toward him with a smooth, noiseless gait. He knew they could see his face now. They were almost to the corner, hands grasping at swords.…

"Eragon!" He jerked as his name was called. The strangers froze in place and hissed. Brom hurried toward him from the side, head bare and staff in hand. The strangers were blocked from the old man's view. Eragon tried to warn him, but his tongue and arms would not stir. "Eragon!" cried Brom again. The strangers gave Eragon one last look, then slipped away between the houses.

Eragon collapsed to the ground, shivering. Sweat beaded on his forehead and made his palms sticky. The old man offered Eragon a hand and pulled him up with a strong arm. "You look sick; is all well?"

Eragon gulped and nodded mutely. His eyes flickered around, searching for anything unusual. "I just got dizzy all of a sudden … it's passed. It was very odd—I don't know why it happened."

"You'll recover," said Brom, "but perhaps it would be better if you went home."

Yes, I have to get home! Have to get there before they do. "I think you're right. Maybe I'm getting ill."

"Then home is the best place for you. It's a long walk, but I'm sure you will feel better by the time you arrive. Let me escort you to the road." Eragon did not protest as Brom took his arm and led him away at a quick pace. Brom's staff crunched in the snow as they passed the houses.

"Why were you looking for me?"

Brom shrugged. "Simple curiosity. I learned you were in town and wondered if you had remembered the name of that trader."

Trader? What's he talking about? Eragon stared blankly; his confusion caught the attention of Brom's probing eyes. "No," he said, and then amended himself, "I'm afraid I still don't remember."

Brom sighed gruffly, as if something had been confirmed, and rubbed his eagle nose. "Well, then … if you do, come tell me. I am most interested in this trader who pretends to know so much about dragons." Eragon nodded with a distracted air. They walked in silence to the road, then Brom said, "Hasten home. I don't think it would be a good idea to tarry on the way." He offered a gnarled hand.

Eragon shook it, but as he let go something in Brom's hand caught on his mitt and pulled it off. It fell to the ground. The old man picked it up. "Clumsy of me," he apologized, and handed it back. As Eragon took the mitt, Brom's strong fingers wrapped around his wrist and

twisted sharply. His palm briefly faced upward, revealing the silvery mark. Brom's eyes glinted, but he let Eragon yank his hand back and jam it into the mitt.

"Goodbye," Eragon forced out, perturbed, and hurried down the road. Behind him he heard Brom whistling a merry tune.

Eragon's mind churned as he sped on his way. He ran as fast as he could, refusing to stop even when his breath came in great gasps. As he pounded down the cold road, he cast out with his mind for Saphira, but she was too far away for him to contact. He thought about what to say to Garrow. There was no choice now; he would have to reveal Saphira.

He arrived home, panting for air and heart pounding. Garrow stood by the barn with the horses. Eragon hesitated. *Should I talk to him now? He won't believe me unless Saphira is here—I'd better find her first.* He slipped around the farm and into the forest. *Saphira!* he shouted with his thoughts.

I come, was the dim reply. Through the words he sensed her alarm. He waited impatiently, though it was not long before the sound of her wings filled the air. She landed amid a gout of smoke. *What happened?* she queried.

He touched her shoulder and closed his eyes. Calming his mind, he quickly told her what had occurred. When he mentioned the strangers, Saphira recoiled. She reared and roared deafeningly, then whipped her tail over his head. He scrambled back in surprise, ducking as her tail hit a snowdrift. Bloodlust and fear emanated from her in great sickening waves. *Fire! Enemies! Death! Murderers!*

What's wrong? He put all of his strength into the words, but an iron wall surrounded her mind, shielding her thoughts. She let out another roar and gouged the earth with her claws, tearing the frozen ground. *Stop it! Garrow will hear!*

Oaths betrayed, souls killed, eggs shattered! Blood everywhere. Murderers!

Frantic, he blocked out Saphira's emotions and watched her tail. When it flicked past him, he dashed to her side and grabbed a spike on her back. Clutching it, he pulled himself into the small hollow at the base of her neck and held on tightly as she reared again. "Enough, Saphira!" he bellowed. Her stream of thoughts ceased abruptly. He ran a hand over her scales. "Everything's going to be all right." She crouched and her wings rushed upward. They hung there for an instant, then drove down as she flung herself into the sky.

Eragon yelled as the ground dropped away and they rose above the trees. Turbulence buffeted him, snatching the breath out of his mouth. Saphira ignored his terror and banked toward the Spine. Underneath, he glimpsed the farm and the Anora River. His stomach convulsed. He

tightened his arms around Saphira's neck and concentrated on the scales in front of his nose, trying not to vomit as she continued to climb. When she leveled off, he gained the courage to glance around.

The air was so cold that frost accumulated on his eyelashes. They had reached the mountains faster than he thought possible. From the air, the peaks looked like giant razor-sharp teeth waiting to slash them to ribbons. Saphira wobbled unexpectedly, and Eragon heaved over her side. He wiped his lips, tasting bile, and buried his head against her neck.

We have to go back, he pleaded. *The strangers are coming to the farm. Garrow has to be warned. Turn around!* There was no answer. He reached for her mind, but was blocked by a barrier of roiling fear and anger. Determined to make her turn around, he grimly wormed into her mental armor. He pushed at its weak places, undermined the stronger sections, and fought to make her listen, but to no avail.

Soon mountains surrounded them, forming tremendous white walls broken by granite cliffs. Blue glaciers sat between the summits like frozen rivers. Long valleys and ravines opened beneath them. He heard the dismayed screech of birds far below as Saphira soared into view. He saw a herd of woolly goats bounding from ledge to ledge on a rocky bluff.

Eragon was battered by swirling gusts from Saphira's wings, and whenever she moved her neck, he was tossed from side to side. She seemed tireless. He was afraid she was going to fly through the night. Finally, as darkness fell, she tilted into a shallow dive.

He looked ahead and saw that they were headed for a small clearing in a valley. Saphira spiraled down, leisurely drifting over the treetops. She pulled back as the ground neared, filled her wings with air, and landed on her rear legs. Her powerful muscles rippled as they absorbed the shock of impact. She dropped to all fours and skipped a step to keep her balance. Eragon slid off without waiting for her to fold her wings.

As he struck the ground, his knees buckled, and his cheek slammed against the snow. He gasped as excruciating pain seared through his legs, sending tears to his eyes. His muscles, cramped from clenching for so long, shook violently. He rolled onto his back, shivering, and stretched his limbs as best he could. Then he forced himself to look down. Two large blots darkened his wool pants on the insides of his thighs. He touched the fabric. It was wet. Alarmed, he peeled off the pants and grimaced. The insides of his legs were raw and bloody. The skin was gone, rubbed off by Saphira's hard scales. He gingerly felt the abrasions and winced. Cold bit into him as he pulled the pants back on, and he cried out as they scraped against the sensitive wounds. He tried to stand, but his legs would not support him.

The deepening night obscured his surroundings; the shaded mountains were unfamiliar. *I'm in the Spine, I don't know where, during the middle of winter, with a crazed dragon, unable to walk or find shelter. Night is falling. I have to get back to the farm tomorrow. And the only way to do that is to fly, which I can't endure anymore*. He took a deep breath. *Oh, I wish Saphira could breathe fire*. He turned his head and saw her next to him, crouched low to the ground. He put a hand on her side and found it trembling. The barrier in her mind was gone. Without it, her fear scorched through him. He clamped down on it and slowly soothed her with gentle images. *Why do the strangers frighten you?*

Murderers, she hissed.

Garrow is in danger and you kidnap me on this ridiculous journey! Are you unable to protect me? She growled deeply and snapped her jaws. *Ah, but if you think you can, why run?*

Death is a poison.

He leaned on one elbow and stifled his frustration. *Saphira, look where we are! The sun is down, and your flight has stripped my legs as easily as I would scale a fish. Is that what you wanted?*

No.

Then why did you do it? he demanded. Through his link with Saphira, he felt her regret for his pain, but not for her actions. She looked away and refused to answer. The icy temperature deadened Eragon's legs; although it lessened the pain, he knew that his condition was not good. He changed tack. *I'm going to freeze unless you make me a shelter or hollow so I can stay warm. Even a pile of pine needles and branches would do*.

She seemed relieved that he had stopped interrogating her. *There is no need. I will curl around you and cover you with my wings—the fire inside me will stay the cold*.

Eragon let his head thump back on the ground. *Fine, but scrape the snow off the ground. It'll be more comfortable*. In answer, Saphira razed a drift with her tail, clearing it with one powerful stroke. She swept over the site again to remove the last few inches of hardened snow. He eyed the exposed dirt with distaste. *I can't walk over there. You'll have to help me to it*. Her head, larger than his torso, swung over him and came to rest by his side. He stared at her large, sapphire-colored eyes and wrapped his hands around one of her ivory spikes. She lifted her head and slowly dragged him to the bare spot. *Gently, gently*. Stars danced in his eyes as he slid over a rock, but he managed to hold on. After he let go, Saphira rolled on her side, exposing her warm belly. He huddled against the smooth scales of her underside. Her right wing extended over him and enclosed him in complete darkness, forming a living tent. Almost immediately the air began to lose its frigidity.

He pulled his arms inside his coat and tied the empty sleeves around

his neck. For the first time he noticed that hunger gnawed at his stomach. But it did not distract him from his main worry: Could he get back to the farm before the strangers did? And if not, what would happen? *Even if I can force myself to ride Saphira again, it'll be at least midafternoon before we get back. The strangers could be there long before that.* He closed his eyes and felt a single tear slide down his face. *What have I done?*

When Eragon opened his eyes in the morning, he thought the sky had fallen. An unbroken plane of blue stretched over his head and slanted to the ground. Still half asleep, he reached out tentatively and felt a thin membrane under his fingers. It took him a long minute to realize what he was staring at. He bent his neck slightly and glared at the scaly haunch his head rested on. Slowly he pushed his legs out from his fetal curl, scabs cracking. The pain had subsided some from yesterday, but he shrank from the thought of walking. Burning hunger reminded him of his missed meals. He summoned the energy to move and pounded weakly on Saphira's side. "Hey! Wake up!" he yelled.

She stirred and lifted her wing to admit a torrent of sunshine. He squinted as the snow momentarily blinded him. Beside him Saphira stretched like a cat and yawned, flashing rows of white teeth. When Eragon's eyes adjusted, he examined where they were. Imposing and unfamiliar mountains surrounded them, casting deep shadows on the clearing. Off to one side, he saw a trail cut through the snow and into the forest, where he could hear the muffled gurgling of a creek.

Groaning, he stood and swayed, then stiffly hobbled to a tree. He grabbed one of its branches and threw his weight against it. It held, then broke with a loud crack. He ripped off the twigs, fit one end of the branch under his arm, and planted the other firmly in the ground. With the help of his improvised crutch, he limped to the iced-over creek. He broke through the hard shell and cupped the clear, bitter water. Sated, he returned to the clearing. As he emerged from the trees, he finally recognized the mountains and the lay of the land.

This was where, amid deafening sound, Saphira's egg had first appeared. He sagged against a rough trunk. There could be no mistake, for now he saw the gray trees that had been stripped of their needles in the explosion. *How did Saphira know where this was? She was still in the egg. My memories must have given her enough information to find it.* He shook his head in silent astonishment.

Saphira was waiting patiently for him. *Will you take me home?* he asked her. She cocked her head. I *know you don't want to, but you must. Both of us carry an obligation to Garrow. He has cared for me and, through me, you. Would you ignore that debt? What will be said of us in years to come if we don't return—that we hid like cowards while my uncle was in danger? I can hear it now, the story of the Rider and his craven dragon! If there will be a fight, let's face it and not shy away. You are a dragon! Even a Shade would run from you! Yet you crouch in the*

mountains like a frightened rabbit.

Eragon meant to anger her, and he succeeded. A growl rippled in her throat as her head jabbed within a few inches of his face. She bared her fangs and glared at him, smoke trailing from her nostrils. He hoped that he had not gone too far. Her thoughts reached him, red with anger. *Blood will meet blood. I will fight. Our wyrds—our fates—bind us, but try me not. I will take you because of debt owed, but into foolishness we fly*.

"Foolishness or not," he said into the air, "there is no choice—we must go." He ripped his shirt in half and stuffed a piece into each side of his pants. Gingerly, he hoisted himself onto Saphira and took a tight hold on her neck. *This time*, he told her, *fly lower and faster. Time is of the essence*.

Don't let go, she cautioned, then surged into the sky. They rose above the forest and leveled out immediately, barely staying above the branches. Eragon's stomach lurched; he was glad it was empty.

Faster, faster, he urged. She said nothing, but the beat of her wings increased. He screwed his eyes shut and hunched his shoulders. He had hoped that the extra padding of his shirt would protect him, but every movement sent pangs through his legs. Soon lines of hot blood trickled down his calves. Concern emanated from Saphira. She went even faster now, her wings straining. The land sped past, as if it were being pulled out from under them. Eragon imagined that to someone on the ground, they were just a blur.

By early afternoon, Palancar Valley lay before them. Clouds obscured his vision to the south; Carvahall was to the north. Saphira glided down while Eragon searched for the farm. When he spotted it, fear jolted him. A black plume with orange flames dancing at its base rose from the farm.

Saphira! He pointed. *Get me down there. Now!*

She locked her wings and tilted into a steep dive, hurtling groundward at a frightening rate. Then she altered her dive slightly so they sped toward the forest. He yelled over the screaming air, "Land in the fields!" He held on tighter as they plummeted. Saphira waited until they were only a hundred feet off the ground before driving her wings downward in several powerful strokes. She landed heavily, breaking his grip. He crashed to the ground, then staggered upright, gasping for breath.

The house had been blasted apart. Timbers and boards that had been walls and roof were strewn across a wide area. The wood was pulverized, as if a giant hammer had smashed it. Sooty shingles lay everywhere. A few twisted metal plates were all that remained of the stove. The snow was perforated with smashed white crockery and chunks of bricks from the chimney. Thick, oily smoke billowed from

the barn, which burned fiercely. The farm animals were gone, either killed or frightened away.

"Uncle!" Eragon ran to the wreckage, hunting through the destroyed rooms for Garrow. There was no sign of him. "Uncle!" Eragon cried again. Saphira walked around the house and came to his side.

Sorrow breeds here, she said.

"This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't run away with me!"

You would not be alive if we had stayed.

"Look at this!" he screamed. "We could've warned Garrow! It's your fault he didn't get away!" He slammed his fist against a pole, splitting the skin on his knuckles. Blood dripped down his fingers as he stalked out of the house. He stumbled to the path that led to the road and bent down to examine the snow. Several tracks were before him, but his vision was blurry and he could barely see. *Am I going blind?* he wondered. With a shaking hand, he touched his cheeks and found them wet.

A shadow fell on him as Saphira loomed overhead, sheltering him with her wings. *Take comfort; all may not be lost.* He looked up at her, searching for hope. *Examine the trail; my eyes see only two sets of prints. Garrow could not have been taken from here.*

He focused on the trampled snow. The faint imprints of two pairs of leather boots headed toward the house. On top of those were traces of the same two sets of boots leaving. And whoever had made the departing tracks had been carrying the same weight as when they arrived. *You're right, Garrow has to be here!* He leapt to his feet and hurried back to the house.

I will search around the buildings and in the forest, said Saphira.

Eragon scrambled into the remains of the kitchen and frantically started digging through a pile of rubble. Pieces of debris that he could not have moved normally now seemed to shift on their own accord. A cupboard, mostly intact, stymied him for a second, then he heaved and sent it flying. As he pulled on a board, something rattled behind him. He spun around, ready for an attack.

A hand extended from under a section of collapsed roof. It moved weakly, and he grasped it with a cry. "Uncle, can you hear me?" There was no response. Eragon tore at pieces of wood, heedless of the splinters that pierced his hands. He quickly exposed an arm and shoulder, but was barred by a heavy beam. He threw his shoulder at it and shoved with every fiber of his being, but it defied his efforts. "Saphira! I need you!"

She came immediately. Wood cracked under her feet as she crawled over the ruined walls. Without a word she nosed past him and set her side against the beam. Her claws sank into what was left of the floor; her muscles strained. With a grating sound, the beam lifted, and

Eragon rushed under it. Garrow lay on his stomach, his clothes mostly torn off. Eragon pulled him out of the rubble. As soon as they were clear, Saphira released the beam, leaving it to crash to the floor.

Eragon dragged Garrow out of the destroyed house and eased him to the ground. Dismayed, he touched his uncle gently. His skin was gray, lifeless, and dry, as if a fever had burned off any sweat. His lip was split, and there was a long scrape on his cheekbone, but that was not the worst. Deep, ragged burns covered most of his body. They were chalky white and oozed clear liquid. A cloying, sickening smell hung over him—the odor of rotting fruit. His breath came in short jerks, each one sounding like a death rattle.

Murderers, hissed Saphira.

Don't say that. He can still be saved! We have to get him to Gertrude. I can't carry him to Carvahall, though.

Saphira presented an image of Garrow hanging under her while she flew.

Can you lift both of us?

I must.

Eragon dug through the rubble until he found a board and leather thongs. He had Saphira pierce a hole with a claw at each of the board's corners, then he looped a piece of leather through each hole and tied them to her forelegs. After checking to make sure the knots were secure, he rolled Garrow onto the board and lashed him down. As he did, a scrap of black cloth fell from his uncle's hand. It matched the strangers' clothing. He angrily stuffed it in a pocket, mounted Saphira, and closed his eyes as his body settled into a steady throb of pain. *Now!*

She leapt up, hind legs digging into the ground. Her wings clawed at the air as she slowly climbed. Tendons strained and popped as she battled gravity. For a long, painful second, nothing happened, but then she lunged forward powerfully and they rose higher. Once they were over the forest, Eragon told her, *Follow the road. It'll give you enough room if you have to land*.

I might be seen.

It doesn't matter anymore! She argued no further as she veered to the road and headed for Carvahall. Garrow swung wildly underneath them; only the slender leather cords kept him from falling.

The extra weight slowed Saphira. Before long her head sagged, and there was froth at her mouth. She struggled to continue, yet they were almost a league from Carvahall when she locked her wings and sank toward the road.

Her hind feet touched with a shower of snow. Eragon tumbled off her, landing heavily on his side to avoid hurting his legs. He struggled to his feet and worked to untie the leather from Saphira's legs. Her

thick panting filled the air. *Find a safe place to rest*, he said. *I don't know how long I'll be gone, so you're going to have to take care of yourself for a while*.

I will wait, she said.

He gritted his teeth and began to drag Garrow down the road. The first few steps sent an explosion of agony through him. "I can't do this!" he howled at the sky, then took a few more steps. His mouth locked into a snarl. He stared at the ground between his feet as he forced himself to hold a steady pace. It was a fight against his unruly body—a fight he refused to lose. The minutes crawled by at an excruciating rate. Each yard he covered seemed many times that. With desperation he wondered if Carvahall still existed or if the strangers had burnt it down, too. After a time, through a haze of pain, he heard shouting and looked up.

Brom was running toward him—eyes large, hair awry, and one side of his head caked with dried blood. He waved his arms wildly before dropping his staff and grabbing Eragon's shoulders, saying something in a loud voice. Eragon blinked uncomprehendingly. Without warning, the ground rushed up to meet him. He tasted blood, then blacked out.

Dreams roiled in Eragon's mind, breeding and living by their own laws. *He watched as a group of people on proud horses approached a lonely river. Many had silver hair and carried tall lances. A strange, fair ship waited for them, shining under a bright moon. The figures slowly boarded the vessel; two of them, taller than the rest, walked arm in arm. Their faces were obscured by cowls, but he could tell that one was a woman. They stood on the deck of the ship and faced the shore. A man stood alone on the pebble beach, the only one who had not boarded the ship. He threw back his head and let out a long, aching cry. As it faded, the ship glided down the river, without a breeze or oars, out into the flat, empty land. The vision clouded, but just before it disappeared, Eragon glimpsed two dragons in the sky*.

Eragon was first aware of the creaking: back and forth, back and forth. The persistent sound made him open his eyes and stare at the underside of a thatched roof. A rough blanket was draped over him, concealing his nakedness. Someone had bandaged his legs and tied a clean rag around his knuckles.

He was in a single-room hut. A mortar and pestle sat on a table with bowls and plants. Rows of dried herbs hung from the walls and suffused the air with strong, earthy aromas. Flames writhed inside a fireplace, before which sat a rotund woman in a wicker rocking chair —the town healer, Gertrude. Her head lolled, eyes closed. A pair of knitting needles and a ball of wool thread rested in her lap.

Though Eragon felt drained of willpower, he made himself sit up. That helped to clear his mind. He sifted through his memories of the last two days. His first thought was of Garrow, and his second was of Saphira. *I hope she's in a safe place*. He tried to contact her but could not. Wherever she was, it was far from Carvahall. *At least Brom got me to Carvahall. I wonder what happened to him? There was all that blood*.

Gertrude stirred and opened her sparkling eyes. "Oh," she said. "You're awake. Good!" Her voice was rich and warm. "How do you feel?"

"Well enough. Where's Garrow?"

Gertrude dragged the chair close to the bed. "Over at Horst's. There wasn't enough room to keep both of you here. And let me tell you, it's kept me on my toes, having to run back and forth, checking to see if the two of you were all right."

Eragon swallowed his worries and asked, "How is he?"

There was a long delay as she examined her hands. “Not good. He has a fever that refuses to break, and his injuries aren’t healing.”

“I have to see him.” He tried to get up.

“Not until you eat,” she said sharply, pushing him down. “I didn’t spend all this time sitting by your side so you can get back up and hurt yourself. Half the skin on your legs was torn off, and your fever broke only last night. Don’t worry yourself about Garrow. He’ll be fine. He’s a tough man.” Gertrude hung a kettle over the fire, then began chopping parsnips for soup.

“How long have I been here?”

“Two full days.”

Two days! That meant his last meal had been four mornings ago! Just thinking about it made Eragon feel weak. *Saphira’s been on her own this entire time; I hope she’s all right.*

“The whole town wants to know what happened. They sent men down to your farm and found it destroyed.” Eragon nodded; he had expected that. “Your barn was burned down.… Is that how Garrow was injured?”

“I … I don’t know,” said Eragon. “I wasn’t there when it happened.”

“Well, no matter. I’m sure it’ll all get untangled.” Gertrude resumed knitting while the soup cooked. “That’s quite a scar on your palm.”

He reflexively clenched his hand. “Yes.”

“How did you get it?”

Several possible answers came to mind. He chose the simplest one. “I’ve had it ever since I can remember. I never asked Garrow where it came from.”

“Mmm.” The silence remained unbroken until the soup reached a rolling boil. Gertrude poured it in a bowl and handed it to Eragon with a spoon. He accepted it gratefully and took a cautious sip. It was delicious.

When he finished, he asked, “Can I visit Garrow now?”

Gertrude sighed. “You’re a determined one, aren’t you? Well, if you really want to, I won’t stop you. Put on your clothes and we’ll go.”

She turned her back as he struggled into his pants, wincing as they dragged over the bandages, and then slipped on his shirt. Gertrude helped him stand. His legs were weak, but they did not pain him like before.

“Take a few steps,” she commanded, then dryly observed, “At least you won’t have to crawl there.”

Outside, a blustery wind blew smoke from the adjacent buildings into their faces. Storm clouds hid the Spine and covered the valley while a curtain of snow advanced toward the village, obscuring the foothills. Eragon leaned heavily on Gertrude as they made their way through Carvahall.

Horst had built his two-story house on a hill so he could enjoy a view of the mountains. He had lavished all of his skill on it. The shale roof shadowed a railed balcony that extended from a tall window on the second floor. Each water spout was a snarling gargoyle, and every window and door was framed by carvings of serpents, harts, ravens, and knotted vines.

The door was opened by Elain, Horst's wife, a small, willowy woman with refined features and silky blond hair pinned into a bun. Her dress was demure and neat, and her movements graceful. "Please, come in," she said softly. They stepped over the threshold into a large well-lit room. A staircase with a polished balustrade curved down to the floor. The walls were the color of honey. Elain gave Eragon a sad smile, but addressed Gertrude. "I was just about to send for you. He isn't doing well. You should see him right away."

"Elain, you'll have to help Eragon up the stairs," Gertrude said, then hurried up them two at a time.

"It's okay, I can do it myself."

"Are you sure?" asked Elain. He nodded, but she looked doubtful. "Well … as soon as you're done come visit me in the kitchen. I have a fresh-baked pie you might enjoy." As soon as she left, he sagged against the wall, welcoming the support. Then he started up the stairs, one painful step at a time. When he reached the top, he looked down a long hallway dotted with doors. The last one was open slightly. Taking a breath, he lurched toward it.

Katrina stood by a fireplace, boiling rags. She looked up, murmured a condolence, and then returned to her work. Gertrude stood beside her, grinding herbs for a poultice. A bucket by her feet held snow melting into ice water.

Garrow lay on a bed piled high with blankets. Sweat covered his brow, and his eyeballs flickered blindly under their lids. The skin on his face was shrunken like a cadaver's. He was still, save for subtle tremors from his shallow breathing. Eragon touched his uncle's forehead with a feeling of unreality. It burned against his hand. He apprehensively lifted the edge of the blankets and saw that Garrow's many wounds were bound with strips of cloth. Where the bandages were being changed, the burns were exposed to the air. They had not begun to heal. Eragon looked at Gertrude with hopeless eyes. "Can't you do anything about these?"

She pressed a rag into the bucket of ice water, then draped the cool cloth over Garrow's head. "I've tried everything: salves, poultices, tinctures, but nothing works. If the wounds closed, he would have a better chance. Still, things may turn for the better. He's hardy and strong."

Eragon moved to a corner and sank to the floor. *This isn't the way*

things are supposed to be! Silence swallowed his thoughts. He stared blankly at the bed. After a while he noticed Katrina kneeling beside him. She put an arm around him. When he did not respond, she diffidently left.

Sometime later the door opened and Horst came in. He talked to Gertrude in a low voice, then approached Eragon. “Come on. You need to get out of here.” Before Eragon could protest, Horst dragged him to his feet and shepherded him out the door.

“I want to stay,” he complained.

“You need a break and fresh air. Don’t worry, you can go back soon enough,” consoled Horst.

Eragon grudgingly let the smith help him downstairs into the kitchen. Heady smells from half a dozen dishes—rich with spices and herbs—filled the air. Albriech and Baldor were there, talking with their mother as she kneaded bread. The brothers fell silent as they saw Eragon, but he had heard enough to know that they were discussing Garrow.

“Here, sit down,” said Horst, offering a chair.

Eragon sank into it gratefully. “Thank you.” His hands were shaking slightly, so he clasped them in his lap. A plate, piled high with food, was set before him.

“You don’t have to eat,” said Elain, “but it’s there if you want.” She returned to her cooking as he picked up a fork. He could barely swallow a few bites.

“How do you feel?” asked Horst.

“Terrible.”

The smith waited a moment. “I know this isn’t the best time, but we need to know … what happened?”

“I don’t really remember.”

“Eragon,” said Horst, leaning forward, “I was one of the people who went out to your farm. Your house didn’t just fall apart—something tore it to pieces. Surrounding it were tracks of a gigantic beast I’ve never seen nor heard of before. Others saw them too. Now, if there’s a Shade or a monster roaming around, we have to know. You’re the only one who can tell us.”

Eragon knew he had to lie. “When I left Carvahall …,” he counted up the time, “four days ago, there were … strangers in town asking about a stone like the one I found.” He gestured at Horst. “You talked to me about them, and because of that, I hurried home.” All eyes were upon him. He licked his lips. “Nothing … nothing happened that night. The next morning I finished my chores and went walking in the forest. Before long I heard an explosion and saw smoke above the trees. I rushed back as fast as I could, but whoever did it was already gone. I dug through the wreckage and … found Garrow.”

"So then you put him on the plank and dragged him back?" asked Albriech.

"Yes," said Eragon, "but before I left, I looked at the path to the road. There were two pairs of tracks on it, both of them men's." He dug in his pocket and pulled out the scrap of black fabric. "This was clenched in Garrow's hand. I think it matches what those strangers were wearing." He set it on the table.

"It does," said Horst. He looked both thoughtful and angry. "And what of your legs? How were they injured?"

"I'm not sure," said Eragon, shaking his head. "I think it happened when I dug Garrow out, but I don't know. It wasn't until the blood started dripping down my legs that I noticed it."

"That's horrible!" exclaimed Elain.

"We should pursue those men," stated Albriech hotly. "They can't get away with this! With a pair of horses we could catch them tomorrow and bring them back here."

"Put that foolishness out of your head," said Horst. "They could probably pick you up like a baby and throw you in a tree. Remember what happened to the house? We don't want to get in the way of those people. Besides, they have what they want now." He looked at Eragon. "They did take the stone, didn't they?"

"It wasn't in the house."

"Then there's no reason for them to return now that they have it." He gave Eragon a piercing look. "You didn't mention anything about those strange tracks. Do you know where they came from?"

Eragon shook his head. "I didn't see them."

Baldor abruptly spoke. "I don't like this. Too much of this rings of wizardry. Who are those men? Are they Shades? Why did they want the stone, and how could they have destroyed the house except with dark powers? You may be right, Father, the stone might be all they wanted, but I think we will see them again."

Silence followed his words.

Something had been overlooked, though Eragon was not sure what. Then it struck him. With a sinking heart, he voiced his suspicion. "Roran doesn't know, does he?" *How could I have forgotten him?*

Horst shook his head. "He and Dempton left a little while after you. Unless they ran into some difficulty on the road, they've been in Therinsford for a couple of days now. We were going to send a message, but the weather was too cold yesterday and the day before."

"Baldor and I were about to leave when you woke up," offered Albriech.

Horst ran a hand through his beard. "Go on, both of you. I'll help you saddle the horses."

Baldor turned to Eragon. "I'll break it to him gently," he promised,

then followed Horst and Albriech out of the kitchen.

Eragon remained at the table, his eyes focused on a knot in the wood. Every excruciating detail was clear to him: the twisting grain, an asymmetrical bump, three little ridges with a fleck of color. The knot was filled with endless detail; the closer he looked, the more he saw. He searched for answers in it, but if there were any, they eluded him.

A faint call broke through his pounding thoughts. It sounded like yelling from outside. He ignored it. *Let someone else deal with it*. Several minutes later he heard it again, louder than before. Angrily, he blocked it out. *Why can't they be quiet? Garrow's resting*. He glanced at Elain, but she did not seem to be bothered by the noise.

ERAGON! The roar was so strong he almost fell out of the chair. He peered around in alarm, but nothing had changed. He suddenly realized that the shouts had been inside his head.

Saphira? he asked anxiously.

There was a pause. *Yes, stone ears*.

Relief seeped into him. *Where are you?*

She sent him an image of a small clump of trees. *I tried to contact you many times, but you were beyond reach*.

I was sick … but I'm better now. Why couldn't I sense you earlier?

After two nights of waiting, hunger bested me. I had to hunt.

Did you catch anything?

A young buck. He was wise enough to guard against the predators of land, but not those of sky. When I first caught him in my jaws, he kicked vigorously and tried to escape. I was stronger, though, and when defeat became unavoidable, he gave up and died. Does Garrow also fight the inevitable?

I don't know. He told her the particulars, then said, *It'll be a long time, if ever, before we can go home. I won't be able to see you for at least a couple of days. You might as well make yourself comfortable*.

Unhappily, she said, I *will do as you say. But do not take too long*.

They parted reluctantly. He looked out a window and was surprised to see that the sun had set. Feeling very tired, he limped to Elain, who was wrapping meat pies with oilcloth. "I'm going back to Gertrude's house to sleep," he said.

She finished with the packages and asked, "Why don't you stay with us? You'll be closer to your uncle, and Gertrude can have her bed back."

"Do you have enough room?" he asked, wavering.

"Of course." She wiped her hands. "Come with me; I'll get everything ready." She escorted him upstairs to an empty room. He sat on the edge of the bed. "Do you need anything else?" she asked. He shook his head. "In that case, I'll be downstairs. Call me if you

need help." He listened as she descended the stairs. Then he opened the door and slipped down the hallway to Garrow's room. Gertrude gave him a small smile over her darting knitting needles.

"How is he?" whispered Eragon.

Her voice rasped with fatigue. "He's weak, but the fever's gone down a little and some of the burns look better. We'll have to wait and see, but this could mean he'll recover."

That lightened Eragon's mood, and he returned to his room. The darkness seemed unfriendly as he huddled under the blankets. Eventually he fell asleep, healing the wounds his body and soul had suffered.

It was dark when Eragon jolted upright in bed, breathing hard. The room was chilly; goose bumps formed on his arms and shoulders. It was a few hours before dawn—the time when nothing moves and life waits for the first warm touches of sunlight.

His heart pounded as a terrible premonition gripped him. It felt like a shroud lay over the world, and its darkest corner was over his room. He quietly got out of bed and dressed. With apprehension he hurried down the hallway. Alarm shot through him when he saw the door to Garrow's room open and people clustered inside.

Garrow lay peacefully on the bed. He was dressed in clean clothes, his hair had been combed back, and his face was calm. He might have been sleeping if not for the silver amulet clasped around his neck and the sprig of dried hemlock on his chest, the last gifts from the living to the dead.

Katrina stood next to the bed, face pale and eyes downcast. He heard her whisper, "I had hoped to call him *Father* one day…."

Call him Father, he thought bitterly, *a right even I don't have*. He felt like a ghost, drained of all vitality. Everything was insubstantial except for Garrow's face. Tears flooded Eragon's cheeks. He stood there, shoulders shaking, but did not cry out. Mother, aunt, uncle—he had lost them all. The weight of his grief was crushing, a monstrous force that left him tottering. Someone led him back to his room, uttering consolations.

He fell on the bed, wrapped his arms around his head, and sobbed convulsively. He felt Saphira contact him, but he pushed her aside and let himself be swept away by sorrow. He could not accept that Garrow was gone. If he did, what was left to believe in? Only a merciless, uncaring world that snuffed lives like candles before a wind. Frustrated and terrified, he turned his tear-dampened face toward the heavens and shouted, "What god would do this? Show yourself!" He heard people running to his room, but no answer came from above. "He didn't deserve this!"

Comforting hands touched him, and he was aware of Elain sitting next to him. She held him as he cried, and eventually, exhausted, he slipped unwillingly into sleep.

Anguish enveloped Eragon as he awoke. Though he kept his eyes closed, they could not stop a fresh flow of tears. He searched for some idea or hope to help him keep his sanity. *I can't live with this*, he moaned.

Then don't. Saphira's words reverberated in his head.

How? Garrow is gone forever! And in time, I must meet the same fate. Love, family, accomplishments—they are all torn away, leaving nothing. What is the worth of anything we do?

The worth is in the act. Your worth halts when you surrender the will to change and experience life. But options are before you; choose one and dedicate yourself to it. The deeds will give you new hope and purpose.

But what can I do?

The only true guide is your heart. Nothing less than its supreme desire can help you.

She left him to ponder her statements. Eragon examined his emotions. It surprised him that, more than grief, he found a searing anger. *What do you want me to do … pursue the strangers?*

Yes.

Her frank answer confused him. He took a deep, trembling breath. *Why?*

Remember what you said in the Spine? How you reminded me of my duty as dragon, and I returned with you despite the urging of my instinct? So, too, must you control yourself. I thought long and deep the past few days, and I realized what it means to be dragon and Rider: It is our destiny to attempt the impossible, to accomplish great deeds regardless of fear. It is our responsibility to the future.

I don't care what you say; those aren't reasons to leave! cried Eragon.

Then here are others. My tracks have been seen, and people are alert to my presence. Eventually I will be exposed. Besides, there is nothing here for you. No farm, no family, and—

Roran's not dead! he said vehemently.

But if you stay, you'll have to explain what really happened. He has a right to know how and why his father died. What might he do once he knows of me?

Saphira's arguments whirled around in Eragon's head, but he shrank from the idea of forsaking Palancar Valley; it was his home. Yet the thought of enacting vengeance on the strangers was fiercely comforting. *Am I strong enough for this?*

You have me.

Doubt besieged him. It would be such a wild, desperate thing to do. Contempt for his indecision rose, and a harsh smile danced on his lips. Saphira was right. Nothing mattered anymore except the act itself. *The doing is the thing.* And what would give him more satisfaction than hunting down the strangers? A terrible energy and strength began to grow in him. It grabbed his emotions and forged them into a solid bar of anger with one word stamped on it: revenge. His head pounded as he said with conviction, *I will do it.*

He severed the contact with Saphira and rolled out of bed, his body tense like a coiled spring. It was still early morning; he had only slept a few hours. *Nothing is more dangerous than an enemy with nothing to lose,* he thought. *Which is what I have become.*

Yesterday he had had difficulty walking upright, but now he moved confidently, held in place by his iron will. The pain his body sent him was defied and ignored.

As he crept out of the house, he heard the murmur of two people talking. Curious, he stopped and listened. Elain was saying in her gentle voice, "… place to stay. We have room." Horst answered inaudibly in his bass rumble. "Yes, the poor boy," replied Elain.

This time Eragon could hear Horst's response. "Maybe …" There was a long pause. "I've been thinking about what Eragon said, and I'm not sure he told us everything."

"What do you mean?" asked Elain. There was concern in her voice.

"When we started for their farm, the road was scraped smooth by the board he dragged Garrow on. Then we reached a place where the snow was all trampled and churned up. His footprints and signs of the board stopped there, but we also saw the same giant tracks from the farm. And what about his legs? I can't believe he didn't notice losing that much skin. I didn't want to push him for answers earlier, but now I think I will."

"Maybe what he saw scared him so much that he doesn't want to talk about it," suggested Elain. "You saw how distraught he was."

"That still doesn't explain how he managed to get Garrow nearly all the way here without leaving any tracks."

Saphira was right, thought Eragon. *It's time to leave. Too many questions from too many people. Sooner or later they'll find the answers.* He continued through the house, tensing whenever the floor creaked.

The streets were clear; few people were up at this time of day. He stopped for a minute and forced himself to focus. I *don't need a horse. Saphira will be my steed, but she needs a saddle. She can hunt for both of us, so I don't have to worry about food—though I should get some anyway. Whatever else I need I can find buried in our house.*

He went to Gedric's tanning vats on the outskirts of Carvahall. The vile smell made him cringe, but he kept moving, heading for a shack

set into the side of a hill where the cured hides were stored. He cut down three large ox hides from the rows of skins hanging from the ceiling. The thievery made him feel guilty, but he reasoned, *It's not really stealing. I'll pay Gedric back someday, along with Horst*. He rolled up the thick leather and took it to a stand of trees away from the village. He wedged the hides between the branches of a tree, then returned to Carvahall.

Now for food. He went to the tavern, intending to get it there, but then smiled tightly and reversed direction. If he was going to steal, it might as well be from Sloan. He sneaked up to the butcher's house. The front door was barred whenever Sloan was not there, but the side door was secured with only a thin chain, which he broke easily. The rooms inside were dark. He fumbled blindly until his hands came upon hard piles of meat wrapped in cloth. He stuffed as many of them as he could under his shirt, then hurried back to the street and furtively closed the door.

A woman shouted his name nearby. He clasped the bottom of his shirt to keep the meat from falling out and ducked behind a corner. He shivered as Horst walked between two houses not ten feet away.

Eragon ran as soon as Horst was out of sight. His legs burned as he pounded down an alley and back to the trees. He slipped between the tree trunks, then turned to see if he was being pursued. No one was there. Relieved, he let out his breath and reached into the tree for the leather. It was gone.

"Going somewhere?"

Eragon whirled around. Brom scowled angrily at him, an ugly wound on the side of his head. A short sword hung at his belt in a brown sheath. The hides were in his hands.

Eragon's eyes narrowed in irritation. How had the old man managed to sneak up on him? Everything had been so quiet, he would have sworn that no one was around. "Give them back," he snapped.

"Why? So you can run off before Garrow is even buried?" The accusation was sharp.

"It's none of your business!" he barked, temper flashing. "Why did you follow me?"

"I didn't," grunted Brom. "I've been waiting for you here. Now where are you going?"

"Nowhere." Eragon lunged for the skins and grabbed them from Brom's hands. Brom did nothing to stop him.

"I hope you have enough meat to feed your dragon."

Eragon froze. "What are you talking about?"

Brom crossed his arms. "Don't fool with me. I know where that mark on your hand, the gedwëy ignasia, the *shining palm*, comes from: you have touched a dragon hatchling. I know why you came to me

with those questions, and I know that once more the Riders live."

Eragon dropped the leather and meat. *It's finally happened … I have to get away! I can't run faster than him with my injured legs, but if … Saphira!* he called.

For a few agonizing seconds she did not answer, but then, *Yes*.

We've been discovered! I need you! He sent her a picture of where he was, and she took off immediately. Now he just had to stall Brom. "How did you find out?" he asked in a hollow voice.

Brom stared into the distance and moved his lips soundlessly as if he were talking to someone else. Then he said, "There were clues and hints everywhere; I had only to pay attention. Anyone with the right knowledge could have done the same. Tell me, how is your dragon?"

"She," said Eragon, "is fine. We weren't at the farm when the strangers came."

"Ah, your legs. You were flying?"

How did Brom figure that out? What if the strangers coerced him into doing this? Maybe they want him to discover where I'm going so they can ambush us. And where is Saphira? He reached out with his mind and found her circling far overhead. *Come!*

No, I will watch for a time.

Why!

Because of the slaughter at Doru Araeba.

What?

Brom leaned against a tree with a slight smile. "I have talked with her, and she has agreed to stay above us until we settle our differences. As you can see, you really don't have any choice but to answer my questions. Now tell me, where are you going?"

Bewildered, Eragon put a hand to his temple. *How could Brom speak to Saphira?* The back of his head throbbed and ideas whirled through his mind, but he kept reaching the same conclusion: he had to tell the old man something. He said, "I was going to find a safe place to stay while I heal."

"And after that?"

The question could not be ignored. The throbbing in his head grew worse. It was impossible to think; nothing seemed clear anymore. All he wanted to do was tell someone about the events of the past few months. It tore at him that his secret had caused Garrow's death. He gave up and said tremulously, "I was going to hunt down the strangers and kill them."

"A mighty task for one so young," Brom said in a normal tone, as if Eragon had proposed the most obvious and suitable thing to do. "Certainly a worthy endeavor and one you are fit to carry out, yet it strikes me that help would not be unwelcome." He reached behind a bush and pulled out a large pack. His tone became gruff. "Anyway,

I'm not going to stay behind while some stripling gets to run around with a dragon."

Is he really offering help, or is it a trap? Eragon was afraid of what his mysterious enemies could do. *But Brom convinced Saphira to trust him, and they've talked through the mind touch. If she isn't worried …* He decided to put his suspicions aside for the present. "I don't need help," said Eragon, then grudgingly added, "but you can come."

"Then we had best be going," said Brom. His face blanked for a moment. "I think you'll find that your dragon will listen to you again."

Saphira? asked Eragon.

Yes.

He resisted the urge to question her. *Will you meet us at the farm?*

Yes. So you reached an agreement?

I guess so. She broke contact and soared away. He glanced at Carvahall and saw people running from house to house. "I think they're looking for me."

Brom raised an eyebrow. "Probably. Shall we go?"

Eragon hesitated. "I'd like to leave a message for Roran. It doesn't seem right to run off without telling him why."

"It's been taken care of," assured Brom. "I left a letter for him with Gertrude, explaining a few things. I also cautioned him to be on guard for certain dangers. Is that satisfactory?"

Eragon nodded. He wrapped the leather around the meat and started off. They were careful to stay out of sight until they reached the road, then quickened their pace, eager to distance themselves from Carvahall. Eragon plowed ahead determinedly, his legs burning. The mindless rhythm of walking freed his mind to think. *Once we get home, I won't travel any farther with Brom until I get some answers*, he told himself firmly. *I hope that he can tell me more about the Riders and whom I'm fighting.*

As the wreckage of the farm came into view, Brom's eyebrows beetled with anger. Eragon was dismayed to see how swiftly nature was reclaiming the farm. Snow and dirt were already piled inside the house, concealing the violence of the strangers' attack. All that remained of the barn was a rapidly eroding rectangle of soot.

Brom's head snapped up as the sound of Saphira's wings drifted over the trees. She dived past them from behind, almost brushing their heads. They staggered as a wall of air buffeted them. Saphira's scales glittered as she wheeled over the farm and landed gracefully.

Brom stepped forward with an expression both solemn and joyous. His eyes were shining, and a tear shone on his cheek before it disappeared into his beard. He stood there for a long while, breathing heavily as he watched Saphira, and she him. Eragon heard him muttering and edged closer to listen.

"So … it starts again. But how and where will it end? My sight is veiled; I cannot tell if this be tragedy or farce, for the elements of both are here.… However it may be, my station is unchanged, and I …"

Whatever else he might have said faded away as Saphira proudly approached them. Eragon passed Brom, pretended he had heard nothing, and greeted her. There was something different between them now, as if they knew each other even more intimately, yet were still strangers. He rubbed her neck, and his palm tingled as their minds touched. A strong curiosity came from her.

I've seen no humans except you and Garrow, and he was badly injured, she said.

You've viewed people through my eyes.

It's not the same. She came closer and turned her long head so that she could inspect Brom with one large blue eye. *You really are queer creatures*, she said critically, and continued to stare at him. Brom held still as she sniffed the air, and then he extended a hand to her. Saphira slowly bowed her head and allowed him to touch her on the brow. With a snort, she jerked back and retreated behind Eragon. Her tail flicked over the ground.

What is it? he asked. She did not answer.

Brom turned to him and asked in an undertone, "What's her name?"

"Saphira." A peculiar expression crossed Brom's face. He ground the butt of his staff into the earth with such force his knuckles turned white. "Of all the names you gave me, it was the only one she liked. I think it fits," Eragon added quickly.

"Fit it does," said Brom. There was something in his voice Eragon could not identify. Was it loss, wonder, fear, envy? He was not sure; it could have been none of them or all. Brom raised his voice and said, "Greetings, Saphira. I am honored to meet you." He twisted his hand in a strange gesture and bowed.

I like him, said Saphira quietly.

Of course you do; everyone enjoys flattery. Eragon touched her on the shoulder and went to the ruined house. Saphira trailed behind with Brom. The old man looked vibrant and alive.

Eragon climbed into the house and crawled under a door into what was left of his room. He barely recognized it under the piles of shattered wood. Guided by memory, he searched where the inside wall had been and found his empty pack. Part of the frame was broken, but the damage could be easily repaired. He kept rummaging and eventually uncovered the end of his bow, which was still in its buckskin tube.

Though the leather was scratched and scuffed, he was pleased to see that the oiled wood was unharmed. *Finally, some luck*. He strung the bow and pulled on the sinew experimentally. It bent smoothly,

without any snaps or creaks. Satisfied, he hunted for his quiver, which he found buried nearby. Many of the arrows were broken.

He unstrung the bow and handed it and the quiver to Brom, who said, “It takes a strong arm to pull that.” Eragon took the compliment silently. He picked through the rest of the house for other useful items and dumped the collection next to Brom. It was a meager pile. “What now?” asked Brom. His eyes were sharp and inquisitive. Eragon looked away.

“We find a place to hide.”

“Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“Yes.” He wrapped all the supplies, except for his bow, into a tight bundle and tied it shut. Hefting it onto his back, he said, “This way,” and headed into the forest. *Saphira, follow us in the air. Your footprints are too easily found and tracked.*

Very well. She took off behind them.

Their destination was nearby, but Eragon took a circuitous route in an effort to baffle any pursuers. It was well over an hour before he finally stopped in a well-concealed bramble.

The irregular clearing in the center was just large enough for a fire, two people, and a dragon. Red squirrels scampered into the trees, chattering in protest at their intrusion. Brom extricated himself from a vine and looked around with interest. “Does anyone else know of this?” he asked.

“No. I found it when we first moved here. It took me a week to dig into the center, and another week to clear out all the deadwood.” Saphira landed beside them and folded her wings, careful to avoid the thorns. She curled up, snapping twigs with her hard scales, and rested her head on the ground. Her unreadable eyes followed them closely.

Brom leaned against his staff and fixed his gaze on her. His scrutiny made Eragon nervous.

Eragon watched them until hunger forced him to action. He built a fire, filled a pot with snow, and then set it over the flames to melt. When the water was hot, he tore off chunks of meat and dropped them into the pot with a lump of salt. *Not much of a meal,* he thought grimly, *but it’ll do. I’ll probably be eating this for some time to come, so I might as well get used to it.*

The stew simmered quietly, spreading a rich aroma through the clearing. The tip of Saphira’s tongue snaked out and tasted the air. When the meat was tender, Brom came over and Eragon served the food. They ate silently, avoiding each other’s eyes. Afterward, Brom pulled out his pipe and lit it leisurely.

“Why do you want to travel with me?” asked Eragon.

A cloud of smoke left Brom’s lips and spiraled up through the trees until it disappeared. “I have a vested interest in keeping you alive,” he

said.

"What do you mean?" demanded Eragon.

"To put it bluntly, I'm a storyteller and I happen to think that you will make a fine story. You're the first Rider to exist outside of the king's control for over a hundred years. What will happen? Will you perish as a martyr? Will you join the Varden? Or will you kill King Galbatorix? All fascinating questions. And I will be there to see every bit of it, no matter what I have to do."

A knot formed in Eragon's stomach. He could not see himself doing any of those things, least of all becoming a martyr. *I want my vengeance, but for the rest … I have no ambition*. "That may be, but tell me, how can you talk with Saphira?"

Brom took his time putting more cardus weed in his pipe. Once it was relit and firmly in his mouth, he said, "Very well, if it's answers you want, it's answers you'll get, but they may not be to your liking." He got up, brought his pack over to the fire, and pulled out a long object wrapped in cloth. It was about three and a half feet long and, from the way he handled it, rather heavy.

He peeled away the cloth, strip by strip, like a mummy being unswathed. Eragon gazed, transfixed, as a sword was revealed. The gold pommel was teardrop shaped with the sides cut away to reveal a ruby the size of a small egg. The hilt was wrapped in silver wire, burnished until it gleamed like starlight. The sheath was wine red and smooth as glass, adorned solely by a strange black symbol etched into it. Next to the sword was a leather belt with a heavy buckle. The last strip fell away, and Brom passed the weapon to Eragon.

The handle fit Eragon's hand as if it had been made for him. He slowly drew the sword; it slid soundlessly from the sheath. The flat blade was iridescent red and shimmered in the firelight. The keen edges curved gracefully to a sharp point. A duplicate of the black symbol was inscribed on the metal. The balance of the sword was perfect; it felt like an extension of his arm, unlike the rude farm tools he was used to. An air of power lay over it, as if an unstoppable force resided in its core. It had been created for the violent convulsions of battle, to end men's lives, yet it held a terrible beauty.

"This was once a Rider's blade," said Brom gravely. "When a Rider finished his training, the elves would present him with a sword. Their methods of forging have always remained secret. However, their swords are eternally sharp and will never stain. The custom was to have the blade's color match that of the Rider's dragon, but I think we can make an exception in this case. This sword is named Zar'roc. I don't know what it means, probably something personal to the Rider who owned it." He watched Eragon swing the sword.

"Where did you get it?" asked Eragon. He reluctantly slipped the

blade back into the sheath and attempted to hand the sword back, but Brom made no move to take it.

"It doesn't matter," said Brom. "I will only say that it took me a series of nasty and dangerous adventures to attain it. Consider it yours. You have more of a claim to it than I do, and before all is done, I think you will need it."

The offer caught Eragon off guard. "It is a princely gift, thank you." Unsure of what else to say, he slid his hand down the sheath. "What is this symbol?" he asked.

"That was the Rider's personal crest." Eragon tried to interrupt, but Brom glared at him until he was quiet. "Now, if you must know, anyone can learn how to speak to a dragon if they have the proper training. And," he raised a finger for emphasis, "it doesn't mean anything if they can. I know more about the dragons and their abilities than almost anyone else alive. On your own it might take years to learn what I can teach you. I'm offering my knowledge as a shortcut. As for how I know so much, I will keep *that* to myself."

Saphira pulled herself up as he finished speaking and prowled over to Eragon. He pulled out the blade and showed her the sword. *It has power*, she said, touching the point with her nose. The metal's iridescent color rippled like water as it met her scales. She lifted her head with a satisfied snort, and the sword resumed its normal appearance. Eragon sheathed it, troubled.

Brom raised an eyebrow. "That's the sort of thing I'm talking about. Dragons will constantly amaze you. Things … happen around them, mysterious things that are impossible anywhere else. Even though the Riders worked with dragons for centuries, they never completely understood their abilities. Some say that even the dragons don't know the full extent of their own powers. They are linked with this land in a way that lets them overcome great obstacles. What Saphira just did illustrates my earlier point: there is much you don't know."

There was a long pause. "That may be," said Eragon, "but I can learn. And the strangers are the most important thing I need to know about right now. Do you have any idea who they are?"

Brom took a deep breath. "They are called the Ra'zac. No one knows if that's the name of their race or what they have chosen to call themselves. Either way, if they have individual names, they keep them hidden. The Ra'zac were never seen before Galbatorix came to power. He must have found them during his travels and enlisted them in his service. Little or nothing is known about them. However, I can tell you this: they aren't human. When I glimpsed one's head, it appeared to have something resembling a beak and black eyes as large as my fist—though how they manage our speech is a mystery to me. Doubtless the rest of their bodies are just as twisted. That is why they cover

themselves with cloaks at all times, regardless of the weather.

"As for their powers, they are stronger than any man and can jump incredible heights, but they cannot use magic. Be thankful for that, because if they could, you would already be in their grasp. I also know they have a strong aversion to sunlight, though it won't stop them if they're determined. Don't make the mistake of underestimating a Ra'zac, for they are cunning and full of guile."

"How many of them are there?" asked Eragon, wondering how Brom could possibly know so much.

"As far as I know, only the two you saw. There might be more, but I've never heard of them. Perhaps they're the last of a dying race. You see, they are the king's personal dragon hunters. Whenever rumors reach Galbatorix of a dragon in the land, he sends the Ra'zac to investigate. A trail of death often follows them." Brom blew a series of smoke rings and watched them float up between the brambles. Eragon ignored the rings until he noticed that they were changing color and darting around. Brom winked slyly.

Eragon was sure that no one had seen Saphira, so how could Galbatorix have heard about her? When he voiced his objections, Brom said, "You're right, it seems unlikely that anyone from Carvahall could have informed the king. Why don't you tell me where you got the egg and how you raised Saphira—that might clarify the issue."

Eragon hesitated, then recounted all the events since he had found the egg in the Spine. It felt wonderful to finally confide in someone. Brom asked a few questions, but most of the time he listened intently. The sun was about to set when Eragon finished his tale. Both of them were quiet as the clouds turned a soft pink. Eragon eventually broke the silence. "I just wish I knew where she came from. And Saphira doesn't remember."

Brom cocked his head. "I don't know.… You've made many things clear to me. I am sure that no one besides us has seen Saphira. The Ra'zac must have had a source of information outside of this valley, one who is probably dead by now.… You have had a hard time and done much. I'm impressed."

Eragon stared blankly into the distance, then asked, "What happened to your head? It looks like you were hit with a rock."

"No, but that's a good guess." He took a deep pull on the pipe. "I was sneaking around the Ra'zac's camp after dark, trying to learn what I could, when they surprised me in the shadows. It was a good trap, but they underestimated me, and I managed to drive them away. Not, however," he said wryly, "without this token of my stupidity. Stunned, I fell to the ground and didn't regain consciousness until the next day. By then they had already arrived at your farm. It was too late to stop them, but I set out after them anyway. That's when we

met on the road."

Who is he to think that he could take on the Ra'zac alone? They ambushed him in the dark, and he was only stunned? Unsettled, Eragon asked hotly, "When you saw the mark, the gedwëy ignasia, on my palm, why didn't you tell me who the Ra'zac were? I would have warned Garrow instead of going to Saphira first, and the three of us could have fled."

Brom sighed. "I was unsure of what to do at the time. I thought I could keep the Ra'zac away from you and, once they had left, confront you about Saphira. But they outsmarted me. It's a mistake that I deeply regret, and one that has cost you dearly."

"Who are you?" demanded Eragon, suddenly bitter. "How come a mere village storyteller happens to have a Rider's sword? How do you know about the Ra'zac?"

Brom tapped his pipe. "I thought I made it clear I wasn't going to talk about that."

"My uncle is dead because of this. *Dead!*" exclaimed Eragon, slashing a hand through the air. "I've trusted you this far because Saphira respects you, but no more! You're not the person I've known in Carvahall for all of these years. Explain yourself!"

For a long time Brom stared at the smoke swirling between them, deep lines creasing his forehead. When he stirred, it was only to take another puff. Finally he said, "You've probably never thought about it, but most of my life has been spent outside of Palancar Valley. It was only in Carvahall that I took up the mantle of storyteller. I have played many roles to different people—I've a complicated past. It was partly through a desire to escape it that I came here. So no, I'm not the man you think I am."

"Ha!" snorted Eragon. "Then who are you?"

Brom smiled gently. "I am one who is here to help you. Do not scorn those words—they are the truest I've ever spoken. But I'm not going to answer your questions. At this point you don't need to hear my history, nor have you yet earned that right. Yes, I have knowledge Brom the storyteller wouldn't, but I'm more than he. You'll have to learn to live with that fact and the fact that I don't hand out descriptions of my life to anyone who asks!"

Eragon glared at him sullenly. "I'm going to sleep," he said, leaving the fire.

Brom did not seem surprised, but there was sorrow in his eyes. He spread his bedroll next to the fire as Eragon lay beside Saphira. An icy silence fell over the camp.

When Eragon's eyes opened, the memory of Garrow's death crashed down on him. He pulled the blankets over his head and cried quietly under their warm darkness. It felt good just to lie there … to hide from the world outside. Eventually the tears stopped. He cursed Brom. Then he reluctantly wiped his cheeks and got up.

Brom was making breakfast. "Good morning," he said. Eragon grunted in reply. He jammed his cold fingers in his armpits and crouched by the fire until the food was ready. They ate quickly, trying to consume the food before it lost its warmth. When he finished, Eragon washed his bowl with snow, then spread the stolen leather on the ground.

"What are you going to do with that?" asked Brom. "We can't carry it with us."

"I'm going to make a saddle for Saphira."

"Mmm," said Brom, moving forward. "Well, dragons used to have two kinds of saddles. The first was hard and molded like a horse's saddle. But those take time and tools to make, neither of which we have. The other was thin and lightly padded, nothing more than an extra layer between the Rider and dragon. Those saddles were used whenever speed and flexibility were important, though they weren't nearly as comfortable as the molded ones."

"Do you know what they looked like?" asked Eragon.

"Better, I can make one."

"Then please do," said Eragon, standing aside.

"Very well, but pay attention. Someday you may have to do this for yourself." With Saphira's permission, Brom measured her neck and chest. Then he cut five bands out of the leather and outlined a dozen or so shapes on the hides. Once the pieces had been sliced out, he cut what remained of the hides into long cords.

Brom used the cords to sew everything together, but for each stitch, two holes had to be bored through the leather. Eragon helped with that. Intricate knots were rigged in place of buckles, and every strap was made extra long so the saddle would still fit Saphira in the coming months.

The main part of the saddle was assembled from three identical sections sewn together with padding between them. Attached to the front was a thick loop that would fit snugly around one of Saphira's neck spikes, while wide bands sewn on either side would wrap around her belly and tie underneath. Taking the place of stirrups were a series

of loops running down both bands. Tightened, they would hold Eragon's legs in place. A long strap was constructed to pass between Saphira's front legs, split in two, and then come up behind her front legs to rejoin with the saddle.

While Brom worked, Eragon repaired his pack and organized their supplies. The day was spent by the time their tasks were completed. Weary from his labor, Brom put the saddle on Saphira and checked to see that the straps fit. He made a few small adjustments, then took it off, satisfied.

"You did a good job," Eragon acknowledged grudgingly.

Brom inclined his head. "One tries his best. It should serve you well; the leather's sturdy enough."

Aren't you going to try it out? asked Saphira.

Maybe tomorrow, said Eragon, storing the saddle with his blankets. *It's too late now*. In truth he was not eager to fly again—not after the disastrous outcome of his last attempt.

Dinner was made quickly. It tasted good even though it was simple. While they ate, Brom looked over the fire at Eragon and asked, "Will we leave tomorrow?"

"There isn't any reason to stay."

"I suppose not…." He shifted. "Eragon, I must apologize about how events have turned out. I never wished for this to happen. Your family did not deserve such a tragedy. If there were anything I could do to reverse it, I would. This is a terrible situation for all of us." Eragon sat in silence, avoiding Brom's gaze, then Brom said, "We're going to need horses."

"Maybe you do, but I have Saphira."

Brom shook his head. "There isn't a horse alive that can outrun a flying dragon, and Saphira is too young to carry us both. Besides, it'll be safer if we stay together, and riding is faster than walking."

"But that'll make it harder to catch the Ra'zac," protested Eragon. "On Saphira, I could probably find them within a day or two. On horses, it'll take much longer—if it's even possible to overtake their lead on the ground!"

Brom said slowly, "That's a chance you'll have to take if I'm to accompany you."

Eragon thought it over. "All right," he grumbled, "we'll get horses. But you have to buy them. I don't have any money, and I don't want to steal again. It's wrong."

"That depends on your point of view," corrected Brom with a slight smile. "Before you set out on this venture, remember that your enemies, the Ra'zac, are the king's servants. They will be protected wherever they go. Laws do not stop them. In cities they'll have access to abundant resources and willing servants. Also keep in mind that

nothing is more important to Galbatorix than recruiting or killing you—though word of your existence probably hasn't reached him yet. The longer you evade the Ra'zac, the more desperate he'll become. He'll know that every day you'll be growing stronger and that each passing moment will give you another chance to join his enemies. You must be very careful, as you may easily turn from the hunter into the hunted."

Eragon was subdued by the strong words. Pensive, he rolled a twig between his fingers. "Enough talk," said Brom. "It's late and my bones ache. We can say more tomorrow." Eragon nodded and banked the fire.

Dawn was gray and overcast with a cutting wind. The forest was quiet. After a light breakfast, Brom and Eragon doused the fire and shouldered their packs, preparing to leave. Eragon hung his bow and quiver on the side of his pack where he could easily reach them. Saphira wore the saddle; she would have to carry it until they got horses. Eragon carefully tied Zar'roc onto her back, too, as he did not want the extra weight. Besides, in his hands the sword would be no better than a club.

Eragon had felt safe inside the bramble, but outside, wariness crept into his movements. Saphira took off and circled overhead. The trees thinned as they returned to the farm.

I will see this place again, Eragon insisted to himself, looking at the ruined buildings. *This cannot, will not, be a permanent exile. Someday when it's safe, I'll return.…* Throwing back his shoulders, he faced south and the strange, barbaric lands that lay there.

As they walked, Saphira veered west toward the mountains and out of sight. Eragon felt uncomfortable as he watched her go. Even now, with no one around, they could not spend their days together. She had to stay hidden in case they met a fellow traveler.

The Ra'zac's footprints were faint on the eroding snow, but Eragon was unconcerned. It was unlikely that they had forsaken the road, which was the easiest way out of the valley, for the wilderness. Once outside the valley, however, the road divided in several places. It would be difficult to ascertain which branch the Ra'zac had taken.

They traveled in silence, concentrating on speed. Eragon's legs continued to bleed where the scabs had cracked. To take his mind off the discomfort, he asked, "So what exactly can dragons do? You said that you knew something of their abilities."

Brom laughed, his sapphire ring flashing in the air as he gestured. "Unfortunately, it's a pitiful amount compared to what I would like to know. Your question is one people have been trying to answer for centuries, so understand that what I tell you is by its very nature incomplete. Dragons have always been mysterious, though maybe not on purpose.

"Before I can truly answer your question, you need a basic education on the subject of dragons. It's hopelessly confusing to start in the middle of such a complex topic without understanding the foundation on which it stands. I'll begin with the life cycle of dragons, and if that doesn't wear you out, we can continue to another topic."

Brom explained how dragons mate and what it took for their eggs to hatch. “You see,” he said, “when a dragon lays an egg, the infant inside is ready to hatch. But it waits, sometimes for years, for the right circumstances. When dragons lived in the wild, those circumstances were usually dictated by the availability of food. However, once they formed an alliance with the elves, a certain number of their eggs, usually no more than one or two, were given to the Riders each year. These eggs, or rather the infants inside, wouldn’t hatch until the person destined to be its Rider came into their presence—though how they sensed that isn’t known. People used to line up to touch the eggs, hoping that one of them might be picked.”

“Do you mean that Saphira might not have hatched for me?” asked Eragon.

“Quite possibly, if she hadn’t liked you.”

He felt honored that of all the people in Alagaësia, she had chosen him. He wondered how long she had been waiting, then shuddered at the thought of being cramped inside an egg, surrounded by darkness.

Brom continued his lecture. He explained what and when dragons ate. A fully grown sedentary dragon could go for months without food, but in mating season they had to eat every week. Some plants could heal their sicknesses, while others would make them ill. There were various ways to care for their claws and clean their scales.

He explained the techniques to use when attacking from a dragon and what to do if you were fighting one, whether on foot, horseback, or with another dragon. Their bellies were armored; their armpits were not. Eragon constantly interrupted to ask questions, and Brom seemed pleased by the inquiries. Hours passed unheeded as they talked.

When evening came, they were near Therinsford. As the sky darkened and they searched for a place to camp, Eragon asked, “Who was the Rider that owned Zar’roc?”

“A mighty warrior,” said Brom, “who was much feared in his time and held great power.”

“What was his name?”

“I’ll not say.” Eragon protested, but Brom was firm. “I don’t want to keep you ignorant, far from it, but certain knowledge would only prove dangerous and distracting for you right now. There isn’t any reason for me to trouble you with such things until you have the time and the power to deal with them. I only wish to protect you from those who would use you for evil.”

Eragon glared at him. “You know what? I think you just enjoy speaking in riddles. I’ve half a mind to leave you so I don’t have to be bothered with them. If you’re going to say something, then say it instead of dancing around with vague phrases!”

“Peace. All will be told in time,” Brom said gently. Eragon grunted, unconvinced.

They found a comfortable place to spend the night and set up camp. Saphira joined them as dinner was being set on the fire. *Did you have time to hunt for food?* asked Eragon.

She snorted with amusement. *If the two of you were any slower, I would have time to fly across the sea and back without falling behind.*

You don’t have to be insulting. Besides, we’ll go faster once we have horses.

She let out a puff of smoke. *Maybe, but will it be enough to catch the Ra’zac? They have a lead of several days and many leagues. And I’m afraid they may suspect we’re following them. Why else would they have destroyed the farm in such a spectacular manner, unless they wished to provoke you into chasing them?*

I don’t know, said Eragon, disturbed. Saphira curled up beside him, and he leaned against her belly, welcoming the warmth. Brom sat on the other side of the fire, whittling two long sticks. He suddenly threw one at Eragon, who grabbed it out of reflex as it whirled over the crackling flames.

“Defend yourself!” barked Brom, standing.

Eragon looked at the stick in his hand and saw that it was shaped in the crude likeness of a sword. Brom wanted to fight him? What chance did the old man stand? *If he wants to play this game, so be it, but if he thinks to beat me, he’s in for a surprise.*

He rose as Brom circled the fire. They faced each other for a moment, then Brom charged, swinging his stick. Eragon tried to block the attack but was too slow. He yelped as Brom struck him on the ribs, and stumbled backward.

Without thinking, he lunged forward, but Brom easily parried the blow. Eragon whipped the stick toward Brom’s head, twisted it at the last moment, and then tried to hit his side. The solid smack of wood striking wood resounded through the camp. “Improvisation—good!” exclaimed Brom, eyes gleaming. His arm moved in a blur, and there was an explosion of pain on the side of Eragon’s head. He collapsed like an empty sack, dazed.

A splash of cold water roused him to alertness, and he sat up, sputtering. His head was ringing, and there was dried blood on his face. Brom stood over him with a pan of melted snow water. “You didn’t have to do that,” said Eragon angrily, pushing himself up. He felt dizzy and unsteady.

Brom arched an eyebrow. “Oh? A real enemy wouldn’t soften his blows, and neither will I. Should I pander to your … incompetence so you’ll feel better? I don’t think so.” He picked up the stick that Eragon had dropped and held it out. “Now, defend yourself.”

Eragon stared blankly at the piece of wood, then shook his head. "Forget it; I've had enough." He turned away and stumbled as he was whacked loudly across the back. He spun around, growling.

"Never turn your back to the enemy!" snapped Brom, then tossed the stick at him and attacked. Eragon retreated around the fire, beneath the onslaught. "Pull your arms in. Keep your knees bent," shouted Brom. He continued to give instructions, then paused to show Eragon exactly how to execute a certain move. "Do it again, but this time *slowly*!" They slid through the forms with exaggerated motions before returning to their furious battle. Eragon learned quickly, but no matter what he tried, he could not hold Brom off for more than a few blows.

When they finished, Eragon flopped on his blankets and groaned. He hurt everywhere—Brom had not been gentle with his stick. Saphira let out a long, coughing growl and curled her lip until a formidable row of teeth showed.

What's wrong with you? he demanded irritably.

Nothing, she replied. *It's funny to see a hatchling like you beaten by the old one*. She made the sound again, and Eragon turned red as he realized that she was laughing. Trying to preserve some dignity, he rolled onto his side and fell asleep.

He felt even worse the next day. Bruises covered his arms, and he was almost too sore to move. Brom looked up from the mush he was serving and grinned. "How do you feel?" Eragon grunted and bolted down the breakfast.

Once on the road, they traveled swiftly so as to reach Therinsford before noon. After a league, the road widened and they saw smoke in the distance. "You'd better tell Saphira to fly ahead and wait for us on the other side of Therinsford," said Brom. "She has to be careful here, otherwise people are bound to notice her."

"Why don't you tell her yourself?" challenged Eragon.

"It's considered bad manners to interfere with another's dragon."

"You didn't have a problem with it in Carvahall."

Brom's lips twitched with a smile. "I did what I had to."

Eragon eyed him darkly, then relayed the instructions. Saphira warned, *Be careful; the Empire's servants could be hiding anywhere*.

As the ruts in the road deepened, Eragon noticed more footprints. Farms signaled their approach to Therinsford. The village was larger than Carvahall, but it had been constructed haphazardly, the houses aligned in no particular order.

"What a mess," said Eragon. He could not see Dempton's mill. *Baldor and Albriech have surely fetched Roran by now*. Either way, Eragon had no wish to face his cousin.

"It's ugly, if nothing else," agreed Brom.

The Anora River flowed between them and the town, spanned by a stout bridge. As they approached it, a greasy man stepped from behind a bush and barred their way. His shirt was too short, and his dirty stomach spilled over a rope belt. Behind his cracked lips, his teeth looked like crumbling tombstones. “You c’n stop right there. This’s my bridge. Gotta pay t’ get over.”

“How much?” asked Brom in a resigned voice. He pulled out a pouch, and the bridgekeeper brightened.

“Five crowns,” he said, pulling his lips into a broad smile. Eragon’s temper flared at the exorbitant price, and he started to complain hotly, but Brom silenced him with a quick look. The coins were wordlessly handed over. The man put them into a sack hanging from his belt. “Thank’ee much,” he said in a mocking tone, and stood out of the way.

As Brom stepped forward, he stumbled and caught the bridgekeeper’s arm to support himself. “Watch y’re step,” snarled the grimy man, sidling away.

“Sorry,” apologized Brom, and continued over the bridge with Eragon.

“Why didn’t you haggle? He skinned you alive!” exclaimed Eragon when they were out of earshot. “He probably doesn’t even own the bridge. We could have pushed right past him.”

“Probably,” agreed Brom.

“Then why pay him?”

“Because you can’t argue with all of the fools in the world. It’s easier to let them have their way, then trick them when they’re not paying attention.” Brom opened his hand, and a pile of coins glinted in the light.

“You stole those!” exclaimed Eragon, incredulous.

Brom pocketed the money with a wink. “Anyone who gulls innocent travelers for a living ought to know better than to carry such a large sum on his person. Come, let us be off before our greedy friend realizes what has happened. If you see any watchmen wandering around, tell me.” He grabbed the shoulder of a young boy running between the houses and asked, “Do you know where we can buy horses?” The child stared at them with solemn eyes and then pointed to a large barn near the edge of Therinsford. “Thank you,” said Brom, tossing him half a coin.

The barn’s large double doors were open, revealing two long rows of stalls. The far wall was covered with saddles, harnesses, and other paraphernalia. A man with muscular arms stood at the end, brushing a white stallion. He raised a hand and beckoned for them to come over.

As they approached, Brom said, “That’s a beautiful animal.”

“Yes indeed. His name’s Snowfire. Mine’s Haberth.” Haberth offered

a rough palm and shook hands vigorously with Eragon and Brom. There was a polite pause as he waited for their names in return. When they were not forthcoming, he asked, “Can I help you?”

Brom nodded. “We need two horses and a full set of tack for both. The horses have to be fast and tough; we’ll be doing a lot of traveling.”

Haberth was thoughtful for a moment. “I don’t have many animals like that, and the ones I do aren’t cheap.” The stallion moved restlessly; he calmed it with a few strokes of his fingers.

“Price is no object. I’ll take the best you have,” said Brom. Haberth nodded and silently tied the stallion to a stall. He went to the wall and started pulling down saddles and other items. Soon he had two identical piles. Next he walked up the line of stalls and brought out two horses. One was a light bay, the other a roan. The bay tugged against his rope.

“He’s a little spirited, but with a firm hand you won’t have any problems,” said Haberth, handing the bay’s rope to Brom.

Brom let the horse smell his hand; it allowed him to rub its neck. “We’ll take him,” he said, then eyed the roan. “The other one, however, I’m not so sure of.”

“There are some good legs on him.”

“Mmm … What will you take for Snowfire?”

Haberth looked fondly at the stallion. “I’d rather not sell him. He’s the finest I’ve ever bred—I’m hoping to sire a whole line from him.”

“If you were willing to part with him, how much would all of this cost me?” asked Brom.

Eragon tried to put his hand on the bay like Brom had, but it shied away. He automatically reached out with his mind to reassure the horse, stiffening with surprise as he touched the animal’s consciousness. The contact was not clear or sharp like it was with Saphira, but he could communicate with the bay to a limited degree. Tentatively, he made it understand that he was a friend. The horse calmed and looked at him with liquid brown eyes.

Haberth used his fingers to add up the price of the purchase. “Two hundred crowns and no less,” he said with a smile, clearly confident that no one would pay that much. Brom silently opened his pouch and counted out the money.

“Will this do?” he asked.

There was a long silence as Haberth glanced between Snowfire and the coins. A sigh, then, “He is yours, though I go against my heart.”

“I will treat him as if he had been sired by Gildintor, the greatest steed of legend,” said Brom.

“Your words gladden me,” answered Haberth, bowing his head slightly. He helped them saddle the horses. When they were ready to

leave, he said, “Farewell, then. For the sake of Snowfire, I hope that misfortune does not befall you.”

“Do not fear; I will guard him well,” promised Brom as they departed. “Here,” he said, handing Snowfire’s reins to Eragon, “go to the far side of Therinsford and wait there.”

“Why?” asked Eragon, but Brom had already slipped away. Annoyed, he exited Therinsford with the two horses and stationed himself beside the road. To the south he saw the hazy outline of Utgard, sitting like a giant monolith at the end of the valley. Its peak pierced the clouds and rose out of sight, towering over the lesser mountains that surrounded it. Its dark, ominous look made Eragon’s scalp tingle.

Brom returned shortly and gestured for Eragon to follow. They walked until Therinsford was hidden by trees. Then Brom said, “The Ra’zac definitely passed this way. Apparently they stopped here to pick up horses, as we did. I was able to find a man who saw them. He described them with many shudders and said that they galloped out of Therinsford like demons fleeing a holy man.”

“They left quite an impression.”

“Quite.”

Eragon patted the horses. “When we were in the barn, I touched the bay’s mind by accident. I didn’t know it was possible to do that.”

Brom frowned. “It’s unusual for one as young as you to have the ability. Most Riders had to train for years before they were strong enough to contact anything other than their dragon.” His face was thoughtful as he inspected Snowfire. Then he said, “Take everything from your pack, put it into the saddlebags, and tie the pack on top.” Eragon did so while Brom mounted Snowfire.

Eragon gazed doubtfully at the bay. It was so much smaller than Saphira that for an absurd moment he wondered if it could bear his weight. With a sigh, he awkwardly got into the saddle. He had only ridden horses bareback and never for any distance. “Is this going to do the same thing to my legs as riding Saphira?” he asked.

“How do they feel now?”

“Not too bad, but I think any hard riding will open them up again.”

“We’ll take it easy,” promised Brom. He gave Eragon a few pointers, then they started off at a gentle pace. Before long the countryside began to change as cultivated fields yielded to wilder land. Brambles and tangled weeds lined the road, along with huge rosebushes that clung to their clothes. Tall rocks slanted out of the ground—gray witnesses to their presence. There was an unfriendly feel in the air, an animosity that resisted intruders.

Above them, growing larger with every step, loomed Utgard, its craggy precipices deeply furrowed with snowy canyons. The black

rock of the mountain absorbed light like a sponge and dimmed the surrounding area. Between Utgard and the line of mountains that formed the east side of Palancar Valley was a deep cleft. It was the only practical way out of the valley. The road led toward it.

The horses' hooves clacked sharply over gravel, and the road dwindled to a skinny trail as it skirted the base of Utgard. Eragon glanced up at the peak looming over them and was startled to see a steepled tower perched upon it. The turret was crumbling and in disrepair, but it was still a stern sentinel over the valley. "What is that?" he asked, pointing.

Brom did not look up, but said sadly and with bitterness, "An outpost of the Riders—one that has lasted since their founding. That was where Vrael took refuge, and where, through treachery, he was found and defeated by Galbatorix. When Vrael fell, this area was tainted. Edoc'sil, 'Unconquerable,' was the name of this bastion, for the mountain is so steep none may reach the top unless they can fly. After Vrael's death the commoners called it Utgard, but it has another name, Ristvak'baen—the 'Place of Sorrow.' It was known as such to the last Riders before they were killed by the king."

Eragon stared with awe. Here was a tangible remnant of the Riders' glory, tarnished though it was by the relentless pull of time. It struck him then just how old the Riders were. A legacy of tradition and heroism that stretched back to antiquity had fallen upon him.

They traveled for long hours around Utgard. It formed a solid wall to their right as they entered the breach that divided the mountain range. Eragon stood in his stirrups; he was impatient to see what lay outside of Palancar, but it was still too far away. For a while they were in a sloped pass, winding over hill and gully, following the Anora River. Then, with the sun low behind their backs, they mounted a rise and saw over the trees.

Eragon gasped. On either side were mountains, but below them stretched a huge plain that extended to the distant horizon and fused into the sky. The plain was a uniform tan, like the color of dead grass. Long, wispy clouds swept by overhead, shaped by fierce winds.

He understood now why Brom had insisted on horses. It would have taken them weeks or months to cover that vast distance on foot. Far above he saw Saphira circling, high enough to be mistaken for a bird.

"We'll wait until tomorrow to make the descent," said Brom. "It's going to take most of the day, so we should camp now."

"How far across is the plain?" Eragon asked, still amazed.

"Two or three days to over a fortnight, depending on which direction we go. Aside from the nomad tribes that roam this section of the plains, it's almost as uninhabited as the Hadarac Desert to the east. So we aren't going to find many villages. However, to the south the

plains are less arid and more heavily populated."

They left the trail and dismounted by the Anora River. As they unsaddled the horses, Brom gestured at the bay. "You should name him."

Eragon considered it as he picketed the bay. "Well, I don't have anything as noble as Snowfire, but maybe this will do." He placed his hand on the bay and said, "I name you Cadoc. It was my grandfather's name, so bear it well." Brom nodded in approval, but Eragon felt slightly foolish.

When Saphira landed, he asked, *How do the plains look?*

Dull. There's nothing but rabbits and scrub in every direction.

After dinner, Brom stood and barked, "Catch!" Eragon barely had time to raise his arm and grab the piece of wood before it hit him on the head. He groaned as he saw another makeshift sword.

"Not again," he complained. Brom just smiled and beckoned with one hand. Eragon reluctantly got to his feet. They whirled around in a flurry of smacking wood, and he backed away with a stinging arm.

The training session was shorter than the first, but it was still long enough for Eragon to amass a new collection of bruises. When they finished sparring, he threw down the stick in disgust and stalked away from the fire to nurse his injuries.

The next morning Eragon avoided bringing to mind any of the recent events; they were too painful for him to consider. Instead, he focused his energies on figuring out how to find and kill the Ra'zac. *I'll do it with my bow*, he decided, imagining how the cloaked figures would look with arrows sticking out of them.

He had difficulty even standing up. His muscles cramped with the slightest movement, and one of his fingers was hot and swollen. When they were ready to leave, he mounted Cadoc and said acidly, "If this keeps up, you're going to batter me to pieces."

"I wouldn't push you so hard if I didn't think you were strong enough."

"For once, I wouldn't mind being thought less of," muttered Eragon.

Cadoc pranced nervously as Saphira approached. Saphira eyed the horse with something close to disgust and said, *There's nowhere to hide on the plains, so I'm not going to bother trying to stay out of sight. I'll just fly above you from now on.*

She took off, and they began the steep descent. In many places the trail all but disappeared, leaving them to find their own way down. At times they had to dismount and lead the horses on foot, holding on to trees to keep from falling down the slope. The ground was scattered with loose rocks, which made the footing treacherous. The ordeal left them hot and irritable, despite the cold.

They stopped to rest when they reached the bottom near midday. The Anora River veered to their left and flowed northward. A biting wind scoured the land, whipping them unmercifully. The soil was parched, and dirt flew into their eyes.

It unnerved Eragon how flat everything was; the plains were unbroken by hummocks or mounds. He had lived his entire life surrounded by mountains and hills. Without them he felt exposed and vulnerable, like a mouse under an eagle's keen eye.

The trail split in three once it reached the plains. The first branch turned north, toward Ceunon, one of the greatest northern cities; the second one led straight across the plains; and the last went south. They examined all three for traces of the Ra'zac and eventually found their tracks, heading directly into the grasslands.

"It seems they've gone to Yazuac," said Brom with a perplexed air.

"Where's that?"

"Due east and four days away, if all goes well. It's a small village situated by the Ninor River." He gestured at the Anora, which

streamed away from them to the north. “Our only supply of water is here. We’ll have to replenish our waterskins before attempting to cross the plains. There isn’t another pool or stream between here and Yazuac.”

The excitement of the hunt began to rise within Eragon. In a few days, maybe less than a week, he would use his arrows to avenge Garrow’s death. *And then …* He refused to think about what might happen afterward.

They filled the waterskins, watered the horses, and drank as much as they could from the river. Saphira joined them and took several gulps of water. Fortified, they turned eastward and started across the plains.

Eragon decided that it would be the wind that drove him crazy first. Everything that made him miserable—his chapped lips, parched tongue, and burning eyes—stemmed from it. The ceaseless gusting followed them throughout the day. Evening only strengthened the wind, instead of subduing it.

Since there was no shelter, they were forced to camp in the open. Eragon found some scrub brush, a short tough plant that thrived on harsh conditions, and pulled it up. He made a careful pile and tried to light it, but the woody stems only smoked and gave off a pungent smell. Frustrated, he tossed the tinderbox to Brom. “I can’t make it burn, especially with this blasted wind. See if you can get it going: otherwise dinner will be cold.”

Brom knelt by the brush and looked at it critically. He rearranged a couple of branches, then struck the tinderbox, sending a cascade of sparks onto the plants. There was smoke, but nothing else. Brom scowled and tried again, but his luck was no better than Eragon’s. “Brisingr!” he swore angrily, striking the flint again. Flames suddenly appeared, and he stepped back with a pleased expression. “There we go. It must have been smoldering inside.”

They sparred with mock swords while the food cooked. Fatigue made it hard on both of them, so they kept the session short. After they had eaten, they lay next to Saphira and slept, grateful for her shelter.

The same cold wind greeted them in the morning, sweeping over the dreadful flatness. Eragon’s lips had cracked during the night; every time he smiled or talked, beads of blood covered them. Licking them only made it worse. It was the same for Brom. They let the horses drink sparingly from their supply of water before mounting them. The day was a monotonous trek of endless plodding.

On the third day, Eragon woke well rested. That, coupled with the fact that the wind had stopped, put him in a cheery humor. His high spirits

were dampened, however, when he saw the sky ahead of them was dark with thunderheads.

Brom looked at the clouds and grimaced. “Normally I wouldn’t go into a storm like that, but we’re in for a battering no matter what we do, so we might as well get some distance covered.”

It was still calm when they reached the storm front. As they entered its shadow, Eragon looked up. The thundercloud had an exotic structure, forming a natural cathedral with a massive arched roof. With some imagination he could see pillars, windows, soaring tiers, and snarling gargoyles. It was a wild beauty.

As Eragon lowered his gaze, a giant ripple raced toward them through the grass, flattening it. It took him a second to realize that the wave was a tremendous blast of wind. Brom saw it too, and they hunched their shoulders, preparing for the storm.

The gale was almost upon them when Eragon had a horrible thought and twisted in his saddle, yelling, both with his voice and mind, *“Saphira! Land!”* Brom’s face grew pale. Overhead, they saw her dive toward the ground. *She’s not going to make it!*

Saphira angled back the way they had come, to gain time. As they watched, the tempest’s wrath struck them like a hammer blow. Eragon gasped for breath and clenched the saddle as a frenzied howling filled his ears. Cadoc swayed and dug his hooves into the ground, mane snapping in the air. The wind tore at their clothes with invisible fingers while the air darkened with billowing clouds of dust.

Eragon squinted, searching for Saphira. He saw her land heavily and then crouch, clenching the ground with her talons. The wind reached her just as she started to fold her wings. With an angry yank, it unfurled them and dragged her into the air. For a moment she hung there, suspended by the storm’s force. Then it slammed her down on her back.

With a savage wrench, Eragon yanked Cadoc around and galloped back up the trail, goading the horse with both heels and mind. *Saphira!* he shouted. *Try to stay on the ground. I’m coming!* He felt a grim acknowledgment from her. As they neared Saphira, Cadoc balked, so Eragon leapt down and ran toward her.

His bow banged against his head. A strong gust pushed him off balance and he flew forward, landing on his chest. He skidded, then got back up with a snarl, ignoring the deep scrapes in his skin.

Saphira was only three yards away, but he could get no closer because of her flailing wings. She struggled to fold them against the overpowering gale. He rushed at her right wing, intending to hold it down, but the wind caught her and she somersaulted over him. The spines on her back missed his head by inches. Saphira clawed at the ground, trying to stay down.

Her wings began to lift again, but before they could flip her, Eragon threw himself at the left one. The wing crumpled in at the joints and Saphira tucked it firmly against her body. Eragon vaulted over her back and tumbled onto the other wing. Without warning it was blown upward, sending him sliding to ground. He broke his fall with a roll, then jumped up and grabbed the wing again. Saphira started to fold it, and he pushed with all of his strength. The wind battled with them for a second, but with one last surge they overcame it.

Eragon leaned against Saphira, panting. *Are you all right?* He could feel her trembling.

She took a moment to answer. *I … I think so*. She sounded shaken. *Nothing's broken—I couldn't do anything; the wind wouldn't let me go. I was helpless*. With a shudder, she fell silent.

He looked at her, concerned. *Don't worry, you're safe now*. He spotted Cadoc a ways off, standing with his back to the wind. With his mind, Eragon instructed the horse to return to Brom. He then got onto Saphira. She crept up the road, fighting the gale while he clung to her back and kept his head down.

When they reached Brom, he shouted over the storm, "Is she hurt?"

Eragon shook his head and dismounted. Cadoc trotted over to him, nickering. As he stroked the horse's long cheek, Brom pointed at a dark curtain of rain sweeping toward them in rippling gray sheets. "What else?" cried Eragon, pulling his clothes tighter. He winced as the torrent reached them. The stinging rain was cold as ice; before long they were drenched and shivering.

Lightning lanced through the sky, flickering in and out of existence. Mile-high blue bolts streaked across the horizon, followed by peals of thunder that shook the ground below. It was beautiful, but dangerously so. Here and there, grass fires were ignited by strikes, only to be extinguished by the rain.

The wild elements were slow to abate, but as the day passed, they wandered elsewhere. Once again the sky was revealed, and the setting sun glowed with brilliance. As beams of light tinted the clouds with blazing colors, everything gained a sharp contrast: brightly lit on one side, deeply shadowed on the other. Objects had a unique sense of mass; grass stalks seemed sturdy as marble pillars. Ordinary things took on an unearthly beauty; Eragon felt as if he were sitting inside a painting.

The rejuvenated earth smelled fresh, clearing their minds and raising their spirits. Saphira stretched, craning her neck, and roared happily. The horses skittered away from her, but Eragon and Brom smiled at her exuberance.

Before the light faded, they stopped for the night in a shallow depression. Too exhausted to spar, they went straight to sleep.

Although they had managed to partially refill the waterskins during the storm, they drank the last of their water that morning. “I hope we’re going in the right direction,” said Eragon, crunching up the empty water bag, “because we’ll be in trouble if we don’t reach Yazuac today.”

Brom did not seem disturbed. “I’ve traveled this way before. Yazuac will be in sight before dusk.”

Eragon laughed doubtfully. “Perhaps you see something I don’t. How can you know that when everything looks exactly the same for leagues around?”

“Because I am guided not by the land, but by the stars and sun. They will not lead us astray. Come! Let us be off. It is foolish to conjure up woe where none exists. Yazuac will be there.”

His words proved true. Saphira spotted the village first, but it was not until later in the day that the rest of them saw it as a dark bump on the horizon. Yazuac was still very far away; it was only visible because of the plain’s uniform flatness. As they rode closer, a dark winding line appeared on either side of the town and disappeared in the distance.

“The Ninor River,” said Brom, pointing at it.

Eragon pulled Cadoc to a stop. “Saphira will be seen if she stays with us much longer. Should she hide while we go into Yazuac?”

Brom scratched his chin and looked at the town. “See that bend in the river? Have her wait there. It’s far enough from Yazuac so no one should find her, but close enough that she won’t be left behind. We’ll go through the town, get what we need, and then meet her.”

I don’t like it, said Saphira when Eragon had explained the plan. *This is irritating, having to hide all the time like a criminal*.

You know what would happen if we were revealed. She grumbled but gave in and flew away low to the ground.

They kept a swift pace in anticipation of the food and drink they would soon enjoy. As they approached the small houses, they could see smoke from a dozen chimneys, but there was no one in the streets. An abnormal silence enveloped the village. By unspoken consent they stopped before the first house. Eragon abruptly said, “There aren’t any dogs barking.”

“No.”

“Doesn’t mean anything, though.”

“… No.”

Eragon paused. “Someone should have seen us by now.”

“Yes.”

“Then why hasn’t anyone come out?”

Brom squinted at the sun. “Could be afraid.”

“Could be,” said Eragon. He was quiet for a moment. “And if it’s a trap? The Ra’zac might be waiting for us.”

“We need provisions and water.”

“There’s the Ninor.”

“Still need provisions.”

“True.” Eragon looked around. “So we go in?”

Brom flicked his reins. “Yes, but not like fools. This is the main entrance to Yazuac. If there’s an ambush, it’ll be along here. No one will expect us to arrive from a different direction.”

“Around to the side, then?” asked Eragon. Brom nodded and pulled out his sword, resting the bare blade across his saddle. Eragon strung his bow and nocked an arrow.

They trotted quietly around the town and entered it cautiously. The streets were empty, except for a small fox that darted away as they came near. The houses were dark and foreboding, with shattered windows. Many of the doors swung on broken hinges. The horses rolled their eyes nervously. Eragon’s palm tingled, but he resisted the urge to scratch it. As they rode into the center of town, he gripped his bow tighter, blanching. “Gods above,” he whispered.

A mountain of bodies rose above them, the corpses stiff and grimacing. Their clothes were soaked in blood, and the churned ground was stained with it. Slaughtered men lay over the women they had tried to protect, mothers still clasped their children, and lovers who had tried to shield each other rested in death’s cold embrace. Black arrows stuck out of them all. Neither young nor old had been spared. But worst of all was the barbed spear that rose out of the peak of the pile, impaling the white body of a baby.

Tears blurred Eragon’s vision and he tried to look away, but the dead faces held his attention. He stared at their open eyes and wondered how life could have left them so easily. *What does our existence mean when it can end like this?* A wave of hopelessness overwhelmed him.

A crow dipped out of the sky, like a black shadow, and perched on the spear. It cocked its head and greedily scrutinized the infant’s corpse. “Oh no you don’t,” snarled Eragon as he pulled back the bowstring and released it with a twang. With a puff of feathers, the crow fell over backward, the arrow protruding from its chest. Eragon fit another arrow to the string, but nausea rose from his stomach and he threw up over Cadoc’s side.

Brom patted him on the back. When Eragon was done, Brom asked

gently, “Do you want to wait for me outside Yazuac?”

“No … I’ll stay,” said Eragon shakily, wiping his mouth. He avoided looking at the gruesome sight before them. “Who could have done …” He could not force out the words.

Brom bowed his head. “Those who love the pain and suffering of others. They wear many faces and go by many disguises, but there is only one name for them: evil. There is no understanding it. All we can do is pity and honor the victims.”

He dismounted Snowfire and walked around, inspecting the trampled ground carefully. “The Ra’zac passed this way,” he said slowly, “but this wasn’t their doing. This is Urgal work; the spear is of their make. A company of them came through here, perhaps as many as a hundred. It’s odd; I know of only a few instances when they have gathered in such …” He knelt and examined a footprint intently. With a curse he ran back to Snowfire and leapt onto him.

“Ride!” he hissed tightly, spurring Snowfire forward. “There are still Urgals here!” Eragon jammed his heels into Cadoc. The horse jumped forward and raced after Snowfire. They dashed past the houses and were almost to the edge of Yazuac when Eragon’s palm tingled again. He saw a flicker of movement to his right, then a giant fist smashed him out of the saddle. He flew back over Cadoc and crashed into a wall, holding on to his bow only by instinct. Gasping and stunned, he staggered upright, hugging his side.

An Urgal stood over him, face set in a gross leer. The monster was tall, thick, and broader than a doorway, with gray skin and yellow piggish eyes. Muscles bulged on his arms and chest, which was covered by a too small breastplate. An iron cap rested over the pair of ram’s horns curling from his temples, and a roundshield was bound to one arm. His powerful hand held a short, wicked sword.

Behind him, Eragon saw Brom rein in Snowfire and start back, only to be stopped by the appearance of a second Urgal, this one with an ax. “Run, you fool!” Brom cried to Eragon, cleaving at his enemy. The Urgal in front of Eragon roared and swung his sword mightily. Eragon jerked back with a startled yelp as the weapon whistled past his cheek. He spun around and fled toward the center of Yazuac, heart pounding wildly.

The Urgal pursued him, heavy boots thudding. Eragon sent a desperate cry for help to Saphira, then forced himself to go even faster. The Urgal rapidly gained ground despite Eragon’s efforts; large fangs separated in a soundless bellow. With the Urgal almost upon him, Eragon strung an arrow, spun to a stop, took aim, and released. The Urgal snapped up his arm and caught the quivering bolt on his shield. The monster collided with Eragon before he could shoot again, and they fell to the ground in a confused tangle.

Eragon sprang to his feet and rushed back to Brom, who was trading fierce blows with his opponent from Snowfire's back. *Where are the rest of the Urgals?* wondered Eragon frantically. *Are these two the only ones in Yazuac?* There was a loud smack, and Snowfire reared, whinnying. Brom doubled over in his saddle, blood streaming down his arm. The Urgal beside him howled in triumph and raised his ax for the death blow.

A deafening scream tore out of Eragon as he charged the Urgal, headfirst. The Urgal paused in astonishment, then faced him contemptuously, swinging his ax. Eragon ducked under the two-handed blow and clawed the Urgal's side, leaving bloody furrows. The Urgal's face twisted with rage. He slashed again, but missed as Eragon dived to the side and scrambled down an alley.

Eragon concentrated on leading the Urgals away from Brom. He slipped into a narrow passageway between two houses, saw it was a dead end, and slid to a stop. He tried to back out, but the Urgals had already blocked the entrance. They advanced, cursing him in their gravelly voices. Eragon swung his head from side to side, searching for a way out, but there was none.

As he faced the Urgals, images flashed in his mind: dead villagers piled around the spear and an innocent baby who would never grow to adulthood. At the thought of their fate, a burning, fiery power gathered from every part of his body. It was more than a desire for justice. It was his entire being rebelling against the fact of death—that he would cease to exist. The power grew stronger and stronger until he felt ready to burst from the contained force.

He stood tall and straight, all fear gone. He raised his bow smoothly. The Urgals laughed and lifted their shields. Eragon sighted down the shaft, as he had done hundreds of times, and aligned the arrowhead with his target. The energy inside him burned at an unbearable level. He had to release it, or it would consume him. A word suddenly leapt unbidden to his lips. He shot, yelling, "Brisingr!"

The arrow hissed through the air, glowing with a crackling blue light. It struck the lead Urgal on the forehead, and the air resounded with an explosion. A blue shock wave blasted out of the monster's head, killing the other Urgal instantly. It reached Eragon before he had time to react, and it passed through him without harm, dissipating against the houses.

Eragon stood panting, then looked at his icy palm. The gedwëy ignasia was glowing like white-hot metal, yet even as he watched, it faded back to normal. He clenched his fist, then a wave of exhaustion washed over him. He felt strange and feeble, as if he had not eaten for days. His knees buckled, and he sagged against a wall.

Once a modicum of strength returned to him, Eragon staggered out of the alley, skirting the dead monsters. He did not get far before Cadoc trotted to his side. “Good, you weren’t hurt,” mumbled Eragon. He noticed, without particularly caring, that his hands were shaking violently and his movements were jerky. He felt detached, as if everything he saw were happening to someone else.

Eragon found Snowfire, nostrils flared and ears flat against his head, prancing by the corner of a house, ready to bolt. Brom was still slumped motionless in the saddle. Eragon reached out with his mind and soothed the horse. Once Snowfire relaxed, Eragon went to Brom.

There was a long, blood-soaked cut on the old man’s right arm. The wound bled profusely, but it was neither deep nor wide. Still, Eragon knew it had to be bound before Brom lost too much blood. He stroked Snowfire for a moment, then slid Brom out of the saddle. The weight proved too much for him, and Brom dropped heavily to the ground. Eragon was shocked by his own weakness.

A scream of rage filled his head. Saphira dived out of the sky and landed fiercely in front of him, keeping her wings half raised. She hissed angrily, eyes burning. Her tail lashed, and Eragon winced as it snapped overhead. *Are you hurt?* she asked, rage boiling in her voice.

“No,” he assured her as he laid Brom on his back.

She growled and exclaimed, *Where are the ones who did this? I will tear them apart!*

He wearily pointed in the direction of the alley. “It’ll do no good; they’re already dead.”

You killed them? Saphira sounded surprised.

He nodded. “Somehow.” With a few terse words, he told her what had happened while he searched his saddlebags for the rags in which Zar’roc had been wrapped.

Saphira said gravely, *You have grown.*

Eragon grunted. He found a long rag and carefully rolled back Brom’s sleeve. With a few deft strokes he cleaned the cut and bandaged it tightly. *I wish we were still in Palancar Valley*, he said to Saphira. *There, at least, I knew what plants were good for healing. Here, I don’t have any idea what will help him*. He retrieved Brom’s sword from the ground, wiped it, then returned it to the sheath on Brom’s belt.

We should leave, said Saphira. *There may be more Urgals lurking about.*

Can you carry Brom? Your saddle will hold him in place, and you can

protect him.

Yes, but I'm not leaving you alone.

Fine, fly next to me, but let's get out of here. He tied the saddle onto Saphira, then put his arms around Brom and tried to lift him, but again his diminished strength failed him. *Saphira—help.*

She snaked her head past him and caught the back of Brom's robe between her teeth. Arching her neck, she lifted the old man off the ground, like a cat would a kitten, and deposited him onto her back. Then Eragon slipped Brom's legs through the saddle's straps and tightened them. He looked up when the old man moaned and shifted.

Brom blinked blearily, putting a hand to his head. He gazed down at Eragon with concern. "Did Saphira get here in time?"

Eragon shook his head. "I'll explain it later. Your arm is injured. I bandaged it as best I could, but you need a safe place to rest."

"Yes," said Brom, gingerly touching his arm. "Do you know where my sword … Ah, I see you found it."

Eragon finished tightening the straps. "Saphira's going to take you and follow me by air."

"Are you sure you want me to ride her?" asked Brom. "I can ride Snowfire."

"Not with that arm. This way, even if you faint, you won't fall off."

Brom nodded. "I'm honored." He wrapped his good arm around Saphira's neck, and she took off in a flurry, springing high into the sky. Eragon backed away, buffeted by the eddies from her wings, and returned to the horses.

He tied Snowfire behind Cadoc, then left Yazuac, returning to the trail and following it southward. It led through a rocky area, veered left, and continued along the bank of the Ninor River. Ferns, mosses, and small bushes dotted the side of the path. It was refreshingly cool under the trees, but Eragon did not let the soothing air lull him into a sense of security. He stopped briefly to fill the waterskins and let the horses drink. Glancing down, he saw the Ra'zac's spoor. *At least we're going in the right direction.* Saphira circled overhead, keeping a keen eye on him.

It disturbed him that they had seen only two Urgals. The villagers had been killed and Yazuac ransacked by a large horde, yet where was it? *Perhaps the ones we encountered were a rear guard or a trap left for anyone who was following the main force.*

His thoughts turned to how he had killed the Urgals. An idea, a revelation, slowly wormed its way through his mind. He, Eragon—farm boy of Palancar Valley—had used magic. *Magic!* It was the only word for what had happened. It seemed impossible, but he could not deny what he had seen. *Somehow I've become a sorcerer or wizard!* But he did not know how to use this new power again or what its limits

and dangers might be. *How can I have this ability? Was it common among the Riders? And if Brom knew of it, why didn't he tell me?* He shook his head in wonder and bewilderment.

He conversed with Saphira to check on Brom's condition and to share his thoughts. She was just as puzzled as he was about the magic. *Saphira, can you find us a place to stay? I can't see very far down here*. While she searched, he continued along the Ninor.

The summons reached him just as the light was fading. *Come*. Saphira sent him an image of a secluded clearing in the trees by the river. Eragon turned the horses in the new direction and nudged them into a trot. With Saphira's help it was easy to find, but it was so well hidden that he doubted anyone else would notice it.

A small, smokeless fire was already burning when he entered the clearing. Brom sat next to it, tending his arm, which he held at an awkward angle. Saphira was crouched beside him, her body tense. She looked intently at Eragon and asked, *Are you sure you aren't hurt?*

Not on the outside … but I'm not sure about the rest of me.

I should have been there sooner.

Don't feel bad. We all made mistakes today. Mine was not staying closer to you. Her gratitude for that remark washed over him. He looked at Brom. "How are you?"

The old man glanced at his arm. "It's a large scratch and hurts terribly, but it should heal quickly enough. I need a fresh bandage; this one didn't last as long as I'd hoped." They boiled water to wash Brom's wound. Then Brom tied a fresh rag to his arm and said, "I must eat, and you look hungry as well. Let's have dinner first, then talk."

When their bellies were full and warm, Brom lit his pipe. "Now, I think it's time for you to tell me what transpired while I was unconscious. I am most curious." His face reflected the flickering firelight, and his bushy eyebrows stuck out fiercely.

Eragon nervously clasped his hands and told the story without embellishment. Brom remained silent throughout it, his face inscrutable. When Eragon finished, Brom looked down at the ground. For a long time the only sound was the snapping fire. Brom finally stirred. "Have you used this power before?"

"No. Do you know anything about it?"

"A little." Brom's face was thoughtful. "It seems I owe you a debt for saving my life. I hope I can return the favor someday. You should be proud; few escape unscathed from slaying their first Urgal. But the manner in which you did it was very dangerous. You could have destroyed yourself and the whole town."

"It wasn't as if I had a choice," said Eragon defensively. "The Urgals were almost upon me. If I had waited, they would have chopped me into pieces!"

Brom stamped his teeth vigorously on the pipe stem. “You didn’t have any idea what you were doing.”

“Then tell me,” challenged Eragon. “I’ve been searching for answers to this mystery, but I can’t make sense of it. What happened? How could I have possibly used magic? No one has ever instructed me in it or taught me spells.”

Brom’s eyes flashed. “This isn’t something you should be taught—much less use!”

“Well, I *have* used it, and I may need it to fight again. But I won’t be able to if you don’t help me. What’s wrong? Is there some secret I’m not supposed to learn until I’m old and wise? Or maybe you don’t know anything about magic!”

“Boy!” roared Brom. “You demand answers with an insolence rarely seen. If you knew what you asked for, you would not be so quick to inquire. Do not try me.” He paused, then relaxed into a kinder countenance. “The knowledge you ask for is more complex than you understand.”

Eragon rose hotly in protest. “I feel as though I’ve been thrust into a world with strange rules that no one will explain.”

“I understand,” said Brom. He fiddled with a piece of grass. “It’s late and we should sleep, but I will tell you a few things now, to stop your badgering. This magic—for it is magic—has rules like the rest of the world. If you break the rules, the penalty is death, without exception. Your deeds are limited by your strength, the words you know, and your imagination.”

“What do you mean by words?” asked Eragon.

“More questions!” cried Brom. “For a moment I had hoped you were empty of them. But you are quite right in asking. When you shot the Urgals, didn’t you say something?”

“Yes, *brisingr*.” The fire flared, and a shiver ran through Eragon. Something about the word made him feel incredibly alive.

“I thought so. *Brisingr* is from an ancient language that all living things used to speak. However, it was forgotten over time and went unspoken for eons in Alagaësia, until the elves brought it back over the sea. They taught it to the other races, who used it for making and doing powerful things. The language has a name for everything, if you can find it.”

“But what does that have to do with magic?” interrupted Eragon.

“Everything! It is the basis for all power. The language describes the true nature of things, not the superficial aspects that everyone sees. For example, fire is called *brisingr*. Not only is that *a* name for fire, it is *the* name for fire. If you are strong enough, you can use *brisingr* to direct fire to do whatever you will. And that is what happened today.”

Eragon thought about it for a moment. “Why was the fire blue?

How come it did exactly what I wanted, if all I said was *fire*?"

"The color varies from person to person. It depends on who says the word. As to why the fire did what you wanted, that's a matter of practice. Most beginners have to spell out exactly what they want to happen. As they gain more experience, it isn't as necessary. A true master could just say *water* and create something totally unrelated, like a gemstone. You wouldn't be able to understand how he had done it, but the master would have seen the connection between *water* and the gem and would have used that as the focal point for his power. The practice is more of an art than anything else. What you did was extremely difficult."

Saphira interrupted Eragon's thoughts. *Brom is a magician! That's how he was able to light the fire on the plains. He doesn't just know about magic; he can use it himself!*

Eragon's eyes widened. *You're right!*

Ask him about this power, but be careful of what you say. It is unwise to trifle with those who have such abilities. If he is a wizard or sorcerer, who knows what his motives might have been for settling in Carvahall?

Eragon kept that in mind as he said carefully, "Saphira and I just realized something. You can use this magic, can't you? That's how you started the fire our first day on the plains."

Brom inclined his head slightly. "I am proficient to some degree."

"Then why didn't you fight the Urgals with it? In fact, I can think of many times when it would have been useful—you could have shielded us from the storm and kept the dirt out of our eyes."

After refilling his pipe, Brom said, "Some simple reasons, really. I am not a Rider, which means that, even at your weakest moment, you are stronger than I. And I have outlived my youth; I'm not as strong as I used to be. Every time I reach for magic, it gets a little harder."

Eragon dropped his eyes, abashed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Brom as he shifted his arm. "It happens to everyone."

"Where did you learn to use magic?"

"That is one fact I'll keep to myself.… Suffice it to say, it was in a remote area and from a very good teacher. I can, at the very least, pass on his lessons." Brom snuffed his pipe with a small rock. "I know that you have more questions, and I will answer them, but they must wait until morning."

He leaned forward, eyes gleaming. "Until then, I will say this to discourage any experiments: magic takes just as much energy as if you used your arms and back. That is why you felt tired after destroying the Urgals. And that is why I was angry. It was a dreadful risk on your part. If the magic had used more energy than was in your body, it would have killed you. You should use magic only for tasks that can't

be accomplished the mundane way."

"How do you know if a spell will use all your energy?" asked Eragon, frightened.

Brom raised his hands. "Most of the time you don't. That's why magicians have to know their limits well, and even then they are cautious. Once you commit to a task and release the magic, you can't pull it back, even if it's going to kill you. I mean this as a warning: don't try anything until you've learned more. Now, enough of this for tonight."

As they spread out their blankets, Saphira commented with satisfaction, *We are becoming more powerful, Eragon, both of us. Soon no one will be able to stand in our way*.

Yes, but which way shall we choose?

Whichever one we want, she said smugly, settling down for the night.

"Why do you think those two Urgals were still in Yazuac?" asked Eragon, after they had been on the trail for a while. "There doesn't seem to be any reason for them to have stayed behind."

"I suspect they deserted the main group to loot the town. What makes it odd is that, as far as I know, Urgals have gathered in force only two or three times in history. It's unsettling that they are doing it now."

"Do you think the Ra'zac caused the attack?"

"I don't know. The best thing we can do is continue away from Yazuac at the fastest pace we can muster. Besides, this is the direction the Ra'zac went: south."

Eragon agreed. "We still need provisions, however. Is there another town nearby?"

Brom shook his head. "No, but Saphira can hunt for us if we must survive on meat alone. This swath of trees may look small to you, but there are plenty of animals in it. The river is the only source of water for many miles around, so most of the plains animals come here to drink. We won't starve."

Eragon remained quiet, satisfied with Brom's answer. As they rode, loud birds darted around them, and the river rushed by peacefully. It was a noisy place, full of life and energy. Eragon asked, "How did that Urgal get you? Things were happening so fast, I didn't see."

"Bad luck, really," grumbled Brom. "I was more than a match for him, so he kicked Snowfire. The idiot of a horse reared and threw me off balance. That was all the Urgal needed to give me this gash." He scratched his chin. "I suppose you're still wondering about this magic. The fact that you've discovered it presents a thorny problem. Few know it, but every Rider could use magic, though with differing strengths. They kept the ability secret, even at the height of their power, because it gave them an advantage over their enemies. Had everyone known about it, dealing with common people would have been difficult. Many think the king's magical powers come from the fact that he is a wizard or sorcerer. That's not true; it is because he's a Rider."

"What's the difference? Doesn't the fact that I used magic make me a sorcerer?"

"Not at all! A sorcerer, like a Shade, uses spirits to accomplish his will. That is totally different from your power. Nor does that make you an ordinary, run-of-the-mill magician, whose powers come

without the aid of spirits or a dragon. And you're certainly not a witch or wizard, who get their powers from various potions and spells.

"Which brings me back to my original point: the problem you've presented. Young Riders like yourself were put through a strict regimen designed to strengthen their bodies and increase their mental control. This regimen continued for many months, occasionally years, until the Riders were deemed responsible enough to handle magic. Up until then, not one student was told of his potential powers. If one of them discovered magic by accident, he or she was immediately taken away for private tutoring. It was rare for anyone to discover magic on his own," he inclined his head toward Eragon, "though they were never put under the same pressure you were."

"Then how were they finally trained to use magic?" asked Eragon. "I don't see how you could teach it to anyone. If you had tried to explain it to me two days ago, it wouldn't have made any sense."

"The students were presented with a series of pointless exercises designed to frustrate them. For example, they were instructed to move piles of stones using only their feet, fill ever draining tubs full of water, and other impossibilities. After a time, they would get infuriated enough to use magic. Most of the time it succeeded.

"What this means," Brom continued, "is that you will be disadvantaged if you ever meet an enemy who has received this training. There are still some alive who are that old: the king for one, not to mention the elves. Any one of those could tear you apart with ease."

"What can I do, then?"

"There isn't time for formal instruction, but we can do much while we travel," said Brom. "I know many techniques you can practice that will give you strength and control, but you cannot gain the discipline the Riders had overnight. You," he looked at Eragon humorously, "will have to amass it on the run. It will be hard in the beginning, but the rewards will be great. It may please you to know that no Rider your age ever used magic the way you did yesterday with those two Urgals."

Eragon smiled at the praise. "Thank you. Does this language have a name?"

Brom laughed. "Yes, but no one knows it. It would be a word of incredible power, something by which you could control the entire language and those who use it. People have long searched for it, but no one has ever found it."

"I still don't understand how this magic works," said Eragon. "Exactly how do I use it?"

Brom looked astonished. "I haven't made that clear?"

"No."

Brom took a deep breath and said, “To work with magic, you must have a certain innate power, which is very rare among people nowadays. You also have to be able to summon this power at will. Once it is called upon, you have to use it or let it fade away. Understood? Now, if you wish to employ the power, you must utter the word or phrase of the ancient language that describes your intent. For example, if you hadn’t said *brisingr* yesterday, nothing would have happened.”

“So I’m limited by my knowledge of this language?”

“Exactly,” crowed Brom. “Also, while speaking it, it’s impossible to practice deceit.”

Eragon shook his head. “That can’t be. People always lie. The sounds of the ancient words can’t stop them from doing that.”

Brom cocked an eyebrow and said, “Fethrblaka, eka weohnata néiat haina ono. Blaka eom iet lam.” A bird suddenly flitted from a branch and landed on his hand. It trilled lightly and looked at them with beady eyes. After a moment he said, “Eitha,” and it fluttered away.

“How did you do that?” asked Eragon in wonder.

“I promised not to harm him. He may not have known exactly what I meant, but in the language of power, the meaning of my words was evident. The bird trusted me because he knows what all animals do, that those who speak in that tongue are bound by their word.”

“And the elves speak this language?”

“Yes.”

“So they never lie?”

“Not quite,” admitted Brom. “They maintain that they don’t, and in a way it’s true, but they have perfected the art of saying one thing and meaning another. You never know exactly what their intent is, or if you have fathomed it correctly. Many times they only reveal part of the truth and withhold the rest. It takes a refined and subtle mind to deal with their culture.”

Eragon considered that. “What do personal names mean in this language? Do they give power over people?”

Brom’s eyes brightened with approval. “Yes, they do. Those who speak the language have two names. The first is for everyday use and has little authority. But the second is their true name and is shared with only a few trusted people. There was a time when no one concealed his true name, but this age isn’t as kind. Whoever knows your true name gains enormous power over you. It’s like putting your life into another person’s hands. Everyone has a hidden name, but few know what it is.”

“How do you find your true name?” asked Eragon.

“Elves instinctively know theirs. No one else has that gift. The human Riders usually went on quests to discover it—or found an elf

who would tell them, which was rare, for elves don't distribute that knowledge freely," replied Brom.

"I'd like to know mine," Eragon said wistfully.

Brom's brow darkened. "Be careful. It can be a terrible knowledge. To know who you are without any delusions or sympathy is a moment of revelation that no one experiences unscathed. Some have been driven to madness by that stark reality. Most try to forget it. But as much as the name will give others power, so you may gain power over yourself, if the truth doesn't break you."

And I'm sure that it would not, stated Saphira.

"I still wish to know," said Eragon, determined.

"You are not easily dissuaded. That is good, for only the resolute find their identity, but I cannot help you with this. It is a search that you will have to undertake on your own." Brom moved his injured arm and grimaced uncomfortably.

"Why can't you or I heal that with magic?" asked Eragon.

Brom blinked. "No reason—I just never considered it because it's beyond my strength. You could probably do it with the right word, but I don't want you to exhaust yourself."

"I could save you a lot of trouble and pain," protested Eragon.

"I'll live with it," said Brom flatly. "Using magic to heal a wound takes just as much energy as it would to mend on its own. I don't want you tired for the next few days. You shouldn't attempt such a difficult task yet."

"Still, if it's possible to fix your arm, could I bring someone back from the dead?"

The question surprised Brom, but he answered quickly, "Remember what I said about projects that will kill you? That is one of them. Riders were forbidden to try to resurrect the dead, for their own safety. There is an abyss beyond life where magic means nothing. If you reach into it, your strength will flee and your soul will fade into darkness. Wizards, sorcerers, and Riders—all have failed and died on that threshold. Stick with what's possible—cuts, bruises, maybe some broken bones—but definitely not dead people."

"But what about the spirits that sorcerers and Shades use? Aren't they human souls?"

"No, and we have precious little idea where they come from."

Eragon frowned. "This is a lot more complicated than I thought."

"Exactly!" said Brom. "And if you don't understand what you're doing, you'll try something too big and die." He twisted in his saddle and swooped down, grabbing a handful of pebbles from the ground. With effort, he righted himself, then discarded all but one of the rocks. "See this pebble?"

"Yes."

"Take it." Eragon did and stared at the unremarkable lump. It was dull black, smooth, and as large as the end of his thumb. There were countless stones like it on the trail. "This is your training."

Eragon looked back at him, confused. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," said Brom impatiently. "That's why I'm teaching you and not the other way around. Now stop talking or we'll never get anywhere. What I want you to do is lift the rock off your palm and hold it in the air for as long as you can. The words you're going to use are *stenr reisa*. Say them."

"Stenr reisa."

"Good. Go ahead and try."

Eragon focused sourly on the pebble, searching his mind for any hint of the energy that had burned in him the day before. The stone remained motionless as he stared at it, sweating and frustrated. *How am I supposed to do this?* Finally, he crossed his arms and snapped, "This is impossible."

"No," said Brom gruffly. "*I'll* say when it's impossible or not. Fight for it! Don't give in this easily. Try again."

Frowning, Eragon closed his eyes, setting aside all distracting thoughts. He took a deep breath and reached into the farthest corners of his consciousness, trying to find where his power resided. Searching, he found only thoughts and memories until he felt something different—a small bump that was a part of him and yet not of him. Excited, he dug into it, seeking what it hid. He felt resistance, a barrier in his mind, but knew that the power lay on the other side. He tried to breach it, but it held firm before his efforts. Growing angry, Eragon drove into the barrier, ramming against it with all of his might until it shattered like a thin pane of glass, flooding his mind with a river of light.

"Stenr reisa," he gasped. The pebble wobbled into the air over his faintly glowing palm. He struggled to keep it floating, but the power slipped away and faded back behind the barrier. The pebble dropped to his hand with a soft plop, and his palm returned to normal. He felt a little tired, but grinned from his success.

"Not bad for your first time," said Brom.

"Why does my hand do that? It's like a little lantern."

"No one's sure," Brom admitted. "The Riders always preferred to channel their power through whichever hand bore the gedwëy ignasia. You can use your other palm, but it isn't as easy." He looked at Eragon for a minute. "I'll buy you some gloves at the next town, if it isn't gutted. You hide the mark pretty well on your own, but we don't want anyone to see it by accident. Besides, there may be times when you won't want the glow to alert an enemy."

"Do you have a mark of your own?"

"No. Only Riders have them," said Brom. "Also, you should know that magic is affected by distance, just like an arrow or a spear. If you try to lift or move something a mile away, it'll take more energy than if you were closer. So if you see enemies racing after you from a league away, let them approach before using magic. Now, back to work! Try to lift the pebble again."

"Again?" asked Eragon weakly, thinking of the effort it had taken to do it just once.

"Yes! And this time be quicker about it."

They continued with the exercises throughout most of the day. When Eragon finally stopped, he was tired and ill-tempered. In those hours, he had come to hate the pebble and everything about it. He started to throw it away, but Brom said, "Don't. Keep it." Eragon glared at him, then reluctantly tucked the stone into a pocket.

"We're not done yet," warned Brom, "so don't get comfortable." He pointed at a small plant. "This is called *delois*." From there on he instructed Eragon in the ancient language, giving him words to memorize, from *vöndr*, a thin, straight stick, to the morning star, *Aiedail*.

That evening they sparred around the fire. Though Brom fought with his left hand, his skill was undiminished.

The days followed the same pattern. First, Eragon struggled to learn the ancient words and to manipulate the pebble. Then, in the evening, he trained against Brom with the fake swords. Eragon was in constant discomfort, but he gradually began to change, almost without noticing. Soon the pebble no longer wobbled when he lifted it. He mastered the first exercises Brom gave him and undertook harder ones, and his knowledge of the ancient language grew.

In their sparring, Eragon gained confidence and speed, striking like a snake. His blows became heavier, and his arm no longer trembled when he warded off attacks. The clashes lasted longer as he learned how to fend off Brom. Now, when they went to sleep, Eragon was not the only one with bruises.

Saphira continued to grow as well, but more slowly than before. Her extended flights, along with periodic hunts, kept her fit and healthy. She was taller than the horses now, and much longer. Because of her size and the way her scales sparkled, she was altogether too visible. Brom and Eragon worried about it, but they could not convince her to allow dirt to obscure her scintillating hide.

They continued south, tracking the Ra'zac. It frustrated Eragon that no matter how fast they went, the Ra'zac always stayed a few days ahead of them. At times he was ready to give up, but then they would find some mark or print that would renew his hope.

There were no signs of habitation along the Ninor or in the plains, leaving the three companions undisturbed as the days slipped by. Finally, they neared Daret, the first village since Yazuac.

The night before they reached the village, Eragon's dreams were especially vivid.

He saw Garrow and Roran at home, sitting in the destroyed kitchen. They asked him for help rebuilding the farm, but he only shook his head with a pang of longing in his heart. "I'm tracking your killers," he whispered to his uncle.

Garrow looked at him askance and demanded, "Do I look dead to you?"

"I can't help you," said Eragon softly, feeling tears in his eyes.

There was a sudden roar, and Garrow transformed into the Ra'zac. "Then die," they hissed, and leapt at Eragon.

He woke up feeling ill and watched the stars slowly turn in the sky.

All will be well, little one, said Saphira gently.

Daret

Daret was on the banks of the Ninor River—as it had to be to survive. The village was small and wild-looking, without any signs of inhabitants. Eragon and Brom approached it with great caution. Saphira hid close to the town this time; if trouble arose, she would be at their sides within seconds.

They rode into Daret, striving to be silent. Brom gripped his sword with his good hand, eyes flashing everywhere. Eragon kept his bow partially drawn as they passed between the silent houses, glancing at each other with apprehension. *This doesn't look good*, commented Eragon to Saphira. She did not answer, but he felt her prepare to rush after them. He looked at the ground and was reassured to see the fresh footprints of children. *But where are they?*

Brom stiffened as they entered the center of Daret and found it empty. Wind blew through the desolate town, and dust devils swirled sporadically. Brom wheeled Snowfire about. "Let's get out of here. I don't like the feel of this." He spurred Snowfire into a gallop. Eragon followed him, urging Cadoc onward.

They advanced only a few strides before wagons toppled out from behind the houses and blocked their way. Cadoc snorted and dug in his hooves, sliding to a stop next to Snowfire. A swarthy man hopped over the wagon and planted himself before them, a broadsword slung at his side and a drawn bow in his hands. Eragon swung his own bow up and pointed it at the stranger, who commanded, "Halt! Put your weapons down. You're surrounded by sixty archers. They'll shoot if you move." As if on cue, a row of men stood up on the roofs of the surrounding houses.

Stay away, Saphira! cried Eragon. *There are too many. If you come, they'll shoot you out of the sky. Stay away!* She heard, but he was unsure if she would obey. He prepared to use magic. *I'll have to stop the arrows before they hit me or Brom*.

"What do you want?" asked Brom calmly.

"Why have you come here?" demanded the man.

"To buy supplies and hear the news. Nothing more. We're on the way to my cousin's house in Dras-Leona."

"You're armed pretty heavily."

"So are you," said Brom. "These are dangerous times."

"True." The man looked at them carefully. "I don't think you mean us ill, but we've had too many encounters with Urgals and bandits for me to trust you only on your word."

“If it doesn’t matter what we say, what happens now?” countered Brom. The men on top of the houses had not moved. By their very stillness, Eragon was sure that they were either highly disciplined … or frightened for their lives. He hoped it was the latter.

“You say that you only want supplies. Would you agree to stay here while we bring what you need, then pay us and leave immediately?”

“Yes.”

“All right,” said the man, lowering his bow, though he kept it ready. He waved at one of the archers, who slid to the ground and ran over. “Tell him what you want.”

Brom recited a short list and then added, “Also, if you have a spare pair of gloves that would fit my nephew, I’d like to buy those too.” The archer nodded and ran off.

“The name’s Trevor,” said the man standing in front of them. “Normally I’d shake your hand, but under the circumstances, I think I’ll keep my distance. Tell me, where are you from?”

“North,” said Brom, “but we haven’t lived in any place long enough to call it home. Have Urgals forced you to take these measures?”

“Yes,” said Trevor, “and worse fiends. Do you have any news from other towns? We receive word from them rarely, but there have been reports that they are also beleaguered.”

Brom turned grave. “I wish it wasn’t our lot to bring you these tidings. Nearly a fortnight ago we passed through Yazuac and found it pillaged. The villagers had been slaughtered and piled together. We would have tried to give them a decent burial, but two Urgals attacked us.”

Shocked, Trevor stepped back and looked down with tears in his eyes. “Alas, this is indeed a dark day. Still, I don’t see how two Urgals could have defeated all of Yazuac. The people there were good fighters—some were my friends.”

“There were signs that a band of Urgals had ravaged the town,” stated Brom. “I think the ones we encountered were deserters.”

“How large was the company?”

Brom fiddled with his saddlebags for a minute. “Large enough to wipe out Yazuac, but small enough to go unnoticed in the countryside. No more than a hundred, and no less than fifty. If I’m not mistaken, either number would prove fatal to you.” Trevor wearily agreed. “You should consider leaving,” Brom continued. “This area has become far too perilous for anyone to live in peace.”

“I know, but the people here refuse to consider moving. This is their home—as well as mine, though I have only been here a couple years—and they place its worth above their own lives.” Trevor looked at him seriously. “We have repulsed individual Urgals, and that has given the townspeople a confidence far beyond their abilities. I fear that we will

all wake up one morning with our throats slashed."

The archer hurried out of a house with a pile of goods in his arms. He set them next to the horses, and Brom paid him. As the man left, Brom asked, "Why did they choose you to defend Daret?"

Trevor shrugged. "I was in the king's army for some years."

Brom dug through the items, handed Eragon the pair of gloves, and packed the rest of the supplies into their saddlebags. Eragon pulled the gloves on, being careful to keep his palm facing down, and flexed his hands. The leather felt good and strong, though it was scarred from use. "Well," said Brom, "as I promised, we will go now."

Trevor nodded. "When you enter Dras-Leona, would you do us this favor? Alert the Empire to our plight and that of the other towns. If word of this hasn't reached the king by now, it's cause for worry. And if it has, but he has chosen to do nothing, that too is cause for worry."

"We will carry your message. May your swords stay sharp," said Brom.

"And yours."

The wagons were pulled out of their way, and they rode from Daret into the trees along the Ninor River. Eragon sent his thoughts to Saphira. *We're on our way back. Everything turned out all right*. Her only response was simmering anger.

Brom pulled at his beard. "The Empire is in worse condition than I had imagined. When the traders visited Carvahall, they brought reports of unrest, but I never believed that it was this widespread. With all these Urgals around, it seems that the Empire itself is under attack, yet no troops or soldiers have been sent out. It's as if the king doesn't care to defend his domain."

"It is strange," agreed Eragon.

Brom ducked under a low-hanging branch. "Did you use any of your powers while we were in Daret?"

"There was no reason to."

"Wrong," corrected Brom. "You could have sensed Trevor's intentions. Even with my limited abilities, I was able to do that. If the villagers had been bent on killing us, I wouldn't have just sat there. However, I felt there was a reasonable chance of talking our way out of there, which is what I did."

"How could I know what Trevor was thinking?" asked Eragon. "Am I supposed to be able to see into people's minds?"

"Come now," chided Brom, "you should know the answer to that. You could have discovered Trevor's purpose in the same way that you communicate with Cadoc or Saphira. The minds of men are not so different from a dragon's or horse's. It's a simple thing to do, but it's a power you must use sparingly and with great caution. A person's mind is his last sanctuary. You must never violate it unless circumstances

force you to. The Riders had very strict rules regarding this. If they were broken without due cause, the punishment was severe."

"And you can do this even though you aren't a Rider?" asked Eragon.

"As I said before, with the right instruction anyone can talk with their minds, but with differing amounts of success. Whether it's magic, though, is hard to tell. Magical abilities will certainly trigger the talent —or becoming linked with a dragon—but I've known plenty who learned it on their own. Think about it: you can communicate with any sentient being, though the contact may not be very clear. You could spend the entire day listening to a bird's thoughts or understanding how an earthworm feels during a rainstorm. But I've never found birds very interesting. I suggest starting with a cat; they have unusual personalities."

Eragon twisted Cadoc's reins in his hands, considering the implications of what Brom had said. "But if I can get into someone's head, doesn't that mean that others can do the same to me? How do I know if someone's prying in my mind? Is there a way to stop that?" *How do I know if Brom can tell what I'm thinking right now?*

"Why, yes. Hasn't Saphira ever blocked you from her mind?"

"Occasionally," admitted Eragon. "When she took me into the Spine, I couldn't talk to her at all. It wasn't that she was ignoring me; I don't think she could even hear me. There were walls around her mind that I couldn't get through."

Brom worked on his bandage for a moment, shifting it higher on his arm. "Only a few people can tell if someone is in their mind, and of those, only a handful could stop you from entering. It's a matter of training and of how you think. Because of your magical power, you'll always know if someone is in your mind. Once you do, blocking them is a simple matter of concentrating on one thing to the exclusion of all else. For instance, if you only think about a brick wall, that's all the enemy will find in your mind. However, it takes a huge amount of energy and discipline to block someone for any length of time. If you're distracted by even the slightest thing, your wall will waver and your opponent will slip in through the weakness."

"How can I learn to do this?" asked Eragon.

"There is only one thing for it: practice, practice, and yet more practice. Picture something in your mind and hold it there to the exclusion of all else for as long as you can. It is a very advanced ability; only a handful ever master it," said Brom.

"I don't need perfection, just safety." *If I can get into someone's mind, can I change how he thinks? Every time I learn something new about magic, I grow more wary of it.*

When they reached Saphira, she startled them by thrusting her head

at them. The horses backstepped nervously. Saphira looked Eragon over carefully and gave a low hiss. Her eyes were flinty. Eragon threw a concerned look at Brom—he had never seen Saphira this angry—then asked, *What's wrong?*

You, she growled. *You are the problem.*

Eragon frowned and got off Cadoc. As soon as his feet touched the ground, Saphira swept his legs out from under him with her tail and pinned him with her talons. "What are you doing?" he yelled, struggling to get up, but she was too strong for him. Brom watched attentively from Snowfire.

Saphira swung her head over Eragon until they were eye to eye. He squirmed under her unwavering glare. *You! Every time you leave my sight you get into trouble. You're like a new hatchling, sticking your nose into everything. And what happens when you stick it into something that bites back? How will you survive then? I cannot help you when I'm miles away. I've stayed hidden so that no one would see me, but no longer! Not when it may cost you your life.*

I can understand why you're upset, said Eragon, *but I'm much older than you and can take care of myself. If anything, you're the one who needs to be protected.*

She snarled and snapped her teeth by his ear. *Do you really believe that?* she asked. *Tomorrow you will ride me—not that pitiful deer-animal you call a horse—or else I will carry you in my claws. Are you a Dragon Rider or not? Don't you care for me?*

The question burned in Eragon, and he dropped his gaze. He knew she was right, but he was scared of riding her. Their flights had been the most painful ordeal he had ever endured.

"Well?" demanded Brom.

"She wants me to ride her tomorrow," said Eragon lamely.

Brom considered it with twinkling eyes. "Well, you have the saddle. I suppose that if the two of you stay out of sight, it won't be a problem." Saphira switched her gaze to him, then returned it to Eragon.

"But what if you're attacked or there's an accident? I won't be able to get there in time and—"

Saphira pressed harder on his chest, stopping his words. *Exactly my point, little one.*

Brom seemed to hide a smile. "It's worth the risk. You need to learn how to ride her anyway. Think about it this way: with you flying ahead and looking at the ground, you'll be able to spot any traps, ambushes, or other unwelcome surprises."

Eragon looked back at Saphira and said, *Okay, I'll do it. But let me up.*

Give me your word.

Is that really necessary? he demanded. She blinked. *Very well. I give you my word that I will fly with you tomorrow. Satisfied?*

I am content.

Saphira let him up and, with a push of her legs, took off. A small shiver ran through Eragon as he watched her twist through the air. Grumbling, he returned to Cadoc and followed Brom.

It was nearly sundown when they made camp. As usual, Eragon dueled with Brom before dinner. In the midst of the fight, Eragon delivered such a powerful blow that he snapped both of their sticks like twigs. The pieces whistled into the darkness in a cloud of splintered fragments. Brom tossed what remained of his stick into the fire and said, "We're done with these; throw yours in as well. You have learned well, but we've gone as far as we can with branches. There is nothing more you can gain from them. It is time for you to use the blade." He removed Zar'roc from Eragon's bag and gave it to him.

"We'll cut each other to ribbons," protested Eragon.

"Not so. Again you forget magic," said Brom. He held up his sword and turned it so that firelight glinted off the edge. He put a finger on either side of the blade and focused intensely, deepening the lines on his forehead. For a moment nothing happened, then he uttered, "Gëuloth du knífr!" and a small red spark jumped between his fingers. As it flickered back and forth, he ran his fingers down the length of the sword. Then he twirled it and did the same thing on the other side. The spark vanished the moment his fingers left the metal.

Brom held his hand out, palm up, and slashed it with the sword. Eragon jumped forward but was too slow to stop him. He was astonished when Brom raised his unharmed hand with a smile. "What did you do?" asked Eragon.

"Feel the edge," said Brom. Eragon touched it and felt an invisible surface under his fingers. The barrier was about a quarter inch wide and very slippery. "Now do the same on Zar'roc," instructed Brom. "Your block will be a bit different than mine, but it should accomplish the same thing."

He told Eragon how to pronounce the words and coached him through the process. It took Eragon a few tries, but he soon had Zar'roc's edge protected. Confident, he took his fighting stance. Before they started, Brom admonished, "These swords won't cut us, but they can still break bones. I would prefer to avoid that, so don't flail around like you normally do. A blow to the neck could prove fatal."

Eragon nodded, then struck without warning. Sparks flew off his blade, and the clash of metal filled their campsite as Brom parried. The sword felt slow and heavy to Eragon after fighting with sticks for so long. Unable to move Zar'roc fast enough, he received a sharp rap

on his knee.

They both had large welts when they stopped, Eragon more so than Brom. He marveled that Zar'roc had not been scratched or dented by the vigorous pounding it had received.

The next morning Eragon woke with stiff limbs and purple bruises. He saw Brom carry the saddle to Saphira and tried to quell his uneasiness. By the time breakfast was ready, Brom had strapped the saddle onto Saphira and hung Eragon's bags from it.

When his bowl was empty, Eragon silently picked up his bow and went to Saphira. Brom said, "Now remember, grip with your knees, guide her with your thoughts, and stay as flat as you can on her back. Nothing will go wrong if you don't panic." Eragon nodded, sliding his unstrung bow into its leather tube, and Brom boosted him into the saddle.

Saphira waited impatiently while Eragon tightened the bands around his legs. *Are you ready?* she asked.

He sucked in the fresh morning air. *No, but let's do it!* She agreed enthusiastically. He braced himself as she crouched. Her powerful legs surged and the air whipped past him, snatching his breath away. With three smooth strokes of her wings, she was in the sky, climbing rapidly.

The last time Eragon had ridden Saphira, every flap of her wings had been strained. Now she flew steadily and effortlessly. He clenched his arms around her neck as she turned on edge, banking. The river shrank to a wispy gray line beneath them. Clouds floated around them.

When they leveled off high above the plains, the trees below were no more than specks. The air was thin, chilly, and perfectly clear. "This is wonderfu—" His words were lost as Saphira tilted and rolled completely around. The ground spun in a dizzying circle, and vertigo clutched Eragon. "Don't do that!" he cried. "I feel like I'm going to fall off."

You must become accustomed to it. If I'm attacked in the air, that's one of the simplest maneuvers I will do, she replied. He could think of no rebuttal, so he concentrated on controlling his stomach. Saphira angled into a shallow dive and slowly approached the ground.

Although Eragon's stomach lurched with every wobble, he began to enjoy himself. He relaxed his arms a bit and stretched his neck back, taking in the scenery. Saphira let him enjoy the sights awhile, then said, *Let me show you what flying is really like*.

How? he asked.

Relax and do not be afraid, she said.

Her mind tugged at his, pulling him away from his body. Eragon

fought for a moment, then surrendered control. His vision blurred, and he found himself looking through Saphira's eyes. Everything was distorted: colors had weird, exotic tints; blues were more prominent now, while greens and reds were subdued. Eragon tried to turn his head and body but could not. He felt like a ghost who had slipped out of the ether.

Pure joy radiated from Saphira as she climbed into the sky. She loved this freedom to go anywhere. When they were high above the ground, she looked back at Eragon. He saw himself as she did, hanging on to her with a blank look. He could feel her body strain against the air, using updrafts to rise. All her muscles were like his own. He felt her tail swinging through the air like a giant rudder to correct her course. It surprised him how much she depended on it.

Their connection grew stronger until there was no distinction between their identities. They clasped their wings together and dived straight down, like a spear thrown from on high. No terror of falling touched Eragon, engulfed as he was in Saphira's exhilaration. The air rushed past their face. Their tail whipped in the air, and their joined minds reveled in the experience.

Even as they plummeted toward the ground, there was no fear of collision. They snapped open their wings at just the right moment, pulling out of the dive with their combined strength. Slanting toward the sky, they shot up and continued back over into a giant loop.

As they leveled out, their minds began to diverge, becoming distinct personalities again. For a split second, Eragon felt both his body and Saphira's. Then his vision blurred and he again sat on her back. He gasped and collapsed on the saddle. It was minutes before his heart stopped hammering and his breathing calmed. Once he had recovered, he exclaimed, *That was incredible! How can you bear to land when you enjoy flying so much?*

I must eat, she said with some amusement. *But I am glad that you took pleasure in it.*

Those are spare words for such an experience. I'm sorry I haven't flown with you more; I never thought it could be like that. Do you always see so much blue?

It is the way I am. We will fly together more often now?

Yes! Every chance we get.

Good, she replied in a contented tone.

They exchanged many thoughts as she flew, talking as they had not for weeks. Saphira showed Eragon how she used hills and trees to hide and how she could conceal herself in the shadow of a cloud. They scouted the trail for Brom, which proved to be more arduous than Eragon expected. They could not see the path unless Saphira flew very close to it, in which case she risked being detected.

Near midday, an annoying buzz filled Eragon's ears, and he became aware of a strange pressure on his mind. He shook his head, trying to get rid of it, but the tension only grew stronger. Brom's words about how people could break into others' minds flashed through Eragon's head, and he frantically tried to clear his thoughts. He concentrated on one of Saphira's scales and forced himself to ignore everything else. The pressure faded for a moment and then returned, greater than ever. A sudden gust rocked Saphira, and Eragon's concentration slipped. Before he could marshal any defenses, the force broke through. But instead of the invasive presence of another mind, there were only the words, *What do you think you're doing? Get down here. I found something important.*

Brom? queried Eragon.

Yes, the old man said irritably. *Now get that oversized lizard of yours to land. I'm here.*… He sent a picture of his location. Eragon quickly told Saphira where to go, and she banked toward the river below. Meanwhile, he strung his bow and drew several arrows.

If there's trouble, I'll be ready for it.

As will I, said Saphira.

When they reached Brom, Eragon saw him standing in a clearing, waving his arms. Saphira landed, and Eragon jumped off her and looked for danger. The horses were tied to a tree on the edge of the clearing, but otherwise Brom was alone. Eragon trotted over and asked, "What's wrong?"

Brom scratched his chin and muttered a string of curses. "Don't ever block me out like that again. It's hard enough for me to reach you without having to fight to make myself heard."

"Sorry."

He snorted. "I was farther down the river when I noticed that the Ra'zac's tracks had ceased. I backtracked until I found where they had disappeared. Look at the ground and tell me what you see."

Eragon knelt and examined the dirt and found a confusion of impressions that were difficult to decipher. Numerous Ra'zac footprints overlapped each other. Eragon guessed that the tracks were only a few days old. Superimposed over them were long, thick gouges torn into the ground. They looked familiar, but Eragon could not say why.

He stood, shaking his head. "I don't have any idea what …" Then his eyes fell on Saphira and he realized what had made the gouges. Every time she took off, her back claws dug into the ground and ripped it in the same manner. "This doesn't make any sense, but the only thing I can think of is that the Ra'zac flew off on dragons. Or else they got onto giant birds and disappeared into the heavens. Tell me you have a better explanation."

Brom shrugged. “I’ve heard reports of the Ra’zac moving from place to place with incredible speed, but this is the first evidence I’ve had of it. It will be almost impossible to find them if they have flying steeds. They aren’t dragons—I know that much. A dragon would never consent to bear a Ra’zac.”

“What do we do? Saphira can’t track them through the sky. Even if she could, we would leave you far behind.”

“There’s no easy solution to this riddle,” said Brom. “Let’s have lunch while we think on it. Perhaps inspiration will strike us while we eat.” Eragon glumly went to his bags for food. They ate in silence, staring at the empty sky.

Once again Eragon thought of home and wondered what Roran was doing. A vision of the burnt farm appeared before him and grief threatened to overwhelm him. *What will I do if we can’t find the Ra’zac? What is my purpose then? I could return to Carvahall*—he plucked a twig from the ground and snapped it between two fingers—*or just travel with Brom and continue my training*. Eragon stared out at the plains, hoping to quiet his thoughts.

When Brom finished eating, he stood and threw back his hood. “I have considered every trick I know, every word of power within my grasp, and all the skills we have, but I still don’t see how we can find the Ra’zac.” Eragon slumped against Saphira in despair. “Saphira could show herself at some town. That would draw the Ra’zac like flies to honey. But it would be an extremely risky thing to attempt. The Ra’zac would bring soldiers with them, and the king might be interested enough to come himself, which would spell certain death for you and me.”

“So what now?” asked Eragon, throwing his hands up. *Do you have any ideas, Saphira?*

No.

“That’s up to you,” said Brom. “This is your crusade.”

Eragon ground his teeth angrily and stalked away from Brom and Saphira. Just as he was about to enter the trees, his foot struck something hard. Lying on the ground was a metal flask with a leather strap just long enough to hang off someone’s shoulder. A silver insignia Eragon recognized as the Ra’zac’s symbol was wrought into it.

Excited, he picked up the flask and unscrewed its cap. A cloying smell filled the air—the same one he had noticed when he found Garrow in the wreckage of their house. He tilted the flask, and a drop of clear, shiny liquid fell on his finger. Instantly Eragon’s finger burned as if it were on fire. He yelped and scrubbed his hand on the ground. After a moment the pain subsided to a dull throbbing. A patch of skin had been eaten away.

Grimacing, he jogged back to Brom. “Look what I found.” Brom

took the flask and examined it, then poured a bit of the liquid into the cap. Eragon started to warn him, “Watch out, it’ll burn—”

“My skin, I know,” said Brom. “And I suppose you went ahead and poured it all over your hand. Your finger? Well, at least you showed sense enough not to drink it. Only a puddle would have been left of you.”

“What is it?” asked Eragon.

“Oil from the petals of the Seithr plant, which grows on a small island in the frigid northern seas. In its natural state, the oil is used for preserving pearls—it makes them lustrous and strong. But when specific words are spoken over the oil, along with a blood sacrifice, it gains the property to eat any flesh. That alone wouldn’t make it special—there are plenty of acids that can dissolve sinew and bone—except for the fact that it leaves everything else untouched. You can dip anything into the oil and pull it out unharmed, unless it was once part of an animal or human. This has made it a weapon of choice for torture and assassination. It can be stored in wood, slathered on the point of a spear, or dripped onto sheets so that the next person to touch them will be burned. There are myriad uses for it, limited only by your ingenuity. Any injury caused by it is always slow to heal. It’s rather rare and expensive, especially this converted form.”

Eragon remembered the terrible burns that had covered Garrow. *That’s what they used on him*, he realized with horror. “I wonder why the Ra’zac left it behind if it’s so valuable.”

“It must have slipped off when they flew away.”

“But why didn’t they come back for it? I doubt that the king will be pleased that they lost it.”

“No, he won’t,” said Brom, “but he would be even more displeased if they delayed bringing him news of you. In fact, if the Ra’zac have reached him by now, you can be sure that the king has learned your name. And that means we will have to be much more careful when we go into towns. There will be notices and alerts about you posted throughout the Empire.”

Eragon paused to think. “This oil, how rare is it exactly?”

“Like diamonds in a pig trough,” said Brom. He amended himself after a second, “Actually, the normal oil is used by jewelers, but only those who can afford it.”

“So there are people who trade in it?”

“Perhaps one, maybe two.”

“Good,” said Eragon. “Now, do the cities along the coast keep shipping records?”

Brom’s eyes brightened. “Of course they do. If we could get to those records, they would tell us who brought the oil south and where it went from there.”

“And the record of the Empire’s purchase will tell us where the Ra’zac live!” concluded Eragon. “I don’t know how many people can afford this oil, but it shouldn’t be hard to figure out which ones aren’t working for the Empire.”

“Genius!” exclaimed Brom, smiling. “I wish I had thought of this years ago; it would have saved me many headaches. The coast is dotted with numerous cities and towns where ships can land. I suppose that Teirm would be the place to start, as it controls most of the trade.” Brom paused. “The last I heard, my old friend Jeod lives there. We haven’t seen each other for many years, but he might be willing to help us. And because he’s a merchant, it’s possible that he has access to those records.”

“How do we get to Teirm?”

“We’ll have to go southwest until we reach a high pass in the Spine. Once on the other side, we can head up the coast to Teirm,” said Brom. A gentle wind pulled at his hair.

“Can we reach the pass within a week?”

“Easily. If we angle away from the Ninor and to our right, we might be able to see the mountains by tomorrow.”

Eragon went to Saphira and mounted her. “I’ll see you at dinner, then.” When they were at a good height, he said, *I’m going to ride Cadoc tomorrow. Before you protest, know that I am only doing it because I want to talk with Brom.*

You should ride with him every other day. That way you can still receive your instruction, and I will have time to hunt.

You won’t be troubled by it?

It is necessary.

When they landed for the day, he was pleased to discover that his legs did not hurt. The saddle had protected him well from Saphira’s scales.

Eragon and Brom had their nightly fight, but it lacked energy, as both were preoccupied with the day’s events. By the time they finished, Eragon’s arms burned from Zar’roc’s unaccustomed weight.

The next day while they were riding, Eragon asked Brom, “What is the sea like?”

“You must have heard it described before,” said Brom.

“Yes, but what is it really like?”

Brom’s eyes grew hazy, as if he looked upon some hidden scene. “The sea is emotion incarnate. It loves, hates, and weeps. It defies all attempts to capture it with words and rejects all shackles. No matter what you say about it, there is always that which you can’t. Do you remember what I told you about how the elves came over the sea?”

“Yes.”

“Though they live far from the coast, they retain a great fascination and passion for the ocean. The sound of crashing waves, the smell of salt air, it affects them deeply and has inspired many of their loveliest songs. There is one that tells of this love, if you want to hear it.”

“I would,” said Eragon, interested.

Brom cleared his throat and said, “I will translate it from the ancient language as best I can. It won’t be perfect, but perhaps it will give you an idea of how the original sounds.” He pulled Snowfire to a stop and closed his eyes. He was silent for a while, then chanted softly:

O liquid temptress ’neath the azure sky,

Your gilded expanse calls me, calls me.

For I would sail ever on,

Were it not for the elven maid,

Who calls me, calls me.

She binds my heart with a lily-white tie,

Never to be broken, save by the sea,

Ever to be torn twixt the trees and the waves.

The words echoed hauntingly in Eragon’s head. “There is much more to that song, the ‘Du Silbena Datia.’ I have only recited one of its verses. It tells the sad tale of two lovers, Acallamh and Nuada, who were separated by longing for the sea. The elves find great meaning in the story.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Eragon simply.

The Spine was a faint outline on the horizon when they halted that

evening.

When they arrived at the Spine's foothills, they turned and followed the mountains south. Eragon was glad to be near the mountains again; they placed comforting boundaries on the world. Three days later they came to a wide road rutted by wagon wheels. "This is the main road between the capital, Urû'baen, and Teirm," said Brom. "It's widely used and a favorite route for merchants. We have to be more cautious. This isn't the busiest time of year, but a few people are bound to be using the road."

Days passed quickly as they continued to trek along the Spine, searching for the mountain pass. Eragon could not complain of boredom. When not learning the elven language, he was either learning how to care for Saphira or practicing magic. Eragon also learned how to kill game with magic, which saved them time hunting. He would hold a small rock on his hand and shoot it at his prey. It was impossible to miss. The results of his efforts roasted over the fire each night. And after dinner, Brom and Eragon would spar with swords and, occasionally, fists.

The long days and strenuous work stripped Eragon's body of excess fat. His arms became corded, and his tanned skin rippled with lean muscles. *Everything about me is turning hard,* he thought dryly.

When they finally reached the pass, Eragon saw that a river rushed out of it and cut across the road. "This is the Toark," explained Brom. "We'll follow it all the way to the sea."

"How can we," laughed Eragon, "if it flows out of the Spine in *this* direction? It won't end up in the ocean unless it doubles back on itself."

Brom twisted the ring on his finger. "Because in the middle of the mountains rests the Woadark Lake. A river flows from each end of it and both are called the Toark. We see the eastward one now. It runs to the south and winds through the brush until it joins Leona Lake. The other one goes to the sea."

After two days in the Spine, they came upon a rock ledge from which they could see clearly out of the mountains. Eragon noticed how the land flattened in the distance, and he groaned at the leagues they still had to traverse. Brom pointed. "Down there and to the north lies Teirm. It is an old city. Some say it's where the elves first landed in Alagaësia. Its citadel has never fallen, nor have its warriors ever been defeated." He spurred Snowfire forward and left the ledge.

It took them until noon the next day to descend through the foothills and arrive at the other side of the Spine, where the forested land quickly leveled out. Without the mountains to hide behind, Saphira flew close to the ground, using every hollow and dip in the land to

conceal herself.

Beyond the forest, they noticed a change. The countryside was covered with soft turf and heather that their feet sank into. Moss clung to every stone and branch and lined the streams that laced the ground. Pools of mud pocked the road where horses had trampled the dirt. Before long both Brom and Eragon were splattered with grime.

“Why is everything green?” asked Eragon. “Don’t they have winter here?”

“Yes, but the season is mild. Mist and fog roll in from the sea and keep everything alive. Some find it to their liking, but to me it’s dreary and depressing.”

When evening fell, they set up camp in the driest spot they could find. As they ate, Brom commented, “You should continue to ride Cadoc until we reach Teirm. It’s likely that we’ll meet other travelers now that we are out of the Spine, and it will be better if you are with me. An old man traveling alone will raise suspicion. With you at my side, no one will ask questions. Besides, I don’t want to show up at the city and have someone who saw me on the trail wondering where you suddenly came from.”

“Will we use our own names?” asked Eragon.

Brom thought about it. “We won’t be able to deceive Jeod. He already knows my name, and I think I trust him with yours. But to everyone else, I will be Neal and you will be my nephew Evan. If our tongues slip and give us away, it probably won’t make a difference, but I don’t want our names in anyone’s heads. People have an annoying habit of remembering things they shouldn’t.”

A Taste of Teirm

After two days of traveling north toward the ocean, Saphira sighted Teirm. A heavy fog clung to the ground, obscuring Brom's and Eragon's sight until a breeze from the west blew the mist away. Eragon gaped as Teirm was suddenly revealed before them, nestled by the edge of the shimmering sea, where proud ships were docked with furled sails. The surf's dull thunder could be heard in the distance.

The city was contained behind a white wall—a hundred feet tall and thirty feet thick—with rows of rectangular arrow slits lining it and a walkway on top for soldiers and watchmen. The wall's smooth surface was broken by two iron portcullises, one facing the western sea, the other opening south to the road. Above the wall—and set against its northeast section—rose a huge citadel built of giant stones and turrets. In the highest tower, a lighthouse lantern gleamed brilliantly. The castle was the only thing visible over the fortifications.

Soldiers guarded the southern gate but held their pikes carelessly. "This is our first test," said Brom. "Let's hope they haven't received reports of us from the Empire and won't detain us. Whatever happens, don't panic or act suspiciously."

Eragon told Saphira, *You should land somewhere now and hide. We're going in.*

Sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. Again, she said sourly.

I know. But Brom and I do have some advantages most people don't. We'll be all right.

If anything happens, I'm going to pin you to my back and never let you off.

I love you too.

Then I will bind you all the tighter.

Eragon and Brom rode toward the gate, trying to appear casual. A yellow pennant bearing the outline of a roaring lion and an arm holding a lily blossom waved over the entrance. As they neared the wall, Eragon asked in amazement, "How big is this place?"

"Larger than any city you have ever seen," said Brom.

At the entrance to Teirm, the guards stood straighter and blocked the gate with their pikes. "Wha's yer name?" asked one of them in a bored tone.

"I'm called Neal," said Brom in a wheezy voice, slouching to one side, an expression of happy idiocy on his face.

"And who's th' other one?" asked the guard.

"Well, I wus gettin' to that. This'ed be m'nephew Evan. He's

m'sister's boy, not a …"

The guard nodded impatiently. "Yeah, yeah. And yer business here?"

"He's visitin' an old friend," supplied Eragon, dropping his voice into a thick accent. "I'm along t' make sure he don't get lost, if y' get m'meaning. He ain't as young as he used to be—had a bit too much sun when he was young'r. Touch o' the brain fever, y' know." Brom bobbed his head pleasantly.

"Right. Go on through," said the guard, waving his hand and dropping the pike. "Just make sure he doesn't cause any trouble."

"Oh, he won't," promised Eragon. He urged Cadoc forward, and they rode into Teirm. The cobblestone street clacked under the horses' hooves.

Once they were away from the guards, Brom sat up and growled, "Touch of brain fever, eh?"

"I couldn't let you have all the fun," teased Eragon.

Brom harrumphed and looked away.

The houses were grim and foreboding. Small, deep windows let in only sparse rays of light. Narrow doors were recessed into the buildings. The tops of the roofs were flat—except for metal railings—and all were covered with slate shingles. Eragon noticed that the houses closest to Teirm's outer wall were no more than one story, but the buildings got progressively higher as they went in. Those next to the citadel were tallest of all, though insignificant compared to the fortress.

"This place looks ready for war," said Eragon.

Brom nodded. "Teirm has a history of being attacked by pirates, Urgals, and other enemies. It has long been a center of commerce. There will always be conflict where riches gather in such abundance. The people here have been forced to take extraordinary measures to keep themselves from being overrun. It also helps that Galbatorix gives them soldiers to defend their city."

"Why are some houses higher than others?"

"Look at the citadel," said Brom, pointing. "It has an unobstructed view of Teirm. If the outer wall were breached, archers would be posted on all the roofs. Because the houses in the front, by the outer wall, are lower, the men farther back could shoot over them without fear of hitting their comrades. Also, if the enemy were to capture those houses and put their own archers on them, it would be an easy matter to shoot them down."

"I've never seen a city planned like this," said Eragon in wonder.

"Yes, but it was only done after Teirm was nearly burned down by a pirate raid," commented Brom. As they continued up the street, people gave them searching looks, but there was not an undue amount

of interest.

Compared to our reception at Daret, we've been welcomed with open arms. Perhaps Teirm has escaped notice by the Urgals, thought Eragon. He changed his opinion when a large man shouldered past them, a sword hanging from his waist. There were other, subtler signs of adverse times: no children played in the streets, people bore hard expressions, and many houses were deserted, with weeds growing from cracks in their stone-covered yards. "It looks like they've had trouble," said Eragon.

"The same as everywhere else," said Brom grimly. "We have to find Jeod." They led their horses across the street to a tavern and tied them to the hitching post. "The Green Chestnut … wonderful," muttered Brom, looking at the battered sign above them as he and Eragon entered the building.

The dingy room felt unsafe. A fire smoldered in the fireplace, yet no one bothered to throw more wood on it. A few lonely people in the corners nursed their drinks with sullen expressions. A man missing two fingers sat at a far table, eyeing his twitching stumps. The bartender had a cynical twist to his lips and held a glass in his hand that he kept polishing, even though it was broken.

Brom leaned against the bar and asked, "Do you know where we can find a man called Jeod?" Eragon stood at his side, fiddling with the tip of his bow by his waist. It was slung across his back, but right then he wished that it were in his hands.

The bartender said in an overly loud voice, "Now, why would I know something like that? Do you think I keep track of the mangy louts in this forsaken place?" Eragon winced as all eyes turned toward them.

Brom kept talking smoothly. "Could you be enticed to remember?" He slid some coins onto the bar.

The man brightened and put his glass down. "Could be," he replied, lowering his voice, "but my memory takes a great deal of prodding." Brom's face soured, but he slid more coins onto the bar. The bartender sucked on one side of his cheek undecidedly. "All right," he finally said, and reached for the coins.

Before he touched them, the man missing two fingers called out from his table, "Gareth, what in th' blazes do you think you're doing? Anyone on the street could tell them where Jeod lives. What are you charging them for?"

Brom swept the coins back into his purse. Gareth shot a venomous look at the man at the table, then turned his back on them and picked up the glass again. Brom went to the stranger and said, "Thanks. The name's Neal. This is Evan."

The man raised his mug to them. "Martin, and of course you met

Gareth." His voice was deep and rough. Martin gestured at some empty chairs. "Go ahead and sit down. I don't mind." Eragon took a chair and arranged it so his back was to the wall and he faced the door. Martin raised an eyebrow, but made no comment.

"You just saved me a few crowns," said Brom.

"My pleasure. Can't blame Gareth, though—business hasn't been doing so well lately." Martin scratched his chin. "Jeod lives on the west side of town, right next to Angela, the herbalist. Do you have business with him?"

"Of a sort," said Brom.

"Well, he won't be interested in buying anything; he just lost another ship a few days ago."

Brom latched onto the news with interest. "What happened? It wasn't Urgals, was it?"

"No," said Martin. "They've left the area. No one's seen 'em in almost a year. It seems they've all gone south and east. But they aren't the problem. See, most of our business is through sea trade, as I'm sure you know. Well," he stopped to drink from his mug, "starting several months ago, someone's been attacking our ships. It's not the usual piracy, because only ships that carry the goods of certain merchants are attacked. Jeod's one of 'em. It's gotten so bad that no captain will accept those merchants' goods, which makes life difficult around here. Especially because some of 'em run the largest shipping businesses in the Empire. They're being forced to send goods by land. It's driven costs painfully high, and their caravans don't always make it."

"Do you have any idea who's responsible? There must be witnesses," said Brom.

Martin shook his head. "No one survives the attacks. Ships go out, then disappear; they're never seen again." He leaned toward them and said in a confidential tone, "The sailors are saying that it's magic." He nodded and winked, then leaned back.

Brom seemed worried by his words. "What do you think?"

Martin shrugged carelessly. "I don't know. And I don't think I will unless I'm unfortunate enough to be on one of those captured ships."

"Are you a sailor?" asked Eragon.

"No," snorted Martin. "Do I look like one? The captains hire me to defend their ships against pirates. And those thieving scum haven't been very active lately. Still, it's a good job."

"But a dangerous one," said Brom. Martin shrugged again and downed the last of his beer. Brom and Eragon took their leave and headed to the west side of the city, a nicer section of Teirm. The houses were clean, ornate, and large. The people in the streets wore expensive finery and walked with authority. Eragon felt conspicuous

and out of place.

The herbalist's shop had a cheery sign and was easy to find. A short, curly-haired woman sat by the door. She was holding a frog in one hand and writing with the other. Eragon assumed that she was Angela, the herbalist. On either side of the store was a house. "Which one do you think is his?" he asked.

Brom deliberated, then said, "Let's find out." He approached the woman and asked politely, "Could you tell us which house Jeod lives in?"

"I could." She continued writing.

"Will you tell us?"

"Yes." She fell silent, but her pen scribbled faster than ever. The frog on her hand croaked and looked at them with baleful eyes. Brom and Eragon waited uncomfortably, but she said no more. Eragon was about to blurt something out when Angela looked up. "Of course I'll tell you! All you have to do is ask. Your first question was whether or not I *could* tell you, and the second was if I *would* tell you. But you never actually put the question to me."

"Then let me ask properly," said Brom with a smile. "Which house is Jeod's? And why are you holding a frog?"

"Now we're getting somewhere," she bantered. "Jeod is on the right. And as for the frog, he's actually a toad. I'm trying to prove that toads don't exist—that there are only frogs."

"How can toads not exist if you have one on your hand right now?" interrupted Eragon. "Besides, what good will it do, proving that there are only frogs?"

The woman shook her head vigorously, dark curls bouncing. "No, no, you don't understand. If I prove toads don't exist, then this is a frog and never was a toad. Therefore, the toad you see now doesn't exist. And," she raised a small finger, "if I can prove there are only frogs, then toads won't be able to do anything bad—like make teeth fall out, cause warts, and poison or kill people. Also, witches won't be able to use any of their evil spells because, of course, there won't be any toads around."

"I see," said Brom delicately. "It sounds interesting, and I would like to hear more, but we have to meet Jeod."

"Of course," she said, waving her hand and returning to her writing.

Once they were out of the herbalist's hearing, Eragon said, "She's crazy!"

"It's possible," said Brom, "but you never know. She might discover

something useful, so don't criticize. Who knows, toads might really be frogs!"

"And my shoes are made of gold," retorted Eragon.

They stopped before a door with a wrought-iron knocker and marble doorstep. Brom banged three times. No one answered. Eragon felt slightly foolish. "Maybe this is the wrong house. Let's try the other one," he said. Brom ignored him and knocked again, pounding loudly.

Again no one answered. Eragon turned away in exasperation, then heard someone run to the door. A young woman with a pale complexion and light blond hair cracked it open. Her eyes were puffy; it looked like she had been crying, but her voice was perfectly steady. "Yes, what do you want?"

"Does Jeod live here?" asked Brom kindly.

The woman dipped her head a little. "Yes, he is my husband. Is he expecting you?" She opened the door no farther.

"No, but we need to talk with him," said Brom.

"He is very busy."

"We have traveled far. It's very important that we see him."

Her face hardened. "He is busy."

Brom bristled, but his voice stayed pleasant. "Since he is unavailable, would you please give him a message?" Her mouth twitched, but she consented. "Tell him that a friend from Gil'ead is waiting outside."

The woman seemed suspicious, but said, "Very well." She closed the door abruptly. Eragon heard her footsteps recede.

"That wasn't very polite." he commented.

"Keep your opinions to yourself," snapped Brom. "And don't say anything. Let me do the talking." He crossed his arms and tapped his fingers. Eragon clamped his mouth shut and looked away.

The door suddenly flew open, and a tall man burst out of the house. His expensive clothes were rumpled, his gray hair wispy, and he had a mournful face with short eyebrows. A long scar stretched across his scalp to his temple.

At the sight of them, his eyes grew wide, and he sagged against the doorframe, speechless. His mouth opened and closed several times like a gasping fish. He asked softly, in an incredulous voice, "Brom …?"

Brom put a finger to his lips and reached forward, clasping the man's arm. "It's good to see you, Jeod! I'm glad that memory has not failed you, but don't use that name. It would be unfortunate if anyone knew I was here."

Jeod looked around wildly, shock plain on his face. "I thought you were dead," he whispered. "What happened? Why haven't you contacted me before?"

"All things will be explained. Do you have a place where we can

talk safely?"

Jeod hesitated, swinging his gaze between Eragon and Brom, face unreadable. Finally he said, "We can't talk here, but if you wait a moment, I'll take you somewhere we can."

"Fine," said Brom. Jeod nodded and vanished behind the door.

I hope I can learn something of Brom's past, thought Eragon.

There was a rapier at Jeod's side when he reappeared. An embroidered jacket hung loosely on his shoulders, matched by a plumed hat. Brom cast a critical eye at the finery, and Jeod shrugged selfconsciously.

He took them through Teirm toward the citadel. Eragon led the horses behind the two men. Jeod gestured at their destination. "Risthart, the lord of Teirm, has decreed that all the business owners must have their headquarters in his castle. Even though most of us conduct our business elsewhere, we still have to rent rooms there. It's nonsense, but we abide by it anyway to keep him calm. We'll be free of eavesdroppers in there; the walls are thick."

They went through the fortress's main gate and into the keep. Jeod strode to a side door and pointed to an iron ring. "You can tie the horses there. No one will bother them." When Snowfire and Cadoc were safely tethered, he opened the door with an iron key and let them inside.

Within was a long, empty hallway lit by torches set into the walls. Eragon was surprised by how cold and damp it was. When he touched the wall, his fingers slid over a layer of slime. He shivered.

Jeod snatched a torch from its bracket and led them down the hall. They stopped before a heavy, wooden door. He unlocked it and ushered them into a room dominated by a bearskin rug laden with stuffed chairs. Bookshelves stacked with leather-bound tomes covered the walls.

Jeod piled wood in the fireplace, then thrust the torch under it. The fire quickly roared. "You, old man, have some explaining to do."

Brom's face crinkled with a smile. "Who are you calling an old man? The last time I saw you there was no gray in your hair. Now it looks like it's in the final stages of decomposition."

"And you look the same as you did nearly twenty years ago. Time seems to have preserved you as a crotchety old man just to inflict wisdom upon each new generation. Enough of this! Get on with the story. That's always what you were good at," said Jeod impatiently. Eragon's ears pricked up, and he waited eagerly to hear what Brom would say.

Brom relaxed into a chair and pulled out his pipe. He slowly blew a smoke ring that turned green, darted into the fireplace, then flew up the chimney. "Do you remember what we were doing in Gil'ead?"

“Yes, of course,” said Jeod. “That sort of thing is hard to forget.”

“An understatement, but true nevertheless,” said Brom dryly. “When we were … separated, I couldn’t find you. In the midst of the turmoil I stumbled into a small room. There wasn’t anything extraordinary in it—just crates and boxes—but out of curiosity, I rummaged around anyway. Fortune smiled on me that hour, for I found what we had been searching for.” An expression of shock ran over Jeod’s face. “Once it was in my hands, I couldn’t wait for you. At any second I might have been discovered, and all lost. Disguising myself as best I could, I fled the city and ran to the …” Brom hesitated and glanced at Eragon, then said, “ran to our friends. They stored it in a vault, for safekeeping, and made me promise to care for whomever received it. Until the day when my skills would be needed, I had to disappear. No one could know that I was alive—not even you—though it grieved me to pain you unnecessarily. So I went north and hid in Carvahall.”

Eragon clenched his jaw, infuriated that Brom was deliberately keeping him in the dark.

Jeod frowned and asked, “Then our … friends knew that you were alive all along?”

“Yes.”

He sighed. “I suppose the ruse was unavoidable, though I wish they had told me. Isn’t Carvahall farther north, on the other side of the Spine?” Brom inclined his head. For the first time, Jeod inspected Eragon. His gray eyes took in every detail. He raised his eyebrows and said, “I assume, then, that you are fulfilling your duty.”

Brom shook his head. “No, it’s not that simple. It was stolen a while ago—at least that’s what I presume, for I haven’t received word from our friends, and I suspect their messengers were waylaid—so I decided to find out what I could. Eragon happened to be traveling in the same direction. We have stayed together for a time now.”

Jeod looked puzzled. “But if they haven’t sent any messages, how could you know that it was—”

Brom overrode him quickly, saying, “Eragon’s uncle was brutally killed by the Ra’zac. They burned his home and nearly caught him in the process. He deserves revenge, but they have left us without a trail to follow, and we need help finding them.”

Jeod’s face cleared. “I see.… But why have you come here? I don’t know where the Ra’zac might be hiding, and anyone who does won’t tell you.”

Standing, Brom reached into his robe and pulled out the Ra’zac’s flask. He tossed it to Jeod. “There’s Seithr oil in there—the dangerous kind. The Ra’zac were carrying it. They lost it by the trail, and we happened to find it. We need to see Teirm’s shipping records so we can trace the Empire’s purchases of the oil. That should tell us where

the Ra'zac's lair is."

Lines appeared on Jeod's face as he thought. He pointed at the books on the shelves. "Do you see those? They are all records from my business. *One* business. You have gotten yourself into a project that could take months. There is another, greater problem. The records you seek are held in this castle, but only Brand, Risthart's administrator of trade, sees them on a regular basis. Traders such as myself aren't allowed to handle them. They fear that we will falsify the results, thus cheating the Empire of its precious taxes."

"I can deal with that when the time comes," said Brom. "But we need a few days of rest before we can think about proceeding."

Jeod smiled. "It seems that it is my turn to help you. My house is yours, of course. Do you have another name while you are here?"

"Yes," said Brom, "I'm Neal, and the boy is Evan."

"Eragon," said Jeod thoughtfully. "You have a unique name. Few have ever been named after the first Rider. In my life I've read about only three people who were called such." Eragon was startled that Jeod knew the origin of his name.

Brom looked at Eragon. "Could you go check on the horses and make sure they're all right? I don't think I tied Snowfire to the ring tightly enough."

They're trying to hide something from me. The moment I leave they're going to talk about it. Eragon shoved himself out of the chair and left the room, slamming the door shut. Snowfire had not moved; the knot that held him was fine. Scratching the horses' necks, Eragon leaned sullenly against the castle wall.

It's not fair, he complained to himself. *If only I could hear what they are saying.* He jolted upright, electrified. Brom had once taught him some words that would enhance his hearing. *Keen ears aren't exactly what I want, but I should be able to make the words work. After all, look what I could do with* brisingr!

He concentrated intensely and reached for his power. Once it was within his grasp, he said, "Thverr stenr un atra eka hórna!" and imbued the words with his will. As the power rushed out of him, he heard a faint whisper in his ears, but nothing more. Disappointed, he sank back, then started as Jeod said, "—and I've been doing that for almost eight years now."

Eragon looked around. No one was there except for a few guards standing against the far wall of the keep. Grinning, he sat on the courtyard and closed his eyes.

"I never expected you to become a merchant," said Brom. "After all the time you spent in books. And finding the passageway in that manner! What made you take up trading instead of remaining a scholar?"

"After Gil'ead, I didn't have much taste for sitting in musty rooms and reading scrolls. I decided to help Ajihad as best I could, but I'm no warrior. My father was a merchant as well—you may remember that. He helped me get started. However, the bulk of my business is nothing more than a front to get goods into Surda."

"But I take it that things have been going badly," said Brom.

"Yes, none of the shipments have gotten through lately, and Tronjheim is running low on supplies. Somehow the Empire—at least I think it's them—has discovered those of us who have been helping to support Tronjheim. But I'm still not convinced that it's the Empire. No one sees any soldiers. I don't understand it. Perhaps Galbatorix hired mercenaries to harass us."

"I heard that you lost a ship recently."

"The last one I owned," answered Jeod bitterly. "Every man on it was loyal and brave. I doubt I'll ever see them again.… The only option I have left is to send caravans to Surda or Gil'ead—which I know won't get there, no matter how many guards I hire—or charter someone else's ship to carry the goods. But no one will take them now."

"How many merchants have been helping you?" asked Brom.

"Oh, a good number up and down the seaboard. All of them have been plagued by the same troubles. I know what you are thinking; I've pondered it many a night myself, but I cannot bear the thought of a traitor with that much knowledge and power. If there is one, we're all in jeopardy. You should return to Tronjheim."

"And take Eragon there?" interrupted Brom. "They'd tear him apart. It's the worst place he could be right now. Maybe in a few months or, even better, a year. Can you imagine how the dwarves will react? Everyone will be trying to influence him, especially Islanzadí. He and Saphira won't be safe in Tronjheim until I at least get them through tuatha du orothrim."

Dwarves! thought Eragon excitedly. *Where is this Tronjheim? And why did he tell Jeod about Saphira? He shouldn't have done that without asking me!*

"Still, I have a feeling that they are in need of your power and wisdom."

"Wisdom," snorted Brom. "I'm just what you said earlier—a crotchety old man."

"Many would disagree."

"Let them. I've no need to explain myself. No, Ajihad will have to get along without me. What I'm doing now is much more important. But the prospect of a traitor raises troubling questions. I wonder if that's how the Empire knew where to be.…" His voice trailed off.

"And I wonder why I haven't been contacted about this," said Jeod.

"Maybe they tried. But if there's a traitor …" Brom paused. "I have to send word to Ajihad. Do you have a messenger you can trust?"

"I think so," said Jeod. "It depends on where he would have to go."

"I don't know," said Brom. "I've been isolated so long, my contacts have probably died or forgotten me. Could you send him to whoever receives your shipments?"

"Yes, but it'll be risky."

"What isn't these days? How soon can he leave?"

"He can go in the morning. I'll send him to Gil'ead. It will be faster," said Jeod. "What can he take to convince Ajihad the message comes from you?"

"Here, give your man my ring. And tell him that if he loses it, I'll personally tear his liver out. It was given to me by the queen."

"Aren't you cheery," commented Jeod.

Brom grunted. After a long silence he said, "We'd better go out and join Eragon. I get worried when he's alone. That boy has an unnatural propensity for being wherever there's trouble."

"Are you surprised?"

"Not really."

Eragon heard chairs being pushed back. He quickly pulled his mind away and opened his eyes. "What's going on?" he muttered to himself. *Jeod and other traders are in trouble for helping people the Empire doesn't favor. Brom found something in Gil'ead and went to Carvahall to hide. What could be so important that he would let his own friend think he was dead for nearly twenty years? He mentioned a queen—when there aren't any queens in the known kingdoms—and dwarves, who, as he himself told me, disappeared underground long ago*.

He wanted answers! But he would not confront Brom now and risk jeopardizing their mission. No, he would wait until they left Teirm, and then he would persist until the old man explained his secrets. Eragon's thoughts were still whirling when the door opened.

"Were the horses all right?" asked Brom.

"Fine," said Eragon. They untied the horses and left the castle.

As they reentered the main body of Teirm, Brom said, "So, Jeod, you finally got married. And," he winked slyly, "to a lovely young woman. Congratulations."

Jeod did not seem happy with the compliment. He hunched his shoulders and stared down at the street. "Whether congratulations are in order is debatable right now. Helen isn't very happy."

"Why? What does she want?" asked Brom.

"The usual," said Jeod with a resigned shrug. "A good home, happy children, food on the table, and pleasant company. The problem is that she comes from a wealthy family; her father has invested heavily in my business. If I keep suffering these losses, there won't be enough

money for her to live the way she's used to."

Jeod continued, "But please, my troubles are not your troubles. A host should never bother his guests with his own concerns. While you are in my house, I will let nothing more than an over-full stomach disturb you."

"Thank you," said Brom. "We appreciate the hospitality. Our travels have long been without comforts of any kind. Do you happen to know where we could find an inexpensive shop? All this riding has worn out our clothes."

"Of course. That's my job," said Jeod, lightening up. He talked eagerly about prices and stores until his house was in sight. Then he asked, "Would you mind if we went somewhere else to eat? It might be awkward if you came in right now."

"Whatever makes you feel comfortable," said Brom.

Jeod looked relieved. "Thanks. Let's leave your horses in my stable."

They did as he suggested, then followed him to a large tavern. Unlike the Green Chestnut, this one was loud, clean, and full of boisterous people. When the main course arrived—a stuffed suckling pig—Eragon eagerly dug into the meat, but he especially savored the potatoes, carrots, turnips, and sweet apples that accompanied it. It had been a long time since he had eaten much more than wild game.

They lingered over the meal for hours as Brom and Jeod swapped stories. Eragon did not mind. He was warm, a lively tune jangled in the background, and there was more than enough food. The spirited tavern babble fell pleasantly on his ears.

When they finally exited the tavern, the sun was nearing the horizon. "You two go ahead; I have to check on something," Eragon said. He wanted to see Saphira and make sure that she was safely hidden.

Brom agreed absently. "Be careful. Don't take too long."

"Wait," said Jeod. "Are you going outside Teirm?" Eragon hesitated, then reluctantly nodded. "Make sure you're inside the walls before dark. The gates close then, and the guards won't let you back in until morning."

"I won't be late," promised Eragon. He turned around and loped down a side street, toward Teirm's outer wall. Once out of the city, he breathed deeply, enjoying the fresh air. *Saphira!* he called. *Where are you?* She guided him off the road, to the base of a mossy cliff surrounded by maples. He saw her head poke out of the trees on the top and waved. *How am I supposed to get up there?*

If you find a clearing, I'll come down and get you.

No, he said, eyeing the cliff, *that won't be necessary. I'll just climb up*.

It's too dangerous.

And you worry too much. Let me have some fun.

Eragon pulled off his gloves and started climbing. He relished the physical challenge. There were plenty of handholds, so the ascent was easy. He was soon high above the trees. Halfway up, he stopped on a ledge to catch his breath.

Once his strength returned, he stretched up for the next handhold, but his arm was not long enough. Stymied, he searched for another crevice or ridge to grasp. There was none. He tried backing down, but his legs could not reach his last foothold. Saphira watched with unblinking eyes. He gave up and said, *I could use some help*.

This is your own fault.

Yes! I know. Are you going to get me down or not?

If I weren't around, you would be in a very bad situation.

Eragon rolled his eyes. *You don't have to tell me*.

You're right. After all, how can a mere dragon expect to tell a man like yourself what to do? In fact, everyone should stand in awe of your brilliance of finding the only dead end. Why, if you had started a few feet in either direction, the path to the top would have been clear. She cocked her head at him, eyes bright.

All right! I made a mistake. Now can you please get me out of here? he pleaded. She pulled her head back from the edge of the cliff. After a moment he called, "Saphira?" Above him were only swaying trees. "Saphira! Come back!" he roared.

With a loud crash Saphira barreled off the top of the cliff, flipping around in midair. She floated down to Eragon like a huge bat and grabbed his shirt with her claws, scratching his back. He let go of the rocks as she yanked him up in the air. After a brief flight, she set him down gently on the top of the cliff and tugged her claws out of his shirt.

Foolishness, said Saphira gently.

Eragon looked away, studying the landscape. The cliff provided a wonderful view of their surroundings, especially the foaming sea, as well as protection against unwelcome eyes. Only birds would see Saphira here. It was an ideal location.

Is Brom's friend trustworthy? she asked.

I don't know. Eragon proceeded to recount the day's events. *There are forces circling us that we aren't aware of. Sometimes I wonder if we can ever understand the true motives of the people around us. They all seem to have secrets*.

It is the way of the world. Ignore all the schemes and trust in the nature of each person. Brom is good. He means us no harm. We don't have to fear his plans.

I hope so, he said, looking down at his hands.

This finding of the Ra'zac through writing is a strange way of tracking,

she remarked. *Would there be a way to use magic to see the records without being inside the room?*

I'm not sure. You would have to combine the word for seeing *with* distance *… or maybe* light *and* distance. *Either way, it seems rather difficult. I'll ask Brom.*

That would be wise. They lapsed into tranquil silence.

You know, we may have to stay here awhile.

Saphira's answer held a hard edge. *And as always, I will be left to wait outside.*

That is not how I want it. Soon enough we will travel together again.

May that day come quickly.

Eragon smiled and hugged her. He noticed then how rapidly the light was fading. *I have to go now, before I'm locked out of Teirm. Hunt tomorrow, and I will see you in the evening.*

She spread her wings. *Come, I will take you down.* He got onto her scaly back and held on tightly as she launched off the cliff, glided over the trees, then landed on a knoll. Eragon thanked her and ran back to Teirm.

He came into sight of the portcullis just as it was beginning to lower. Calling for them to wait, he put on a burst of speed and slipped inside seconds before the gateway slammed closed. "Ya cut that a little close," observed one of the guards.

"It won't happen again," assured Eragon, bending over to catch his breath. He wound his way through the darkened city to Jeod's house. A lantern hung outside like a beacon.

A plump butler answered his knock and ushered him inside without a word. Tapestries covered the stone walls. Elaborate rugs dotted the polished wood floor, which glowed with the light from three gold candelabra hanging from the ceiling. Smoke drifted through the air and collected above.

"This way, sir. Your friend is in the study."

They passed scores of doorways until the butler opened one to reveal a study. Books covered the room's walls. But unlike those in Jeod's office, these came in every size and shape. A fireplace filled with blazing logs warmed the room. Brom and Jeod sat before an oval writing desk, talking amiably. Brom raised his pipe and said in a jovial voice, "Ah, here you are. We were getting worried about you. How was your walk?"

I wonder what put him in such a good mood? Why doesn't he just come out and ask how Saphira is? "Pleasant, but the guards almost locked me outside the city. And Teirm is big. I had trouble finding this house."

Jeod chuckled. "When you have seen Dras-Leona, Gil'ead, or even Kuasta, you won't be so easily impressed by this small ocean city. I like it here, though. When it's not raining, Teirm is really quite

beautiful."

Eragon turned to Brom. "Do you have any idea how long we'll be here?"

Brom spread his palms upward. "That's hard to tell. It depends on whether we can get to the records and how long it will take us to find what we need. We'll all have to help; it will be a huge job. I'll talk with Brand tomorrow and see if he'll let us examine the records."

"I don't think I'll be able to help," Eragon said, shifting uneasily.

"Why not?" asked Brom. "There will be plenty of work for you."

Eragon lowered his head. "I can't read."

Brom straightened with disbelief. "You mean Garrow never taught you?"

"He knew how to read?" asked Eragon, puzzled. Jeod watched them with interest.

"Of course he did," snorted Brom. "The proud fool—what was he thinking? I should have realized that he wouldn't have taught you. He probably considered it an unnecessary luxury." Brom scowled and pulled at his beard angrily. "This sets my plans back, but not irreparably. I'll just have to teach you how to read. It won't take long if you put your mind to it."

Eragon winced. Brom's lessons were usually intense and brutally direct. *How much more can I learn at one time?* "I suppose it's necessary," he said ruefully.

"You'll enjoy it. There is much you can learn from books and scrolls," said Jeod. He gestured at the walls. "These books are my friends, my companions. They make me laugh and cry and find meaning in life."

"It sounds intriguing," admitted Eragon.

"Always the scholar, aren't you?" asked Brom.

Jeod shrugged. "Not anymore. I'm afraid I've degenerated into a bibliophile."

"A what?" asked Eragon.

"One who loves books," explained Jeod, and resumed conversing with Brom. Bored, Eragon scanned the shelves. An elegant book set with gold studs caught his attention. He pulled it off the shelf and stared at it curiously.

It was bound in black leather carved with mysterious runes. Eragon ran his fingers over the cover and savored its cool smoothness. The letters inside were printed with a reddish glossy ink. He let the pages slip past his fingers. A column of script, set off from the regular lettering, caught his eye. The words were long and flowing, full of graceful lines and sharp points.

Eragon took the book to Brom. "What is this?" he asked, pointing to the strange writing.

Brom looked at the page closely and raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Jeod, you've expanded your collection. Where did you get this? I haven't seen one in ages."

Jeod strained his neck to see the book. "Ah yes, the *Domia abr Wyrda*. A man came through here a few years ago and tried to sell it to a trader down by the wharves. Fortunately, I happened to be there and was able to save the book, along with his neck. He didn't have a clue what it was."

"It's odd, Eragon, that you should pick up this book, the *Dominance of Fate*," said Brom. "Of all the items in this house, it's probably worth the most. It details a complete history of Alagaësia—starting long before the elves landed here and ending a few decades ago. The book is very rare and is the best of its kind. When it was written, the Empire decried it as blasphemy and burned the author, Heslant the Monk. I didn't think any copies still existed. The lettering you asked about is from the ancient language."

"What does it say?" asked Eragon.

It took Brom a moment to read the writing. "It's part of an elven poem that tells of the years they fought the dragons. This excerpt describes one of their kings, Ceranthor, as he rides into battle. The elves love this poem and tell it regularly—though you need three days to do it properly—so that they won't repeat the mistakes of the past. At times they sing it so beautifully it seems the very rocks will cry."

Eragon returned to his chair, holding the book gently. *It's amazing that a man who is dead can talk to people through these pages. As long as this book survives, his ideas live. I wonder if it contains any information about the Ra'zac?*

He browsed through the book while Brom and Jeod spoke. Hours passed, and Eragon began to drowse. Out of pity for his exhaustion, Jeod bid them good night. "The butler will show you to your rooms."

On the way upstairs, the servant said, "If you need assistance, use the bellpull next to the bed." He stopped before a cluster of three doors, bowed, then backed away.

As Brom entered the room on the right, Eragon asked, "Can I talk to you?"

"You just did, but come in anyway."

Eragon closed the door behind himself. "Saphira and I had an idea. Is there—"

Brom stopped him with a raised hand and pulled the curtains shut over the window. "When you talk of such things, you would do well to make sure that no unwelcome ears are present."

"Sorry," said Eragon, berating himself for the slip. "Anyway, is it possible to conjure up an image of something that you can't see?"

Brom sat on the edge of his bed. "What you are talking about is

called scrying. It is quite possible and extremely helpful in some situations, but it has a major drawback. You can only observe people, places, and things that you've already seen. If you were to scry the Ra'zac, you'd see them all right, but not their surroundings. There are other problems as well. Let's say that you wanted to view a page in a book, one that you'd already seen. You could only see the page if the book were open to it. If the book were closed when you tried this, the page would appear completely black."

"Why can't you view objects that you haven't seen?" asked Eragon. Even with those limitations, he realized, scrying could be very useful. *I wonder if I could view something leagues away and use magic to affect what was happening there?*

"Because," said Brom patiently, "to scry, you have to know what you're looking at and where to direct your power. Even if a stranger was described to you, it would still be nigh impossible to view him, not to mention the ground and whatever else might be around him. You have to know *what* you're going to scry before you *can* scry it. Does that answer your question?"

Eragon thought for a moment. "But how is it done? Do you conjure up the image in thin air?"

"Not usually," said Brom, shaking his white head. "That takes more energy than projecting it onto a reflective surface like a pool of water or a mirror. Some Riders used to travel everywhere they could, trying to see as much as possible. Then, whenever war or some other calamity occurred, they would be able to view events throughout Alagaësia."

"May I try it?" asked Eragon.

Brom looked at him carefully. "No, not now. You're tired, and scrying takes lots of strength. I will tell you the words, but you must promise not to attempt it tonight. And I'd rather you wait until we leave Teirm; I have more to teach you."

Eragon smiled. "I promise."

"Very well." Brom bent over and very quietly whispered, "Draumr kópa" into Eragon's ear.

Eragon took a moment to memorize the words. "Maybe after we've left Teirm, I can scry Roran. I would like to know how he's doing. I'm afraid that the Ra'zac might go after him."

"I don't mean to frighten you, but that's a distinct possibility," said Brom. "Although Roran was gone most of the time the Ra'zac were in Carvahall, I'm sure that they asked questions about him. Who knows, they may have even met him while they were in Therinsford. Either way, I doubt their curiosity is sated. You're on the loose, after all, and the king is probably threatening them with terrible punishment if you aren't found. If they get frustrated enough, they'll go back and

interrogate Roran. It's only a matter of time."

"If that's true, then the only way to keep Roran safe is to let the Ra'zac know where I am so that they'll come after me instead of him."

"No, that won't work either. You're not thinking," admonished Brom. "If you can't understand your enemies, how can you expect to anticipate them? Even if you exposed your location, the Ra'zac would *still* chase Roran. Do you know why?"

Eragon straightened and tried to consider every possibility. "Well, if I stay in hiding long enough, they might get frustrated and capture Roran to force me to reveal myself. If that didn't work, they'd kill him just to hurt me. Also, if I become a public enemy of the Empire, they might use him as bait to catch me. And if I met with Roran and they found out about it, they would torture him to find out where I was."

"Very good. You figured that out quite nicely," said Brom.

"But what's the solution? I can't let him be killed!"

Brom clasped his hands loosely. "The solution is quite obvious. Roran is going to have to learn how to defend himself. That may sound hard-hearted, but as you pointed out, you cannot risk meeting with him. You may not remember this—you were half delirious at the time—but when we left Carvahall, I told you that I had left a warning letter for Roran so he won't be totally unprepared for danger. If he has any sense at all, when the Ra'zac show up in Carvahall again, he'll take my advice and flee."

"I don't like this," said Eragon unhappily.

"Ah, but you forget something."

"What?" he demanded.

"There is some good in all of this. The king cannot afford to have a Rider roaming around that he does not control. Galbatorix is the only known Rider alive besides yourself, but he would like another one under his command. Before he tries to kill you or Roran, he will offer you the chance to serve him. Unfortunately, if he ever gets close enough to make that proposition, it will be far too late for you to refuse and still live."

"You call that some good!"

"It's all that's protecting Roran. As long as the king doesn't know which side you've chosen, he won't risk alienating you by harming your cousin. Keep that firmly in mind. The Ra'zac killed Garrow, but I think it was an ill-considered decision on their part. From what I know of Galbatorix, he would not have approved it unless he gained something from it."

"And how will I be able to deny the king's wishes when he is threatening me with death?" asked Eragon sharply.

Brom sighed. He went to his nightstand and dipped his fingers in a basin of rose water. "Galbatorix wants your willing cooperation.

Without that, you're worse than useless to him. So the question becomes, If you are ever faced with this choice, are you willing to die for what you believe in? For that is the only way you will deny him."

The question hung in the air.

Brom finally said, "It's a difficult question and not one you can answer until you're faced with it. Keep in mind that many people have died for their beliefs; it's actually quite common. The real courage is in living and suffering for what you believe."

It was late in the morning when Eragon woke. He dressed, washed his face in the basin, then held the mirror up and brushed his hair into place. Something about his reflection made him stop and look closer. His face had changed since he had run out of Carvahall just a short while ago. Any baby fat was gone now, stripped away by traveling, sparring, and training. His cheekbones were more prominent, and the line of his jaw was sharper. There was a slight cast to his eyes that, when he looked closely, gave his face a wild, alien appearance. He held the mirror at arm's length, and his face resumed its normal semblance—but it still did not seem quite his own.

A little disturbed, he slung his bow and quiver across his back, then left the room. Before he had reached the end of the hall, the butler caught up with him and said, "Sir, Neal left with my master for the castle earlier. He said that you could do whatever you want today because he will not return until this evening."

Eragon thanked him for the message, then eagerly began exploring Teirm. For hours he wandered the streets, entering every shop that struck his fancy and chatting with various people. Eventually he was forced back to Jeod's by his empty stomach and lack of money.

When he reached the street where the merchant lived, he stopped at the herbalist's shop next door. It was an unusual place for a store. The other shops were down by the city wall, not crammed between expensive houses. He tried to look in the windows, but they were covered with a thick layer of crawling plants on the interior. Curious, he went inside.

At first he saw nothing because the store was so dark, but then his eyes adjusted to the faint greenish light that filtered through the windows. A colorful bird with wide tail feathers and a sharp, powerful beak looked at Eragon inquisitively from a cage near the window. The walls were covered with plants; vines clung to the ceiling, obscuring all but an old chandelier, and on the floor was a large pot with a yellow flower. A collection of mortars, pestles, metal bowls, and a clear crystal ball the size of Eragon's head rested on a long counter.

He walked to the counter, carefully stepping around complex machines, crates of rocks, piles of scrolls, and other objects he did not recognize. The wall behind the counter was covered with drawers of every size. Some of them were no larger than his smallest finger, while others were big enough for a barrel. There was a foot-wide gap in the shelves far above.

A pair of red eyes suddenly flashed from the dark space, and a large, fierce cat leapt onto the counter. It had a lean body with powerful shoulders and oversized paws. A shaggy mane surrounded its angular face; its ears were tipped with black tufts. White fangs curved down over its jaw. Altogether, it did not look like any cat Eragon had ever seen. It inspected him with shrewd eyes, then flicked its tail dismissively.

On a whim, Eragon reached out with his mind and touched the cat's consciousness. Gently, he prodded it with his thoughts, trying to make it understand that he was a friend.

You don't have to do that.

Eragon looked around in alarm. The cat ignored him and licked a paw. *Saphira? Where are you?* he asked. No one answered. Puzzled, he leaned against the counter and reached for what looked like a wood rod.

That wouldn't be wise.

Stop playing games, Saphira, he snapped, then picked up the rod. A shock of electricity exploded through his body, and he fell to the floor, writhing. The pain slowly faded, leaving him gasping for air. The cat jumped down and looked at him.

You aren't very smart for a Dragon Rider. I did warn you.

You said that! exclaimed Eragon. The cat yawned, then stretched and sauntered across the floor, weaving its way between objects.

Who else?

But you're just a cat! he objected.

The cat yowled and stalked back to him. It jumped on his chest and crouched there, looking down at him with gleaming eyes. Eragon tried to sit up, but it growled, showing its fangs. *Do I look like other cats?*

No …

Then what makes you think I am one? Eragon started to say something, but the creature dug its claws into his chest. *Obviously your education has been neglected. I—to correct your mistake—am a werecat. There aren't many of us left, but I think even a farm boy should have heard of us.*

I didn't know you were real, said Eragon, fascinated. A werecat! He was indeed fortunate. They were always flitting around the edges of stories, keeping to themselves and occasionally giving advice. If the legends were true, they had magical powers, lived longer than humans, and usually knew more than they told.

The werecat blinked lazily. *Knowing is independent of being. I did not know you existed before you bumbled in here and ruined my nap. Yet that doesn't mean you weren't real before you woke me.*

Eragon was lost by its reasoning. *I'm sorry I disturbed you.*

I was getting up anyway, it said. It leapt back onto the counter and

licked its paw. *If I were you, I wouldn't hold on to that rod much longer. It's going to shock you again in a few seconds*.

He hastily put the rod back where he had found it. *What is it?*

A common and boring artifact, unlike myself.

But what's it for?

Didn't you find out? The werecat finished cleaning its paw, stretched once more, then jumped back up to its sleeping place. It sat down, tucked its paws under its breast, and closed its eyes, purring.

Wait, said Eragon, *what's your name?*

One of the werecat's slanted eyes cracked open. *I go by many names. If you are looking for my proper one, you will have to seek elsewhere*. The eye closed. Eragon gave up and turned to leave. *However, you may call me Solembum*.

Thank you, said Eragon seriously. Solembum's purring grew louder.

The door to the shop swung open, letting in a beam of sunlight. Angela entered with a cloth bag full of plants. Her eyes flickered at Solembum and she looked startled. "He says you talked with him."

"You can talk with him, too?" asked Eragon.

She tossed her head. "Of course, but that doesn't mean he'll say anything back." She set her plants on the counter, then walked behind it and faced him. "He likes you. That's unusual. Most of the time Solembum doesn't show himself to customers. In fact, he says that you show some promise, given a few years of work."

"Thanks."

"It's a compliment, coming from him. You're only the third person to come in here who has been able to speak with him. The first was a woman, many years ago; the second was a blind beggar; and now you. But I don't run a store just so I can prattle on. Is there anything you want? Or did you only come in to look?"

"Just to look," said Eragon, still thinking about the werecat. "Besides, I don't really need any herbs."

"That's not all I do," said Angela with a grin. "The rich fool lords pay me for love potions and the like. I never claim that they work, but for some reason they keep coming back. But I don't think you need those chicaneries. Would you like your fortune told? I do that, too, for all the rich fool ladies."

Eragon laughed. "No, I'm afraid my fortune is pretty much unreadable. And I don't have any money."

Angela looked at Solembum curiously. "I think …" She gestured at the crystal ball resting on the counter. "That's only for show anyway—it doesn't do anything. But I do have … Wait here; I'll be right back." She hurried into a room at the back of the shop.

She came back, breathless, holding a leather pouch, which she set on the counter. "I haven't used these for so long, I almost forgot where

they were. Now, sit across from me and I'll show you why I went to all this trouble." Eragon found a stool and sat. Solembum's eyes glowed from the gap in the drawers.

Angela laid a thick cloth on the counter, then poured a handful of smooth bones, each slightly longer than a finger, onto it. Runes and symbols were inscribed along their sides. "These," she said, touching them gently, "are the knucklebones of a dragon. Don't ask where I got them; it is a secret I won't reveal. But unlike tea leaves, crystal balls, or even divining cards, these have true power. They do not lie, though understanding what they say is … complicated. If you wish, I will cast and read them for you. But understand that to know one's fate can be a terrible thing. You must be sure of your decision."

Eragon looked at the bones with a feeling of dread. *There lies what was once one of Saphira's kin. To know one's fate … How can I make this decision when I don't know what lies in wait for me and whether I will like it? Ignorance is indeed bliss*. "Why do you offer this?" he asked.

"Because of Solembum. He may have been rude, but the fact that he spoke to you makes you special. He *is* a werecat, after all. I offered to do this for the other two people who talked with him. Only the woman agreed to it. Selena was her name. Ah, she regretted it, too. Her fortune was bleak and painful. I don't think she believed it—not at first."

Emotion overcame Eragon, bringing tears to his eyes. "Selena," he whispered to himself. His mother's name. *Could it have been her? Was her destiny so horrible that she had to abandon me?* "Do you remember anything about her fortune?" he asked, feeling sick.

Angela shook her head and sighed. "It was so long ago that the details have melted into the rest of my memory, which isn't as good as it used to be. Besides, I'll not tell you what I do remember. That was for her and her alone. It was sad, though; I've never forgotten the look on her face."

Eragon closed his eyes and struggled to regain control of his emotions. "Why do you complain about your memory?" he asked to distract himself. "You're not that old."

Dimples appeared on Angela's cheeks. "I'm flattered, but don't be deceived; I'm much older than I look. The appearance of youth probably comes from having to eat my own herbs when times are lean."

Smiling, Eragon took a deep breath. *If that was my mother and she could bear to have her fortune told, I can too*. "Cast the bones for me," he said solemnly.

Angela's face became grave as she grasped the bones in each hand. Her eyes closed, and her lips moved in a soundless murmur. Then she said powerfully, *"Manin! Wyrda! Hügin!"* and tossed the bones onto

the cloth. They fell all jumbled together, gleaming in the faint light.

The words rang in Eragon's ears; he recognized them from the ancient language and realized with apprehension that to use them for magic, Angela must be a witch. She had not lied; this was a true fortunetelling. Minutes slowly passed as she studied the bones.

Finally, Angela leaned back and heaved a long sigh. She wiped her brow and pulled out a wineskin from under the counter. "Do you want some?" she asked. Eragon shook his head. She shrugged and drank deeply. "This," she said, wiping her mouth, "is the hardest reading I've ever done. You were right. Your future is nigh impossible to see. I've never known of anyone's fate being so tangled and clouded. I was, however, able to wrestle a few answers from it."

Solembum jumped onto the counter and settled there, watching them both. Eragon clenched his hands as Angela pointed to one of the bones. "I will start here," she said slowly, "because it is the clearest to understand."

The symbol on the bone was a long horizontal line with a circle resting on it. "Infinity or long life," said Angela quietly. "This is the first time I have ever seen it come up in someone's future. Most of the time it's the aspen or the elm, both signs that a person will live a normal span of years. Whether this means that you will live forever or that you will only have an extraordinarily long life, I'm not sure. Whatever it foretells, you may be sure that many years lie ahead of you."

No surprises there—I am a Rider, thought Eragon. Was Angela only going to tell him things he already knew?

"Now the bones grow harder to read, as the rest are in a confused pile." Angela touched three of them. "Here the wandering path, lightning bolt, and sailing ship all lie together—a pattern I've never seen, only heard of. The wandering path shows that there are many choices in your future, some of which you face even now. I see great battles raging around you, some of them fought for your sake. I see the mighty powers of this land struggling to control your will and destiny. Countless possible futures await you—all of them filled with blood and conflict—but only one will bring you happiness and peace. Beware of losing your way, for you are one of the few who are truly free to choose their own fate. That freedom is a gift, but it is also a responsibility more binding than chains."

Then her face grew sad. "And yet, as if to counteract that, here is the lightning bolt. It is a terrible omen. There is a doom upon you, but of what sort I know not. Part of it lies in a death—one that rapidly approaches and will cause you much grief. But the rest awaits in a great journey. Look closely at this bone. You can see how its end rests on that of the sailing ship. That is impossible to misunderstand. Your

fate will be to leave this land forever. Where you will end up I know not, but you will never again stand in Alagaësia. This is inescapable. It will come to pass even if you try to avoid it."

Her words frightened Eragon. *Another death … who must I lose now?* His thoughts immediately went to Roran. Then he thought about his homeland. *What could ever force me to leave? And where would I go? If there are lands across the sea or to the east, only the elves know of them*.

Angela rubbed her temples and breathed deeply. "The next bone is easier to read and perhaps a bit more pleasant." Eragon examined it and saw a rose blossom inscribed between the horns of a crescent moon.

Angela smiled and said, "An epic romance is in your future, extraordinary, as the moon indicates—for that is a magical symbol—and strong enough to outlast empires. I cannot say if this passion will end happily, but your love is of noble birth and heritage. She is powerful, wise, and beautiful beyond compare."

Of noble birth, thought Eragon in surprise. *How could that ever happen? I have no more standing than the poorest of farmers*.

"Now for the last two bones, the tree and the hawthorn root, which cross each other strongly. I wish that this were not so—it can only mean more trouble—but betrayal is clear. And it will come from within your family."

"Roran wouldn't do that!" objected Eragon abruptly.

"I wouldn't know," said Angela carefully. "But the bones have never lied, and that is what they say."

Doubt wormed into Eragon's mind, but he tried to ignore it. What reason would there ever be for Roran to turn on him? Angela put a comforting hand on his shoulder and offered him the wineskin again. This time Eragon accepted the drink, and it made him feel better.

"After all that, death might be welcome," he joked nervously. *Betrayal from Roran? It couldn't happen! It won't!*

"It might be," said Angela solemnly, then laughed slightly. "But you shouldn't fret about what has yet to occur. The only way the future can harm us is by causing worry. I guarantee that you'll feel better once you're out in the sun."

"Perhaps." *Unfortunately*, he reflected wryly, *nothing she said will make sense until it has already happened. If it really does*, he amended himself. "You used words of power," he noted quietly.

Angela's eyes flashed. "What I wouldn't give to see how the rest of your life plays out. You can speak to werecats, know of the ancient language, and have a most interesting future. Also, few young men with empty pockets and rough traveling clothes can expect to be loved by a noblewoman. Who are you?"

Eragon realized that the werecat must not have told Angela that he

was a Rider. He almost said, “Evan,” but then changed his mind and simply stated, “I am Eragon.”

Angela arched her eyebrows. “Is that who you are or your name?” she asked.

“Both,” said Eragon with a small smile, thinking of his namesake, the first Rider.

“Now I’m all the more interested in seeing how your life will unfold. Who was the ragged man with you yesterday?”

Eragon decided that one more name couldn’t hurt. “His name is Brom.”

A guffaw suddenly burst out of Angela, doubling her over in mirth. She wiped her eyes and took a sip of wine, then fought off another attack of merriment. Finally, gasping for breath, she forced out, “Oh … that one! I had no idea!”

“What is it?” demanded Eragon.

“No, no, don’t be upset,” said Angela, hiding a smile. “It’s only that —well, he is known by those in my profession. I’m afraid that the poor man’s doom, or future if you will, is something of a joke with us.”

“Don’t insult him! He’s a better man than any you could find!” snapped Eragon.

“Peace, peace,” chided Angela with amusement. “I know that. If we meet again at the right time I’ll be sure to tell you about it. But in the meantime you should—” She stopped speaking as Solembum padded between them. The werecat stared at Eragon with unblinking eyes.

Yes? Eragon asked, irritated.

Listen closely and I will tell you two things. When the time comes and you need a weapon, look under the roots of the Menoa tree. Then, when all seems lost and your power is insufficient, go to the Rock of Kuthian and speak your name to open the Vault of Souls.

Before Eragon could ask what Solembum meant, the werecat walked away, waving his tail ever so gracefully. Angela tilted her head, coils of dense hair shadowing her forehead. “I don’t know what he said, and I don’t want to know. He spoke to you and only you. Don’t tell anyone else.”

“I think I have to go,” said Eragon, shaken.

“If you want to,” said Angela, smiling again. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you like, especially if you buy some of my goods. But go if you wish; I’m sure that we’ve given you enough to ponder for a while.”

“Yes.” Eragon quickly made his way to the door. “Thank you for reading my future.” *I think*.

“You’re welcome,” said Angela, still smiling.

Eragon exited the shop and stood in the street, squinting until his eyes adjusted to the brightness. It was a few minutes before he could

think calmly about what he had learned. He started walking, his steps unconsciously quickening until he dashed out of Teirm, feet flying as he headed to Saphira's hiding place.

He called to her from the base of the cliff. A minute later she soared down and bore him up to the cliff top. When they were both safely on the ground, Eragon told her about his day. *And so*, he concluded, *I think Brom's right; I always seem to be where there's trouble*.

You should remember what the werecat told you. It's important.

How do you know? he asked curiously.

I'm not sure, but the names he used feel powerful. Kuthian, she said, rolling the word around. *No, we should not forget what he said*.

Do you think I should tell Brom?

It's your choice, but think of this: he has no right to know your future. To tell him of Solembum and his words will only raise questions you may not want to answer. And if you decided to only ask him what those words mean, he will want to know where you learned them. Do you think you can lie convincingly to him?

No, admitted Eragon. *Maybe I won't say anything. Still, this might be too important to hide*. They talked until there was nothing more to say. Then they sat together companionably, watching the trees until dusk.

Eragon hurried back to Teirm and was soon knocking on Jeod's door. "Is Neal back?" he asked the butler.

"Yes sir. I believe he's in the study right now."

"Thank you," said Eragon. He strode to the room and peeked inside. Brom was sitting before the fire, smoking. "How did it go?" asked Eragon.

"Bloody awful!" growled Brom around his pipe.

"So you talked to Brand?"

"Not that it did any good. This *administrator* of trade is the worst sort of bureaucrat. He abides by every rule, delights in making his own whenever it can inconvenience someone, and at the same time believes that he's doing good."

"Then he won't let us see the records?" asked Eragon.

"No," snapped Brom, exasperated. "Nothing I could say would sway him. He even refused bribes! Substantial ones, too. I didn't think I would ever meet a noble who wasn't corrupt. Now that I have, I find that I prefer them when they're greedy bastards." He puffed furiously on his pipe and mumbled a steady stream of curses.

When he seemed to have calmed, Eragon asked tentatively, "So, what now?"

"I'm going to take the next week and teach you how to read."

"And after that?"

A smile split Brom's face. "After that, we're going to give Brand a nasty surprise." Eragon pestered him for details, but Brom refused to

say more.

Dinner was held in a sumptuous dining room. Jeod sat at one end of the table, a hard-eyed Helen at the other. Brom and Eragon were seated between them, which Eragon felt was a dangerous place to be. Empty chairs were on either side of him, but he didn't mind the space. It helped to protect him from the glares of their hostess.

The food was served quietly, and Jeod and Helen wordlessly began eating. Eragon followed suit, thinking, *I've had cheerier meals at funerals*. And he had, in Carvahall. He remembered many burials that had been sad, yes, but not unduly so. This was different; he could feel simmering resentment pouring from Helen throughout the dinner.

Brom scratched a rune on parchment with charcoal, then showed it to Eragon. “This is the letter a,” he said. “Learn it.” With that, Eragon began the task of becoming literate. It was difficult and strange and pushed his intellect to its limits, but he enjoyed it. Without anything else to do and with a good—if sometimes impatient—teacher, he advanced rapidly.

A routine was soon established. Every day Eragon got up, ate in the kitchen, then went to the study for his lessons, where he labored to memorize the sounds of the letters and the rules of writing. It got so that when he closed his eyes, letters and words danced in his mind. He thought of little else during that time.

Before dinner, he and Brom would go behind Jeod’s house and spar. The servants, along with a small crowd of wide-eyed children, would come and watch. If there was any time afterward, Eragon would practice magic in his room, with the curtains securely closed.

His only worry was Saphira. He visited her every evening, but it was not enough time together for either of them. During the day, Saphira spent most of her time leagues away searching for food; she could not hunt near Teirm without arousing suspicion. Eragon did what he could to help her, but he knew that the only solution for both her hunger and loneliness was to leave the city far behind.

Every day more grim news poured into Teirm. Arriving merchants told of horrific attacks along the coast. There were reports of powerful people disappearing from their houses in the night and their mangled corpses being discovered in the morning. Eragon often heard Brom and Jeod discussing the events in an undertone, but they always stopped when he came near.

The days passed quickly, and soon a week had gone by. Eragon’s skills were rudimentary, but he could now read whole pages without asking Brom’s help. He read slowly, but he knew that speed would come with time. Brom encouraged him, “No matter, you’ll do fine for what I have planned.”

It was afternoon when Brom summoned both Jeod and Eragon to the study. Brom gestured at Eragon. “Now that you can help us, I think it’s time to move ahead.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Eragon.

A fierce smile danced on Brom’s face. Jeod groaned. “I know that look; it’s what got us into trouble in the first place.”

“A slight exaggeration,” said Brom, “but not unwarranted. Very

well, this is what we'll do.…"

We leave tonight or tomorrow, Eragon told Saphira from within his room.

This is unexpected. Will you be safe during this venture?

Eragon shrugged. *I don't know. We may end up fleeing Teirm with soldiers on our heels*. He felt her worry and tried to reassure her. *It'll be all right. Brom and I can use magic, and we're good fighters*.

He lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. His hands shook slightly, and there was a lump in his throat. As sleep overcame him, he felt a wave of confusion. *I don't want to leave Teirm*, he suddenly realized. *The time I've spent here has been—almost normal. What I would give not to keep uprooting myself. To stay here and be like everyone else would be wonderful*. Then, another thought raged through him, *But I'll never be able to while Saphira is around. Never*.

Dreams owned his consciousness, twisting and directing it to their whims. At times he quaked with fear; at others he laughed with pleasure. Then something changed—it was as though his eyes had been opened for the first time—and a dream came to him that was clearer than any before.

He saw a young woman, bent over by sorrow, chained in a cold, hard cell. A beam of moonlight shone through a barred window set high in the wall and fell on her face. A single tear rolled down her cheek, like a liquid diamond.

Eragon rose with a start and found himself crying uncontrollably before sinking back into a fitful sleep.

Eragon woke from his nap to a golden sunset. Red and orange beams of light streamed into the room and fell across the bed. They warmed his back pleasantly, making him reluctant to move. He dozed, but the sunlight crept off him, and he grew cold. The sun sank below the horizon, lighting the sea and sky with color. *Almost time!*

He slung his bow and quiver on his back, but left Zar'roc in the room; the sword would only slow him, and he was averse to using it. If he had to disable someone, he could use magic or an arrow. He pulled his jerkin over his shirt and laced it securely.

He waited nervously in his room until the light faded. Then he entered the hallway and shrugged so the quiver settled comfortably across his back. Brom joined him, carrying his sword and staff.

Jeod, dressed in a black doublet and hose, was waiting for them outside. From his waist swung an elegant rapier and a leather pouch. Brom eyed the rapier and observed, "That toad sticker is too thin for any real fighting. What will you do if someone comes after you with a broadsword or a flamberge?"

"Be realistic," said Jeod. "None of the guards has a flamberge. Besides, this *toad sticker* is faster than a broadsword."

Brom shrugged. "It's your neck."

They walked casually along the street, avoiding watchmen and soldiers. Eragon was tense and his heart pounded. As they passed Angela's shop, a flash of movement on the roof caught his attention, but he saw no one. His palm tingled. He looked at the roof again, but it was still empty.

Brom led them along Teirm's outer wall. By the time they reached the castle, the sky was black. The sealed walls of the fortress made Eragon shiver. He would hate to be imprisoned there. Jeod silently took the lead and strode up to the gates, trying to look at ease. He pounded on the gate and waited.

A small grille slid open and a surly guard peered out. "Ya?" he grunted shortly. Eragon could smell rum on his breath.

"We need to get in," said Jeod.

The guard peered at Jeod closer. "Wha' for?"

"The boy here left something very valuable in my office. We have to retrieve it immediately." Eragon hung his head, shamefaced.

The guard frowned, clearly impatient to get back to his bottle. "Ah, wha'ever," he said, swinging his arm. "Jus' make sure 'n give 'im a good beating f'r me."

“I’ll do that,” assured Jeod as the guard unbolted a small door set into the gate. They entered the keep, then Brom handed the guard a few coins.

“Thank’ee,” mumbled the man, tottering away. As soon as he was gone, Eragon pulled his bow from its tube and strung it. Jeod quickly let them into the main part of the castle. They hurried toward their destination, listening carefully for any soldiers on patrol. At the records room, Brom tried the door. It was locked. He put his hand against the door and muttered a word that Eragon did not recognize. It swung open with a faint click. Brom grabbed a torch from the wall, and they darted inside, closing the door quietly.

The squat room was filled with wooden racks piled high with scrolls. A barred window was set in the far wall. Jeod threaded his way between the racks, running his eyes over the scrolls. He halted at the back of the room. “Over here,” he said. “These are the shipping records for the past five years. You can tell the date by the wax seals on the corner.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Eragon, pleased that they had made it so far without being discovered.

“Start at the top and work down,” said Jeod. “Some scrolls only deal with taxes. You can ignore those. Look for anything that mentions Seithr oil.” He took a length of parchment from his pouch and stretched it out on the floor, then set a bottle of ink and a quill pen next to it. “So we can keep track of whatever we find,” he explained.

Brom scooped an armful of scrolls from the top of the rack and piled them on the floor. He sat and unrolled the first one. Eragon joined him, positioning himself so he could see the door. The tedious work was especially difficult for him, as the cramped script on the scrolls was different from the printing Brom had taught him.

By looking only for the names of ships that sailed in the northern areas, they winnowed out many of the scrolls. Even so, they moved down the rack slowly, recording each shipment of Seithr oil as they located it.

It was quiet outside the room, except for the occasional watchman. Suddenly, Eragon’s neck prickled. He tried to keep working, but the uneasy feeling remained. Irritated, he looked up and jerked with surprise—a small boy crouched on the windowsill. His eyes were slanted, and a sprig of holly was woven into his shaggy black hair.

Do you need help? asked a voice in Eragon’s head. His eyes widened with shock. It sounded like Solembum.

Is that you? he asked incredulously.

Am I someone else?

Eragon gulped and concentrated on his scroll. *If my eyes don’t deceive me, you are.*

The boy smiled slightly, revealing pointed teeth. *What I look like doesn't change who I am. You don't think I'm called a werecat for nothing, do you?*

What are you doing here? Eragon asked.

The werecat tilted his head and considered whether the question was worth an answer. *That depends on what you are doing here. If you are reading those scrolls for entertainment, then I suppose there isn't any reason for my visit. But if what you are doing is unlawful and you don't want to be discovered, I might be here to warn you that the guard whom you bribed just told his replacement about you and that this second official of the Empire has sent soldiers to search for you.*

Thank you for telling me, said Eragon.

Told you something, did I? I suppose I did. And I suggest you make use of it.

The boy stood and tossed back his wild hair. Eragon asked quickly, *What did you mean last time about the tree and the vault?*

Exactly what I said.

Eragon tried to ask more, but the werecat vanished through the window. He announced abruptly, "There are soldiers looking for us."

"How do you know?" asked Brom sharply.

"I listened in on the guard. His replacement just sent men to search for us. We have to get out of here. They've probably already discovered that Jeod's office is empty."

"Are you sure?" asked Jeod.

"Yes!" said Eragon impatiently. "They're on their way."

Brom snatched another scroll from the rack. "No matter. We have to finish this now!" They worked furiously for the next minute, scanning the records as fast as they could. As the last scroll was finished, Brom threw it back onto the rack, and Jeod jammed his parchment, ink, and pen into his pouch. Eragon grabbed the torch.

They raced from the room and shut the door, but just as it closed they heard the heavy tramp of soldiers' boots at the end of the hall. They turned to leave, but Brom hissed furiously, "Damnation! It's not locked." He put his hand against the door. The lock clicked at the same time three armed soldiers came into view.

"Hey! Get away from that door!" shouted one of them. Brom stepped back, assuming a surprised expression. The three men marched up to them. The tallest one demanded, "Why are you trying to get into the records?" Eragon gripped his bow tighter and prepared to run.

"I'm afraid we lost our way." The strain was evident in Jeod's voice. A drop of sweat rolled down his neck.

The soldier glared at them suspiciously. "Check inside the room," he ordered one of his men.

Eragon held his breath as the soldier stepped up to the door, tried to open it, then pounded on it with his mailed fist. “It’s locked, sir.”

The leader scratched his chin. “Ar’right, then. I don’t know what you were up to, but as long as the door’s locked, I guess you’re free to go. Come on.” The soldiers surrounded them and marched them back to the keep.

I can’t believe it, thought Eragon. *They’re helping us get away!*

At the main gates, the soldier pointed and said, “Now, you walk through those and don’t try anything. We’ll be watching. If you have to come back, wait until morning.”

“Of course,” promised Jeod.

Eragon could feel the guards’ eyes boring into their backs as they hurried out of the castle. The moment that the gates closed behind them, a triumphant grin stretched across his face, and he jumped into the air. Brom shot him a cautioning look and growled, “Walk back to the house normally. You can celebrate there.”

Chastised, Eragon adopted a staid demeanor, but inside he still bubbled with energy. Once they had hurried back to the house and into the study, Eragon exclaimed, “We did it!”

“Yes, but now we have to figure out if it was worth the trouble,” said Brom. Jeod took a map of Alagaësia from the shelves and unrolled it on the desk.

On the left side of the map, the ocean extended to the unknown west. Along the coast stretched the Spine, an immense length of mountains. The Hadarac Desert filled the center of the map—the east end was blank. Somewhere in that void hid the Varden. To the south was Surda, a small country that had seceded from the Empire after the Riders’ fall. Eragon had been told that Surda secretly supported the Varden.

Near Surda’s eastern border was a mountain range labeled Beor Mountains. Eragon had heard of them in many stories—they were supposed to be ten times the height of the Spine, though he privately believed that was exaggeration. The map was empty to the east of the Beors.

Five islands rested off the coast of Surda: Nia, Parlim, Uden, Illium, and Beirland. Nía was no more than an outcropping of rock, but Beirland, the largest, had a small town. Farther up, near Teirm, was a jagged island called Sharktooth. And high to the north was one more island, immense and shaped like a knobby hand. Eragon knew its name without even looking: Vroengard, the ancestral home of the Riders—once a place of glory, but now a looted, empty shell haunted by strange beasts. In the center of Vroengard was the abandoned city of Doru Araeba.

Carvahall was a small dot at the top of Palancar Valley. Level with

it, but across the plains, sprawled the forest Du Weldenvarden. Like the Beor Mountains, its eastern end was unmapped. Parts of Du Weldenvarden's western edge had been settled, but its heart lay mysterious and unexplored. The forest was wilder than the Spine; the few who braved its depths often came back raving mad, or not at all.

Eragon shivered as he saw Urû'baen in the center of the Empire. King Galbatorix ruled from there with his black dragon, Shruikan, by his side. Eragon put his finger on Urû'baen. "The Ra'zac are sure to have a hiding place here."

"You had better hope that that isn't their only sanctuary," said Brom flatly. "Otherwise you'll never get near them." He pushed the rustling map flat with his wrinkled hands.

Jeod took the parchment out of his pouch and said, "From what I saw in the records, there have been shipments of Seithr oil to every major city in the Empire over the past five years. As far as I can tell, all of them might have been ordered by wealthy jewelers. I'm not sure how we can narrow down the list without more information."

Brom swept a hand over the map. "I think we can eliminate some cities. The Ra'zac have to travel wherever the king wants, and I'm sure he keeps them busy. If they're expected to go anywhere at anytime, the only reasonable place for them to stay is at a crossroads where they can reach every part of the country fairly easily." He was excited now and paced the room. "This crossroads has to be large enough so the Ra'zac will be inconspicuous. It also has to have enough trade so any unusual requests—special food for their mounts, for example—will go unnoticed."

"That makes sense," said Jeod, nodding. "Under those conditions, we can ignore most of the cities in the north. The only big ones are Teirm, Gil'ead, and Ceunon. I know they're not in Teirm, and I doubt that the oil has been shipped farther up the coast to Narda—it's too small. Ceunon is too isolated … only Gil'ead remains."

"The Ra'zac might be there," conceded Brom. "It would have a certain irony."

"It would at that," Jeod acknowledged softly.

"What about southern cities?" asked Eragon.

"Well," said Jeod. "There's obviously Urû'baen, but that's an unlikely destination. If someone were to die from Seithr oil in Galbatorix's court, it would be all too easy for an earl or some other lord to discover that the Empire had been buying large amounts of it. That still leaves many others, any one of which could be the one we want."

"Yes," said Eragon, "but the oil wasn't sent to all of them. The parchment only lists Kuasta, Dras-Leona, Aroughs, and Belatona. Kuasta wouldn't work for the Ra'zac; it's on the coast and surrounded

by mountains. Aroughs is isolated like Ceunon, though it is a center of trade. That leaves Belatona and Dras-Leona, which are rather close together. Of the two, I think Dras-Leona is the likelier. It's larger and better situated."

"And that's where nearly all the goods of the Empire pass through at one time or another, including Teirm's," said Jeod. "It would be a good place for the Ra'zac to hide."

"So … Dras-Leona," said Brom as he sat down and lit his pipe. "What do the records show?"

Jeod looked at the parchment. "Here it is. At the beginning of the year, three shipments of Seithr oil were sent to Dras-Leona. Each shipment was only two weeks apart, and the records say they were all transported by the same merchant. The same thing happened last year and the year before that. I doubt any one jeweler, or even a group of them, has the money for so much oil."

"What about Gil'ead?" asked Brom, raising an eyebrow.

"It doesn't have the same access to the rest of the Empire. And," Jeod tapped the parchment, "they've only received the oil twice in recent years." He thought for a moment, then said, "Besides, I think we forgot something—Helgrind."

Brom nodded. "Ah yes, the Dark Gates. It's been many years since I've thought of it. You're right, that would make Dras-Leona perfect for the Ra'zac. I guess it's decided, then; that's where we'll go."

Eragon sat abruptly, too drained of emotion to even ask what Helgrind was. *I thought I would be happy to resume the hunt. Instead, I feel like an abyss has opened up before me. Dras-Leona! It's so far away.…*

The parchment crackled as Jeod slowly rolled up the map. He handed it to Brom and said, "You'll need this, I'm afraid. Your expeditions often take you into obscure regions." Nodding, Brom accepted the map. Jeod clapped him on the shoulder. "It doesn't feel right that you will leave without me. My heart expects to go along, but the rest of me reminds me of my age and responsibilities."

"I know," said Brom. "But you have a life in Teirm. It is time for the next generation to take up the standard. You've done your part; be happy."

"What of you?" asked Jeod. "Does the road ever end for you?"

A hollow laugh escaped Brom's lips. "I see it coming, but not for a while." He extinguished his pipe, and they left for their rooms, exhausted. Before he fell asleep, Eragon contacted Saphira to relate the night's adventures.

In the morning Eragon and Brom retrieved their saddlebags from the stable and prepared to depart. Jeod greeted Brom while Helen watched from the doorway. With grave looks, the two men clasped hands. “I’ll miss you, old man,” said Jeod.

“And you I,” said Brom thickly. He bowed his white head and then turned to Helen. “Thank you for your hospitality; it was most gracious.” Her face reddened. Eragon thought she was going to slap him. Brom continued, unperturbed, “You have a good husband; take care of him. There are few men as brave and as determined as he is. But even he cannot weather difficult times without support from those he loves.” He bowed again and said gently, “Only a suggestion, dear lady.”

Eragon watched as indignation and hurt crossed Helen’s face. Her eyes flashed as she shut the door brusquely. Sighing, Jeod ran his fingers through his hair. Eragon thanked him for all his help, then mounted Cadoc. With the last farewells said, he and Brom departed.

At Teirm’s south gate, the guards let them through without a second glance. As they rode under the giant outer wall, Eragon saw movement in a shadow. Solembum was crouched on the ground, tail twitching. The werecat followed them with inscrutable eyes. As the city receded into the distance, Eragon asked, “What are werecats?”

Brom looked surprised at the question. “Why the sudden curiosity?”

“I heard someone mention them in Teirm. They’re not real, are they?” said Eragon, pretending ignorance.

“They are quite real. During the Riders’ years of glory, they were as renowned as the dragons. Kings and elves kept them as companions—yet the werecats were free to do what they chose. Very little has ever been known about them. I’m afraid that their race has become rather scarce recently.”

“Could they use magic?” asked Eragon.

“No one’s sure, but they could certainly do unusual things. They always seemed to know what was going on and somehow or another manage to get themselves involved.” Brom pulled his hood up to block a chill wind.

“What’s Helgrind?” asked Eragon, after a moment’s thought.

“You’ll see when we get to Dras-Leona.”

When Teirm was out of sight, Eragon reached out with his mind and called, *Saphira!* The force of his mental shout was so strong that Cadoc flicked his ears in annoyance.

Saphira answered and sped toward them with all of her strength. Eragon and Brom watched as a dark blur rushed from a cloud, then heard a dull roar as Saphira's wings flared open. The sun shone behind the thin membranes, turning them translucent and silhouetting the dark veins. She landed with a blast of air.

Eragon tossed Cadoc's reins to Brom. "I'll join you for lunch."

Brom nodded, but seemed preoccupied. "Have a good time," he said, then looked at Saphira and smiled. "It's good to see you again."

And you too.

Eragon hopped onto Saphira's shoulders and held on tightly as she bounded upward. With the wind at her tail, Saphira sliced through the air. *Hold on*, she warned Eragon, and letting out a wild bugle, she soared in a great loop. Eragon yelled with excitement as he flung his arms in the air, holding on only with his legs.

I didn't know I could stay on while you did that without being strapped into the saddle, he said, grinning fiercely.

Neither did I, admitted Saphira, laughing in her peculiar way. Eragon hugged her tightly, and they flew a level path, masters of the sky.

By noon his legs were sore from riding bareback, and his hands and face were numb from the cold air. Saphira's scales were always warm to the touch, but she could not keep him from getting chilled. When they landed for lunch, he buried his hands in his clothes and found a warm, sunny place to sit. As he and Brom ate, Eragon asked Saphira, *Do you mind if I ride Cadoc?* He had decided to question Brom further about his past.

No, but tell me what he says. Eragon was not surprised that Saphira knew his plans. It was nearly impossible to hide anything from her when they were mentally linked. When they finished eating, she flew away as he joined Brom on the trail. After a time, Eragon slowed Cadoc and said, "I need to talk to you. I wanted to do it when we first arrived in Teirm, but I decided to wait until now."

"About what?" asked Brom.

Eragon paused. "There's a lot going on that I don't understand. For instance, who are your 'friends,' and why were you hiding in Carvahall? I trust you with my life—which is why I'm still traveling with you—but I need to know more about who you are and what you are doing. What did you steal in Gil'ead, and what is the tuatha du orothrim that you're taking me through? I think that after all that's happened, I deserve an explanation."

"You eavesdropped on us."

"Only once," said Eragon.

"I see that you have yet to learn proper manners," said Brom grimly, tugging on his beard. "What makes you think that this

concerns you?"

"Nothing, really," said Eragon shrugging. "Just it's an odd coincidence that you happened to be hiding in Carvahall when I found Saphira's egg *and* that you also know so much dragonlore. The more I think about it, the less likely it seems. There were other clues that I mostly ignored, but they're obvious now that I look back. Like how you knew of the Ra'zac in the first place and why they ran away when you approached. And I can't help but wonder if you had something to do with the appearance of Saphira's egg. There's a lot you haven't told us, and Saphira and I can't afford to ignore anything that might be dangerous."

Dark lines appeared on Brom's forehead as he reined Snowfire to a halt. "You won't wait?" he asked. Eragon shook his head mulishly. Brom sighed. "This wouldn't be a problem if you weren't so suspicious, but I suppose that you wouldn't be worth my time if you were otherwise." Eragon was unsure if he should take that as a compliment. Brom lit his pipe and slowly blew a plume of smoke into the air. "I'll tell you," he said, "but you have to understand that I cannot reveal everything." Eragon started to protest, but Brom cut him off. "It's not out of a desire to withhold information, but because I won't give away secrets that aren't mine. There are other stories woven in with this narrative. You'll have to talk with the others involved to find out the rest."

"Very well. Explain what you can," said Eragon.

"Are you sure?" asked Brom. "There are reasons for my secretiveness. I've tried to protect you by shielding you from forces that would tear you apart. Once you know of them and their purposes, you'll never have the chance to live quietly. You will have to choose sides and make a stand. Do you really want to know?"

"I cannot live my life in ignorance," said Eragon quietly.

"A worthy goal.… Very well: there is a war raging in Alagaësia between the Varden and the Empire. Their conflict, however, reaches far beyond any incidental armed clashes. They are locked in a titanic power struggle … centered around you."

"Me?" said Eragon, disbelieving. "That's impossible. I don't have anything to do with either of them."

"Not yet," said Brom, "but your very existence is the focus of their battles. The Varden and the Empire aren't fighting to control this land or its people. Their goal is to control the next generation of Riders, of whom you are the first. Whoever controls these Riders will become the undisputed master of Alagaësia."

Eragon tried to absorb Brom's statements. It seemed incomprehensible that so many people would be interested in him and Saphira. No one besides Brom had thought he was that important. The

whole concept of the Empire and Varden fighting over him was too abstract for him to grasp fully. Objections quickly formed in his mind. "But all the Riders were killed except for the Forsworn, who joined Galbatorix. As far as I know, even those are now dead. And you told me in Carvahall that no one knows if there are still dragons in Alagaësia."

"I lied about the dragons," said Brom flatly. "Even though the Riders are gone, there are still three dragon eggs left—all of them in Galbatorix's possession. Actually there are only two now, since Saphira hatched. The king salvaged the three during his last great battle with the Riders."

"So there may soon be two new Riders, both of them loyal to the king?" asked Eragon with a sinking feeling.

"Exactly," said Brom. "There is a deadly race in progress. Galbatorix is desperately trying to find the people for whom his eggs will hatch, while the Varden are employing every means to kill his candidates or steal the eggs."

"But where did Saphira's egg come from? How could anyone have gotten it away from the king? And why do you know all of this?" asked Eragon, bewildered.

"So many questions," laughed Brom bitterly. "There is another chapter to all this, one that took place long before you were born. Back then I was a bit younger, though perhaps not as wise. I hated the Empire—for reasons I'll keep to myself—and wanted to damage it in any way I could. My fervor led me to a scholar, Jeod, who claimed to have discovered a book that showed a secret passageway into Galbatorix's castle. I eagerly brought Jeod to the Varden—who are my 'friends'—and they arranged to have the eggs stolen."

The Varden!

"However, something went amiss, and our thief got only one egg. For some reason he fled with it and didn't return to the Varden. When he wasn't found, Jeod and I were sent to bring him and the egg back." Brom's eyes grew distant, and he spoke in a curious voice. "That was the start of one of the greatest searches in history. We raced against the Ra'zac and Morzan, last of the Forsworn and the king's finest servant."

"Morzan!" interrupted Eragon. "But he was the one who betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix!" *And that happened so long ago! Morzan must have been ancient.* It disturbed him to be reminded of how long Riders lived.

"So?" asked Brom, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, he was old, but strong and cruel. He was one of the king's first followers and by far his most loyal. As there had been blood between us before, the hunt for the egg turned into a personal battle. When it was located in Gil'ead, I rushed

there and fought Morzan for possession. It was a terrible contest, but in the end I slew him. During the conflict I was separated from Jeod. There was no time to search for him, so I took the egg and bore it to the Varden, who asked me to train whomever became the new Rider. I agreed and decided to hide in Carvahall—which I had been to several times before—until the Varden contacted me. I was never summoned."

"Then how did Saphira's egg appear in the Spine? Was another one stolen from the king?" asked Eragon.

Brom grunted. "Small chance of that. He has the remaining two guarded so thoroughly that it would be suicide to try and steal them. No, Saphira was taken from the Varden, and I think I know how. To protect the egg, its guardian must have tried to send it to me with magic.

"The Varden haven't contacted me to explain how they lost the egg, so I suspect that their runners were intercepted by the Empire and the Ra'zac were sent in their place. I'm sure they were quite eager to find me, as I've managed to foil many of their plans."

"Then the Ra'zac didn't know about me when they arrived in Carvahall," said Eragon with wonder.

"That's right," replied Brom. "If that ass Sloan had kept his mouth shut, they might not have found out about you. Events could have turned out quite differently. In a way I have you to thank for my life. If the Ra'zac hadn't become so preoccupied with you, they might have caught me unawares, and that would have been the end of Brom the storyteller. The only reason they ran was because I'm stronger than the two of them, especially during the day. They must have planned to drug me during the night, then question me about the egg."

"You sent a message to the Varden, telling them about me?"

"Yes. I'm sure they'll want me to bring you to them as soon as possible."

"But you're not going to, are you?"

Brom shook his head. "No, I'm not."

"Why not? Being with the Varden must be safer than chasing after the Ra'zac, especially for a new Rider."

Brom snorted and looked at Eragon with fondness. "The Varden are dangerous people. If we go to them, you will be entangled in their politics and machinations. Their leaders may send you on missions just to make a point, even though you might not be strong enough for them. I want you to be well prepared before you go anywhere near the Varden. At least while we pursue the Ra'zac, I don't have to worry about someone poisoning your water. This is the lesser of two evils. And," he said with a smile, "it keeps you happy while I train you.… Tuatha du orothrim is just a stage in your instruction. I *will* help you find—and perhaps even kill—the Ra'zac, for they are as much my

enemies as yours. But then you will have to make a choice."

"And that would be …?" asked Eragon warily.

"Whether to join the Varden," said Brom. "If you kill the Ra'zac, the only ways for you to escape Galbatorix's wrath will be to seek the Varden's protection, flee to Surda, or plead for the king's mercy and join his forces. Even if you don't kill the Ra'zac, you will still face this choice eventually."

Eragon knew the best way to gain sanctuary might be to join the Varden, but he did not want to spend his entire life fighting the Empire like they did. He mulled over Brom's comments, trying to consider them from every angle. "You still didn't explain how you know so much about dragons."

"No, I didn't, did I?" said Brom with a crooked smile. "That will have to wait for another time."

Why me? Eragon asked himself. What made him so special that he should become a Rider? "Did you ever meet my mother?" he blurted.

Brom looked grave. "Yes, I did."

"What was she like?"

The old man sighed. "She was full of dignity and pride, like Garrow. Ultimately it was her downfall, but it was one of her greatest gifts nevertheless.… She always helped the poor and the less fortunate, no matter what her situation."

"You knew her well?" asked Eragon, startled.

"Well enough to miss her when she was gone."

As Cadoc plodded along, Eragon tried to recall when he had thought that Brom was just a scruffy old man who told stories. For the first time Eragon understood how ignorant he had been.

He told Saphira what he had learned. She was intrigued by Brom's revelations, but recoiled from the thought of being one of Galbatorix's possessions. At last she said, *Aren't you glad that you didn't stay in Carvahall? Think of all the interesting experiences you would have missed!* Eragon groaned in mock distress.

When they stopped for the day, Eragon searched for water while Brom made dinner. He rubbed his hands together for warmth as he walked in a large circle, listening for a creek or spring. It was gloomy and damp between the trees.

He found a stream a ways from the camp, then crouched on the bank and watched the water splash over the rocks, dipping in his fingertips. The icy mountain water swirled around his skin, numbing it. *It doesn't care what happens to us, or anyone else*, thought Eragon. He shivered and stood.

An unusual print on the opposing stream bank caught his attention. It was oddly shaped and very large. Curious, he jumped across the

stream and onto a rock shelf. As he landed, his foot hit a patch of damp moss. He grabbed a branch for support, but it broke, and he thrust out his hand to break his fall. He felt his right wrist crack as he hit the ground. Pain lanced up his arm.

A steady stream of curses came out from behind his clenched teeth as he tried not to howl. Half blind with pain, he curled on the ground, cradling his arm. *Eragon!* came Saphira's alarmed cry. *What happened?*

Broke my wrist … did something stupid … fell.

I'm coming, said Saphira.

No—I can make it back. Don't … come. Trees too close for … wings.

She sent him a brief image of her tearing the forest apart to get at him, then said, *Hurry*.

Groaning, he staggered upright. The print was pressed deeply into the ground a few feet away. It was the mark of a heavy, nail-studded boot. Eragon instantly remembered the tracks that had surrounded the pile of bodies in Yazuac. "Urgal," he spat, wishing that Zar'roc was with him; he could not use his bow with only one hand. His head snapped up, and he shouted with his mind, *Saphira! Urgals! Keep Brom safe*.

Eragon leapt back over the stream and raced toward their camp, yanking out his hunting knife. He saw potential enemies behind every tree and bush. *I hope there's only one Urgal*. He burst into the camp, ducking as Saphira's tail swung overhead. "Stop. It's me!" he yelled.

Oops, said Saphira. Her wings were folded in front of her chest like a wall.

"Oops?" growled Eragon, running to her. "You could've killed me! Where's Brom?"

"I'm right here," snapped Brom's voice from behind Saphira's wings. "Tell your crazy dragon to release me; she won't listen to me."

"Let him go!" said Eragon, exasperated. "Didn't you tell him?"

No, she said sheepishly. *You just said to keep him safe*. She lifted her wings, and Brom stepped forward angrily.

"I found an Urgal footprint. And it's fresh."

Brom immediately turned serious. "Saddle the horses. We're leaving." He put out the fire, but Eragon did not move. "What's wrong with your arm?"

"My wrist is broken," he said, swaying.

Brom cursed and saddled Cadoc for him. He helped Eragon onto the horse and said, "We have to put a splint on your arm as soon as possible. Try not to move your wrist until then." Eragon gripped the reins tightly with his left hand. Brom said to Saphira, "It's almost dark; you might as well fly right overhead. If Urgals show up, they'll think twice about attacking with you nearby."

They'd better, or else they won't think again, remarked Saphira as she

took off.

The light was disappearing quickly, and the horses were tired, but they spurred them on without respite. Eragon's wrist, swollen and red, continued to throb. A mile from the camp, Brom halted. "Listen," he said.

Eragon heard the faint call of a hunting horn behind them. As it fell silent, panic gripped him. "They must have found where we were," said Brom, "and probably Saphira's tracks. They will chase us now. It's not in their nature to let prey escape." Then two horns winded. They were closer. A chill ran through Eragon. "Our only chance is to run," said Brom. He raised his head to the sky, and his face blanked as he called Saphira.

She rushed out of the night sky and landed. "Leave Cadoc. Go with her. You'll be safer," commanded Brom.

"What about you?" Eragon protested.

"I'll be fine. Now go!" Unable to muster the energy to argue, Eragon climbed onto Saphira while Brom lashed Snowfire and rode away with Cadoc. Saphira flew after him, flapping above the galloping horses.

Eragon clung to Saphira as best he could; he winced whenever her movements jostled his wrist. The horns blared nearby, bringing a fresh wave of terror. Brom crashed through the underbrush, forcing the horses to their limits. The horns trumpeted in unison close behind him, then were quiet.

Minutes passed. *Where are the Urgals?* wondered Eragon. A horn sounded, this time in the distance. He sighed in relief, resting against Saphira's neck, while on the ground Brom slowed his headlong rush. *That was close*, said Eragon.

Yes, but we cannot stop until—Saphira was interrupted as a horn blasted directly underneath them. Eragon jerked in surprise, and Brom resumed his frenzied retreat. Horned Urgals, shouting with coarse voices, barreled along the trail on horses, swiftly gaining ground. They were almost in sight of Brom; the old man could not outrun them. *We have to do something!* exclaimed Eragon.

What?

Land in front of the Urgals!

Are you crazy? demanded Saphira.

Land! I know what I'm doing, said Eragon. *There isn't time for anything else. They're going to overtake Brom!*

Very well. Saphira pulled ahead of the Urgals, then turned, preparing to drop onto the trail. Eragon reached for his power and felt the familiar resistance in his mind that separated him from the magic. He did not try to breach it yet. A muscle twitched in his neck.

As the Urgals pounded up the trail, he shouted, "Now!" Saphira abruptly folded her wings and dropped straight down from above the

trees, landing on the trail in a spray of dirt and rocks.

The Urgals shouted with alarm and yanked on their horses' reins. The animals went stiff-legged and collided into each other, but the Urgals quickly untangled themselves to face Saphira with bared weapons. Hate crossed their faces as they glared at her. There were twelve of them, all ugly, jeering brutes. Eragon wondered why they did not flee. He had thought that the sight of Saphira would frighten them away. *Why are they waiting? Are they going to attack us or not?*

He was shocked when the largest Urgal advanced and spat, "Our master wishes to speak with you, human!" The monster spoke in deep, rolling gutturals.

It's a trap, warned Saphira before Eragon could say anything. *Don't listen to him.*

At least let's find out what he has to say, he reasoned, curious, but extremely wary. "Who is your master?" he asked.

The Urgal sneered. "His name does not deserve to be given to one as low as yourself. He rules the sky and holds dominance over the earth. You are no more than a stray ant to him. Yet he has decreed that you shall be brought before him, *alive*. Take heart that you have become worthy of such notice!"

"I'll never go with you nor any of my enemies!" declared Eragon, thinking of Yazuac. "Whether you serve Shade, Urgal, or some twisted fiend I've not heard of, I have no wish to parley with him."

"That is a grave mistake," growled the Urgal, showing his fangs. "There is no way to escape him. Eventually you will stand before our master. If you resist, he will fill your days with agony."

Eragon wondered who had the power to bring the Urgals under one banner. Was there a third great force loose in the land—along with the Empire and the Varden? "Keep your offer and tell your master that the crows can eat his entrails for all I care!"

Rage swept through the Urgals; their leader howled, gnashing his teeth. "We'll drag you to him, then!" He waved his arm and the Urgals rushed at Saphira. Raising his right hand, Eragon barked, "Jierda!"

No! cried Saphira, but it was too late.

The monsters faltered as Eragon's palm glowed. Beams of light lanced from his hand, striking each of them in the gut. The Urgals were thrown through the air and smashed into trees, falling senseless to the ground.

Fatigue suddenly drained Eragon of strength, and he tumbled off Saphira. His mind felt hazy and dull. As Saphira bent over him, he realized that he might have gone too far. The energy needed to lift and throw twelve Urgals was enormous. Fear engulfed him as he struggled to stay conscious.

At the edge of his vision he saw one of the Urgals stagger to his feet,

sword in hand. Eragon tried to warn Saphira, but he was too weak. *No* …, he thought feebly. The Urgal crept toward Saphira until he was well past her tail, then raised his sword to strike her neck. *No!* … Saphira whirled on the monster, roaring savagely. Her talons slashed with blinding speed. Blood spurted everywhere as the Urgal was rent in two.

Saphira snapped her jaws together with finality and returned to Eragon. She gently wrapped her bloody claws around his torso, then growled and jumped into the air. The night blurred into a pain-filled streak. The hypnotic sound of Saphira's wings put him in a bleary trance: up, down; up, down; up, down.…

When Saphira eventually landed, Eragon was dimly aware of Brom talking with her. Eragon could not understand what they said, but a decision must have been reached because Saphira took off again.

His stupor yielded to sleep that covered him like a soft blanket.

Eragon twisted under the blankets, reluctant to open his eyes. He dozed, then a fuzzy thought entered his mind … *How did I get here?* Confused, he pulled the blankets tighter and felt something hard on his right arm. He tried to move his wrist. It zinged with pain. *The Urgals!* He bolted upright.

He lay in a small clearing that was empty save a small campfire heating a stew-filled pot. A squirrel chattered on a branch. His bow and quiver rested alongside the blankets. Attempting to stand made him grimace, as his muscles were feeble and sore. There was a heavy splint on his bruised right arm.

Where is everyone? he wondered forlornly. He tried to call Saphira, but to his alarm could not feel her. Ravenous hunger gripped him, so he ate the stew. Still hungry, he looked for the saddlebags, hoping to find a chunk of bread. Neither the saddlebags nor the horses were in the clearing. *I'm sure there's a good reason for this*, he thought, suppressing a surge of uneasiness.

He wandered about the clearing, then returned to his blankets and rolled them up. Without anything better to do, he sat against a tree and watched the clouds overhead. Hours passed, but Brom and Saphira did not show up. *I hope nothing's wrong.*

As the afternoon dragged on, Eragon grew bored and started to explore the surrounding forest. When he became tired, he rested under a fir tree that leaned against a boulder with a bowl-shaped depression filled with clear dew water.

Eragon stared at the water and thought about Brom's instructions for scrying. *Maybe I can see where Saphira is. Brom said that scrying takes a lot of energy, but I'm stronger than he is.…* He breathed deeply and closed his eyes. In his mind he formed a picture of Saphira, making it as lifelike as possible. It was more demanding than he expected. Then he said, "Draumr kópa!" and gazed at the water.

Its surface became completely flat, frozen by an invisible force. The reflections disappeared and the water became clear. On it shimmered an image of Saphira. Her surroundings were pure white, but Eragon could see that she was flying. Brom sat on her back, beard streaming, sword on his knees.

Eragon tiredly let the image fade. *At least they're safe.* He gave himself a few minutes to recuperate, then leaned back over the water. *Roran, how are you?* In his mind he saw his cousin clearly. Impulsively, he drew upon the magic and uttered the words.

The water grew still, then the image formed on its surface. Roran appeared, sitting on an invisible chair. Like Saphira, his surroundings were white. There were new lines on Roran's face—he looked more like Garrow than ever before. Eragon held the image in place as long as he could. *Is Roran in Therinsford? He's certainly nowhere I've been.*

The strain of using magic had brought beads of sweat to his forehead. He sighed and for a long time was content just to sit. Then an absurd notion struck him. *What if I tried to scry something I created with my imagination or saw in a dream?* He smiled. *Perhaps I'd be shown what my own consciousness looks like.*

It was too tempting an idea to pass by. He knelt by the water once again. *What shall I look for?* He considered a few things, but discarded them all when he remembered his dream about the woman in the cell.

After fixing the scene in his mind, he spoke the words and watched the water intently. He waited, but nothing happened. Disappointed, he was about to release the magic when inky blackness swirled across the water, covering the surface. The image of a lone candle flickered in the darkness, brightening to illuminate a stone cell. The woman from his dream was curled up on a cot in one corner. She lifted her head, dark hair falling back, and stared directly at Eragon. He froze, the force of her gaze keeping him in place. Chills ran up his spine as their eyes locked. Then the woman trembled and collapsed limply.

The water cleared. Eragon rocked back on his heels, gasping. "This can't be." *She shouldn't be real; I only dreamed about her! How could she know I was looking at her? And how could I have scryed into a dungeon that I've never seen?* He shook his head, wondering if any of his other dreams had been visions.

The rhythmic thump of Saphira's wings interrupted his thoughts. He hurried back to the clearing, arriving just as Saphira landed. Brom was on her back, as Eragon had seen, but his sword was now bloody. Brom's face was contorted; the edges of his beard were stained red. "What happened?" asked Eragon, afraid that he had been wounded.

"What happened?" roared the old man. "I've been trying to clean up your mess!" He slashed the air with the sword, flinging drops of blood along its arc. "Do you know what you did with that little trick of yours? Do you?"

"I stopped the Urgals from catching you," said Eragon, a pit forming in his stomach.

"Yes," growled Brom, "but that piece of magic nearly killed you! You've been sleeping for two days. There were twelve Urgals. *Twelve!* But that didn't stop you from trying to throw them all the way to Teirm, now did it? What were you thinking? Sending a rock through each of their heads would have been the smart thing to do. But no, you had to knock them unconscious so they could run away later. I've

spent the last two days trying to track them down. Even with Saphira, three escaped!"

"I didn't want to kill them," said Eragon, feeling very small.

"It wasn't a problem in Yazuac."

"There was no choice then, and I couldn't control the magic. This time it just seemed … extreme."

"Extreme!" cried Brom. "It's not extreme when they wouldn't show you the same mercy. And why, oh why, did you *show* yourself to them?"

"You said that they had found Saphira's footprints. It didn't make any difference if they saw me," said Eragon defensively.

Brom stabbed his sword into the dirt and snapped, "I said they had *probably* found her tracks. We didn't know for certain. They might have believed they were chasing some stray travelers. But why would they think that now? After all, *you landed right in front of them!* And since you let them live, they're scrambling around the countryside with all sorts of fantastic tales! This might even get back to the Empire!" He threw his hands up. "You don't even deserve to be called a Rider after this, *boy*." "Brom yanked his sword out of the ground and stomped to the fire. He took a rag from inside his robe and angrily began to clean the blade.

Eragon was stunned. He tried to ask Saphira for advice, but all she would say was, *Speak with Brom*.

Hesitantly, Eragon made his way to the fire and asked, "Would it help if I said I was sorry?"

Brom sighed and sheathed his sword. "No, it wouldn't. Your feelings can't change what happened." He jabbed his finger at Eragon's chest. "You made some very bad choices that could have dangerous repercussions. Not the least of which is that you almost died. Died, Eragon! From now on you're going to have to think. There's a reason why we're born with brains in our heads, not rocks."

Eragon nodded, abashed. "It's not as bad as you think, though; the Urgals already knew about me. They had orders to capture me."

Astonishment widened Brom's eyes. He stuck his unlit pipe in his mouth. "No, it's not as bad as I thought. It's worse! Saphira told me you had talked with the Urgals, but she didn't mention this." The words tumbled out of Eragon's mouth as he quickly described the confrontation. "So they have some sort of leader now, eh?" questioned Brom.

Eragon nodded.

"And you just defied his wishes, insulted him, and attacked his men?" Brom shook his head. "I didn't think it could get any worse. If the Urgals had been killed, your rudeness would have gone unnoticed, but now it'll be impossible to ignore. Congratulations, you just made

enemies with one of the most powerful beings in Alagaësia."

"All right, I made a mistake," said Eragon sullenly.

"Yes, you did," agreed Brom, eyes flashing. "What has me worried, though, is who this Urgal leader is."

Shivering, Eragon asked softly, "What happens now?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. "Your arm is going to take at least a couple of weeks to heal. That time would be well spent forging some sense into you. I suppose this is partially my fault. I've been teaching you *how* to do things, but not whether you *should*. It takes discretion, something you obviously lack. All the magic in Alagaësia won't help you if you don't know when to use it."

"But we're still going to Dras-Leona, right?" asked Eragon.

Brom rolled his eyes. "Yes, we can keep looking for the Ra'zac, but even if we find them, it won't do any good until you've healed." He began unsaddling Saphira. "Are you well enough to ride?"

"I think so."

"Good, then we can still cover a few miles today."

"Where are Cadoc and Snowfire?"

Brom pointed off to the side. "Over there a ways. I picketed them where there was grass." Eragon prepared to leave, then followed Brom to the horses.

Saphira said pointedly, *If you had explained what you were planning to do, none of this would have happened. I would have told you it was a bad idea not to kill the Urgals. I only agreed to do what you asked because I assumed it was halfway reasonable!*

I don't want to talk about it.

As you wish, she sniffed.

As they rode, every bump and dip in the trail made Eragon grit his teeth with discomfort. If he had been alone, he would have stopped. With Brom there, he dared not complain. Also, Brom started drilling him with difficult scenarios involving Urgals, magic, and Saphira. The imagined fights were many and varied. Sometimes a Shade or other dragons were included. Eragon discovered that it was possible to torture his body and mind at the same time. He got most of the questions wrong and became increasingly frustrated.

When they stopped for the night, Brom grumbled shortly, "It was a start." Eragon knew that he was disappointed.

The next day was easier on both of them. Eragon felt better and was able to answer more of Brom's questions correctly. After an especially difficult exercise, Eragon mentioned his scrying of the woman. Brom pulled on his beard. "You say she was imprisoned?"

"Yes."

"Did you see her face?" asked Brom intently.

"Not very clearly. The lighting was bad, yet I could tell that she was beautiful. It's strange; I didn't have any problem seeing her eyes. And she did look at me."

Brom shook his head. "As far as I know, it's impossible for anyone to know if they're being scryed upon."

"Do you know who she might be?" asked Eragon, surprised by the eagerness in his own voice.

"Not really," admitted Brom. "If pressed, I suppose I could come up with a few guesses, but none of them would be very likely. This dream of yours is peculiar. Somehow you managed to scry in your sleep something that you'd never seen before—without saying the words of power. Dreams do occasionally touch the spirit realm, but this is different."

"Perhaps to understand this we should search every prison and dungeon until we find the woman," bantered Eragon. He actually thought it would be a good idea. Brom laughed and rode on.

Brom's strict training filled nearly every hour as the days slowly blended into weeks. Because of his splint, Eragon was forced to use his left hand whenever they sparred. Before long he could duel as well with his left hand as he had with his right.

By the time they crossed the Spine and came to the plains, spring had crept over Alagaësia, summoning a multitude of flowers. The bare deciduous trees were russet with buds, while new blades of grass began to push up between last year's dead stalks. Birds returned from their winter absence to mate and build nests.

The travelers followed the Toark River southeast, along the edge of the Spine. It grew steadily as tributaries flowed into it from every side, feeding its bulging girth. When the river was over a league wide, Brom pointed at the silt islands that dotted the water. "We're close to Leona Lake now," he said. "It's only about two leagues away."

"Do you think we can get there before nightfall?" asked Eragon.

"We can try."

Dusk soon made the trail hard to follow, but the sound of the river at their side guided them. When the moon rose, the bright disk provided enough light to see what lay ahead.

Leona Lake looked like a thin sheet of silver beaten over the land. The water was so calm and smooth it did not even seem to be liquid. Aside from a bright strip of moonlight reflecting off the surface, it was indistinguishable from the ground. Saphira was on the rocky shore, fanning her wings to dry them. Eragon greeted her and she said, *The water is lovely—deep, cool, and clear.*

Maybe I'll go swimming tomorrow, he responded. They set up camp under a stand of trees and were soon asleep.

At dawn, Eragon eagerly rushed out to see the lake in daylight. A whitecapped expanse of water rippled with fan-shaped patterns where wind brushed it. The pure size of it delighted him. He whooped and ran to the water. *Saphira, where are you? Let's have some fun!*

The moment Eragon climbed onto her, she jumped out over the water. They soared upward, circling over the lake, but even at that height the opposing shore was not visible. *Would you like to take a bath?* Eragon casually asked Saphira.

She grinned wolfishly. *Hold on!* She locked her wings and sank to the waves, clipping the crests with her claws. The water sparkled in the sunlight as they sailed over it. Eragon whooped again. Then Saphira folded her wings and dived into the lake, her head and neck entering it like a lance.

The water hit Eragon like an icy wall, knocking out his breath and almost tearing him off Saphira. He held on tightly as she swam to the surface. With three strokes of her feet, she breached it and sent a burst of shimmering water toward the sky. Eragon gasped and shook his hair as Saphira slithered across the lake, using her tail as a rudder.

Ready?

Eragon nodded and took a deep breath, tightening his arms. This time they slid gently under the water. They could see for yards through the unclouded liquid. Saphira twisted and turned in fantastic shapes, slipping through the water like an eel. Eragon felt as if he were riding a sea serpent of legend.

Just as his lungs started to cry for air, Saphira arched her back and pointed her head upward. An explosion of droplets haloed them as she leapt into the air, wings snapping open. With two powerful flaps she gained altitude.

Wow! That was fantastic, exclaimed Eragon.

Yes, said Saphira happily. *Though it's a pity you can't hold your breath longer.*

Nothing I can do about that, he said, pressing water out of his hair.

His clothes were drenched, and the wind from Saphira's wings chilled him. He pulled at his splint—his wrist itched.

Once Eragon was dry, he and Brom saddled the horses and started around Leona Lake in high spirits while Saphira playfully dived in and out of the water.

Before dinner, Eragon blocked Zar'roc's edge in preparation for their usual sparring. Neither he nor Brom moved as they waited for the other to strike first. Eragon inspected their surroundings for anything that might give him an advantage. A stick near the fire caught his attention.

Eragon swooped down, grabbed the stick, and hurled it at Brom. The splint got in his way, though, and Brom easily sidestepped the piece of wood. The old man rushed forward, swinging his sword. Eragon ducked just as the blade whistled over his head. He growled and tackled Brom ferociously.

They pitched to the ground, each struggling to stay on top. Eragon rolled to the side and swept Zar'roc over the ground at Brom's shins. Brom parried the blow with the hilt of his sword, then jumped to his feet. Twisting as he stood, Eragon attacked again, guiding Zar'roc through a complex pattern. Sparks danced from their blades as they struck again and again. Brom blocked each blow, his face tight with concentration. But Eragon could tell that he was tiring. The relentless hammering continued as each sought an opening in the other's defenses.

Then Eragon felt the battle change. Blow by blow he gained advantage; Brom's parries slowed and he lost ground. Eragon easily blocked a stab from Brom. Veins pulsed on the old man's forehead and cords bulged in his neck from the effort.

Suddenly confident, Eragon swung Zar'roc faster than ever, weaving a web of steel around Brom's sword. With a burst of speed, he smashed the flat of his blade against Brom's guard and knocked the sword to the ground. Before Brom could react, Eragon flicked Zar'roc up to his throat.

They stood panting, the red sword tip resting on Brom's collarbone. Eragon slowly lowered his arm and backed away. It was the first time he had bested Brom without resorting to trickery. Brom picked up his sword and sheathed it. Still breathing hard, he said, "We're done for today."

"But we just started," said Eragon, startled.

Brom shook his head. "I can teach you nothing more of the sword. Of all the fighters I've met, only three of them could have defeated me like that, and I doubt any of them could have done it with their left hand." He smiled ruefully. "I may not be as young as I used to be, but

I can tell that you're a talented and rare swordsman."

"Does this mean we're not going to spar every night?" asked Eragon.

"Oh, you're not getting out of it," laughed Brom. "But we'll go easier now. It's not as important if we miss a night here or there." He wiped his brow. "Just remember, if you ever have the misfortune to fight an elf—trained or not, female or male—expect to lose. They, along with dragons and other creatures of magic, are many times stronger than nature intended. Even the weakest elf could easily overpower you. The same goes for the Ra'zac—they are not human and tire much more slowly than we do."

"Is there any way to become their equal?" asked Eragon. He sat cross-legged by Saphira.

You fought well, she said. He smiled.

Brom seated himself with a shrug. "There are a few, but none are available to you now. Magic will let you defeat all but the strongest enemies. For those you'll need Saphira's help, plus a great deal of luck. Remember, when creatures of magic actually use magic, they can accomplish things that could kill a human, because of their enhanced abilities."

"How do you fight with magic?" asked Eragon.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," he said, leaning on an elbow. "Suppose I was attacked by a Shade. How could I block his magic? Most spells take place instantaneously, which makes it impossible to react in time. And even if I could, how would I nullify an enemy's magic? It seems I would have to know my opponent's intention *before* he acted." He paused. "I just don't see how it can be done. Whoever attacked first would win."

Brom sighed. "What you are talking about—a 'wizards' duel,' if you will—is extremely dangerous. Haven't you ever wondered how Galbatorix was able to defeat all of the Riders with the help of only a dozen or so traitors?"

"I never thought about it," acknowledged Eragon.

"There are several ways. Some you'll learn about later, but the main one is that Galbatorix was, and still is, a master of breaking into people's minds. You see, in a wizards' duel there are strict rules that each side must observe or else both contestants will die. To begin with, no one uses magic until one of the participants gains access to the other's mind."

Saphira curled her tail comfortably around Eragon and asked, *Why wait? By the time an enemy realizes that you've attacked, it will be too late for him to act.* Eragon repeated the question out loud.

Brom shook his head. "No, it won't. If I were to suddenly use my power against you, Eragon, you would surely die, but in the brief

moment before you were destroyed, there would be time for a counterattack. Therefore, unless one combatant has a death wish, neither side attacks until one of them has breached the other's defenses."

"Then what happens?" Eragon inquired.

Brom shrugged and said, "Once you're inside your enemy's mind, it's easy enough to anticipate what he will do and prevent it. Even with that advantage, it's still possible to lose if you don't know how to counteract spells."

He filled and lit his pipe. "And that requires extraordinarily quick thinking. Before you can defend yourself, you have to understand the exact nature of the forces directed at you. If you're being attacked with heat, you have to know whether it is being conveyed to you through air, fire, light, or some other medium. Only once that's known can you combat the magic by, for instance, chilling the heated material."

"It sounds difficult."

"Extremely," confirmed Brom. A plume of smoke rose from his pipe. "Seldom can people survive such a duel for more than a few seconds. The enormous amount of effort and skill required condemns anyone without the proper training to a quick death. Once you've progressed, I'll start teaching you the necessary methods. In the meantime, if you ever find yourself facing a wizards' duel, I suggest you run away as fast as you can."

They lunched at Fasaloft, a bustling lakeside village. It was a charming place set on a rise overlooking the lake. As they ate in the hostel's common room, Eragon listened intently to the gossip and was relieved to hear no rumors of him and Saphira.

The trail, now a road, had grown steadily worse over the past two days. Wagon wheels and iron-shod hooves had conspired to tear up the ground, making many sections impassable. An increase in travelers forced Saphira to hide during the day and then catch up with Brom and Eragon at night.

For days they continued south along Leona Lake's vast shore. Eragon began to wonder if they would ever get around it, so he was heartened when they met men who said that Dras-Leona was an easy day's ride ahead of them.

Eragon rose early the following morning. His fingers twitched with anticipation at the thought of finally finding the Ra'zac. *The two of you must be careful*, said Saphira. *The Ra'zac could have spies watching for travelers that fit your description*.

We'll do our best to remain inconspicuous, he assured her.

She lowered her head until their eyes met. *Perhaps, but realize that I won't be able to protect you as I did with the Urgals. I will be too far away to come to your aid, nor would I survive long in the narrow streets your kind favor. Follow Brom's lead in this hunt; he is sensible*.

I know, he said somberly.

Will you go with Brom to the Varden? Once the Ra'zac are killed, he will want to take you to them. And since Galbatorix will be enraged by the Ra'zac's death, that may be the safest thing for us to do.

Eragon rubbed his arms. *I don't want to fight the Empire all the time like the Varden do. Life is more than constant war. There'll be time to consider it once the Ra'zac are gone*.

Don't be too sure, she warned, then went to hide herself until night.

The road was clogged with farmers taking their goods to market in Dras-Leona. Brom and Eragon were forced to slow their horses and wait for wagons that blocked the way.

Although they saw smoke in the distance before noon, it was another league before the city was clearly visible. Unlike Teirm, a planned city, Dras-Leona was a tangled mess that sprawled next to Leona Lake. Ramshackle buildings sat on crooked streets, and the heart of the city was surrounded by a dirty, pale yellow wall of

daubed mud.

Several miles east, a mountain of bare rock speared the sky with spires and columns, a tenebrous nightmare ship. Near-vertical sides rose out of the ground like a jagged piece of the earth's bone.

Brom pointed. "*That* is Helgrind. It's the reason Dras-Leona was originally built. People are fascinated by it, even though it's an unhealthy and malevolent thing." He gestured at the buildings inside the city's wall. "We should go to the center of the city first."

As they crept along the road to Dras-Leona, Eragon saw that the highest building within the city was a cathedral that loomed behind the walls. It was strikingly similar to Helgrind, especially when its arches and flanged spires caught the light. "Who do they worship?" he asked.

Brom grimaced in distaste. "Their prayers go to Helgrind. It's a cruel religion they practice. They drink human blood and make flesh offerings. Their priests often lack body parts because they believe that the more bone and sinew you give up, the less you're attached to the mortal world. They spend much of their time arguing about which of Helgrind's three peaks is the highest and most important and whether the fourth—and lowest—should be included in their worship."

"That's horrible," said Eragon, shuddering.

"Yes," said Brom grimly, "but don't say that to a believer. You'll quickly lose a hand in 'penance.' "

At Dras-Leona's enormous gates, they led the horses through the crush of people. Ten soldiers were stationed on either side of the gates, casually scanning the crowd. Eragon and Brom passed into the city without incident.

The houses inside the city wall were tall and thin to compensate for the lack of space. Those next to the wall were braced against it. Most of the houses hung over the narrow, winding streets, covering the sky so that it was hard to tell if it was night or day. Nearly all the buildings were constructed of the same rough brown wood, which darkened the city even more. The air reeked like a sewer; the streets were filthy.

A group of ragged children ran between the houses, fighting over scraps of bread. Deformed beggars crouched next to the entrance gates, pleading for money. Their cries for help were like a chorus of the damned. *We don't even treat animals like this*, thought Eragon, eyes wide with anger. "I won't stay here," he said, rebelling against the sight.

"It gets better farther in," said Brom. "Right now we need to find an inn and form a strategy. Dras-Leona can be a dangerous place to even the most cautious. I don't want to remain on the streets any longer than necessary."

They forged deeper into Dras-Leona, leaving the squalid entrance behind. As they entered wealthier parts of the city, Eragon wondered, *How can these people live in ease when the suffering around them is so obvious?*

They found lodging at the Golden Globe, which was cheap but not decrepit. A narrow bed was crammed against one wall of the room, with a rickety table and a basin alongside it. Eragon took one look at the mattress and said, "I'm sleeping on the floor. There are probably enough bugs in that thing to eat me alive."

"Well, I wouldn't want to deprive them of a meal," said Brom, dropping his bags on the mattress. Eragon set his own on the floor and pulled off his bow.

"What now?" he asked.

"We find food and beer. After that, sleep. Tomorrow we can start looking for the Ra'zac." Before they left the room, Brom warned, "No matter what happens, make sure that your tongue doesn't loosen. We'll have to leave immediately if we're given away."

The inn's food was barely adequate, but its beer was excellent. By the time they stumbled back to the room, Eragon's head was buzzing pleasantly. He unrolled his blankets on the floor and slid under them as Brom tumbled onto the bed.

Just before Eragon fell asleep, he contacted Saphira: *We're going to be here for a few days, but this shouldn't take as long as it did at Teirm. When we discover where the Ra'zac are, you might be able to help us get them. I'll talk to you in the morning. Right now I'm not thinking too clearly*.

You've been drinking, came the accusing thought. Eragon considered it for a moment and had to agree that she was absolutely right. Her disapproval was clear, but all she said was, *I won't envy you in the morning*.

No, groaned Eragon, *but Brom will. He drank twice as much as I did*.

What was I thinking? wondered Eragon in the morning. His head was pounding and his tongue felt thick and fuzzy. As a rat skittered under the floor, Eragon winced at the noise.

How are we feeling? asked Saphira smugly.

Eragon ignored her.

A moment later, Brom rolled out of bed with a grumble. He doused his head in cold water from the basin, then left the room. Eragon followed him into the hallway. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"To recover."

"I'll come." At the bar, Eragon discovered that Brom's method of recovery involved imbibing copious amounts of hot tea and ice water and washing it all down with brandy. When they returned to the room, Eragon was able to function somewhat better.

Brom belted on his sword and smoothed the wrinkles out of his robe. "The first thing we need to do is ask some discreet questions. I want to find out where the Seithr oil was delivered in Dras-Leona and where it was taken from there. Most likely, soldiers or workmen were involved in transporting it. We have to find those men and get one to talk."

They left the Golden Globe and searched for warehouses where the Seithr oil might have been delivered. Near the center of Dras-Leona, the streets began to slant upward toward a palace of polished granite. It was built on a rise so that it towered above every building except the cathedral.

The courtyard was a mosaic of mother-of-pearl, and parts of the walls were inlaid with gold. Black statues stood in alcoves, with sticks of incense smoking in their cold hands. Soldiers stationed every four yards watched passersby keenly.

"Who lives there?" asked Eragon in awe.

"Marcus Tábor, ruler of this city. He answers only to the king and his own conscience, which hasn't been very active recently," said Brom. They walked around the palace, looking at the gated, ornate houses that surrounded it.

By midday they had learned nothing useful, so they stopped for lunch. "This city is too vast for us to comb it together," said Brom. "Search on your own. Meet me at the Golden Globe by dusk." He glowered at Eragon from under his bushy eyebrows. "I'm trusting you not to do anything stupid."

"I won't," promised Eragon. Brom handed him some coins, then

strode away in the opposite direction.

Throughout the rest of the day, Eragon talked with shopkeepers and workers, trying to be as pleasant and charming as he could. His questions led him from one end of the city to the other and back again. No one seemed to know about the oil. Wherever he went, the cathedral stared down at him. It was impossible to escape its tall spires.

At last he found a man who had helped ship the Seithr oil and remembered to which warehouse it had been taken. Eragon excitedly went to look at the building, then returned to the Golden Globe. It was over an hour before Brom came back, slumped with fatigue. "Did you find anything?" asked Eragon.

Brom brushed back his white hair. "I heard a great deal of interesting things today, not the least of which is that Galbatorix will visit Dras-Leona within the week."

"What?" exclaimed Eragon.

Brom slouched against the wall, the lines on his forehead deepening. "It seems that Tábor has taken a few too many liberties with his power, so Galbatorix has decided to come teach him a lesson in humility. It's the first time the king has left Urû'baen in over ten years."

"Do you think he knows of us?" asked Eragon.

"Of course he *knows* of us, but I'm sure he hasn't been told our location. If he had, we would already be in the Ra'zac's grasp. However, this means that whatever we're going to do about the Ra'zac must be accomplished before Galbatorix arrives. We don't want to be anywhere within twenty leagues of him. The one thing in our favor is that the Ra'zac are sure to be here, preparing for his visit."

"I want to get the Ra'zac," said Eragon, his fists tightening, "but not if it means fighting the king. He could probably tear me to pieces."

That seemed to amuse Brom. "Very good: caution. And you're right; you wouldn't stand a chance against Galbatorix. Now tell me what you learned today. It might confirm what I heard."

Eragon shrugged. "It was mostly drivel, but I did talk with a man who knew where the oil was taken. It's just an old warehouse. Other than that, I didn't discover anything useful."

"My day was a little more fruitful than yours. I heard the same thing you did, so I went to the warehouse and talked with the workers. It didn't take much cajoling before they revealed that the cases of Seithr oil are always sent from the warehouse to the palace."

"And that's when you came back here," finished Eragon.

"No, it's not! Don't interrupt. After that, I went to the palace and got myself invited into the servants' quarters as a bard. For several hours I wandered about, amusing the maids and others with songs and poems

—and asking questions all the while." Brom slowly filled his pipe with cardus weed. "It's really amazing all the things servants find out. Did you know that one of the earls has *three* mistresses, and they all live in the same wing of the palace?" He shook his head and lit the pipe. "Aside from the fascinating tidbits, I was told, quite by accident, where the oil is taken from the palace."

"And that is …?" asked Eragon impatiently.

Brom puffed on his pipe and blew a smoke ring. "Out of the city, of course. Every full moon two slaves are sent to the base of Helgrind with a month's worth of provisions. Whenever the Seithr oil arrives in Dras-Leona, they send it along with the provisions. The slaves are never seen again. And the one time someone followed them, he disappeared too."

"I thought the Riders demolished the slave trade," said Eragon.

"Unfortunately, it has flourished under the king's reign."

"So the Ra'zac are in Helgrind," said Eragon, thinking of the rock mountain.

"There or somewhere nearby."

"If they *are* in Helgrind, they'll be either at the bottom—and protected by a thick stone door—or higher up where only their flying mounts, or Saphira, can reach. Top or bottom, their shelter will no doubt be disguised." He thought for a moment. "If Saphira and I go flying around Helgrind, the Ra'zac are sure to see us—not to mention all of Dras-Leona."

"It is a problem," agreed Brom.

Eragon frowned. "What if we took the place of the two slaves? The full moon isn't far off. It would give us a perfect opportunity to get close to the Ra'zac."

Brom tugged his beard thoughtfully. "That's chancy at best. If the slaves are killed from a distance, we'll be in trouble. We can't harm the Ra'zac if they aren't in sight."

"We don't know if the slaves are killed at all," Eragon pointed out.

"I'm sure they are," said Brom, his face grave. Then his eyes sparkled, and he blew another smoke ring. "Still, it's an intriguing idea. If it were done with Saphira hidden nearby and a …" His voice trailed off. "It might work, but we'll have to move quickly. With the king coming, there isn't much time."

"Should we go to Helgrind and look around? It would be good to see the land in daylight so we won't be surprised by any ambushes," said Eragon.

Brom fingered his staff. "That can be done later. Tomorrow I'll return to the palace and figure out how we can replace the slaves. I have to be careful not to arouse suspicion, though—I could easily be revealed by spies and courtiers who know about the Ra'zac."

“I can’t believe it; we actually found them,” said Eragon quietly. An image of his dead uncle and burned farm flashed through his mind. His jaw tightened.

“The toughest part is yet to come, but yes, we’ve done well,” said Brom. “If fortune smiles on us, you may soon have your revenge and the Varden will be rid of a dangerous enemy. What comes after that will be up to you.”

Eragon opened his mind and jubilantly told Saphira, *We found the Ra’zac’s lair!*

Where? He quickly explained what they had discovered. *Helgrind*, she mused. *A fitting place for them*.

Eragon agreed. *When we’re done here, maybe we could visit Carvahall*.

What is it you want? she asked, suddenly sour. *To go back to your previous life? You know that won’t happen, so stop mooning after it! At a certain point you have to decide what to commit to. Will you hide for the rest of your life, or will you help the Varden? Those are the only options left to you, unless you join forces with Galbatorix, which I do not and never will accept.*

Softly, he said, *If I must choose, I cast my fate with the Varden, as you well know*.

Yes, but sometimes you have to hear yourself say it. She left him to ponder her words.

Eragon was alone in the room when he woke. Scrawled onto the wall with a charcoal stick was a note that read:

Eragon,

I will be gone until late tonight. Coins for food are under the mattress. Explore the city, enjoy yourself, but stay unnoticed!

Brom

P.S. Avoid the palace. Don't go anywhere without your bow! Keep it strung.

Eragon wiped the wall clean, then retrieved the money from under the bed. He slipped the bow across his back, thinking, *I wish I didn't have to go armed all the time*.

He left the Golden Globe and ambled through the streets, stopping to observe whatever interested him. There were many intriguing stores, but none quite as exciting as Angela's herb shop in Teirm. At times he glared at the dark, claustrophobic houses and wished that he were free of the city. When he grew hungry, he bought a wedge of cheese and a loaf of bread and ate them, sitting on a curb.

Later, in a far corner of Dras-Leona, he heard an auctioneer rattling off a list of prices. Curious, he headed toward the voice and arrived at a wide opening between two buildings. Ten men stood on a waist-high platform. Arrayed before them was a richly dressed crowd that was both colorful and boisterous. *Where are the goods for sale?* wondered Eragon.

The auctioneer finished his list and motioned for a young man behind the platform to join him. The man awkwardly climbed up, chains dragging at his hands and feet. "And here we have our first item," proclaimed the auctioneer. "A healthy male from the Hadarac Desert, captured just last month, and in excellent condition. Look at those arms and legs; he's strong as a bull! He'd be perfect as a shield bearer, or, if you don't trust him for that, hard labor. But let me tell you, lords and ladies, that would be a waste. He's bright as a nail, if you can get him to talk a civilized tongue!"

The crowd laughed, and Eragon ground his teeth with fury. His lips started to form a word that would free the slave, and his arm, newly liberated from the splint, rose. The mark on his palm shimmered. He

was about to release the magic when it struck him, *He'd never get away!* The slave would be caught before he reached the city walls. Eragon would only make the situation worse if he tried to help. He lowered his arm and quietly cursed. *Think! This is how you got into trouble with the Urgals.*

He watched helplessly as the slave was sold to a tall, hawk-nosed man. The next slave was a tiny girl, no more than six years old, wrenched from the arms of her crying mother. As the auctioneer started the bidding, Eragon forced himself to walk away, rigid with fury and outrage.

It was several blocks before the weeping was inaudible. *I'd like to see a thief try to cut my purse right now*, he thought grimly, almost wishing it would happen. Frustrated, he punched a nearby wall, bruising his knuckles.

That's the sort of thing I could stop by fighting the Empire, he realized. *With Saphira by my side I could free those slaves. I've been graced with special powers; it would be selfish of me not to use them for the benefit of others. If I don't, I might as well not be a Rider at all.*

It was a while before he took stock of his bearings and was surprised to find himself before the cathedral. Its twisted spires were covered with statues and scrollwork. Snarling gargoyles crouched along the eaves. Fantastic beasts writhed on the walls, and heroes and kings marched along their bottom edges, frozen in cold marble. Ribbed arches and tall stained-glass windows lined the cathedral's sides, along with columns of differing sizes. A lonely turret helmed the building like a mast.

Recessed in shadow at the cathedral's front was an iron-bound door inlaid with a row of silver script that Eragon recognized as the ancient language. As best he could tell, it read: *May thee who enter here understand thine impermanence and forget thine attachments to that which is beloved.*

The entire building sent a shiver down Eragon's spine. There was something menacing about it, as if it were a predator crouched in the city, waiting for its next victim.

A broad row of steps led to the cathedral's entrance. Eragon solemnly ascended them and stopped before the door. *I wonder if I can go in?* Almost guiltily he pushed on the door. It swung open smoothly, gliding on oiled hinges. He stepped inside.

The silence of a forgotten tomb filled the empty cathedral. The air was chill and dry. Bare walls extended to a vaulted ceiling that was so high Eragon felt no taller than an ant. Stained-glass windows depicting scenes of anger, hate, and remorse pierced the walls, while spectral beams of light washed sections of the granite pews with transparent hues, leaving the rest in shadow. His hands were shaded a

deep blue.

Between the windows stood statues with rigid, pale eyes. He returned their stern gazes, then slowly trod up the center row, afraid to break the quiet. His leather boots padded noiselessly on the polished stone floor.

The altar was a great slab of stone devoid of adornment. A solitary finger of light fell upon it, illuminating motes of golden dust floating in the air. Behind the altar, the pipes of a wind organ pierced the ceiling and opened themselves to the elements. The instrument would play its music only when a gale rocked Dras-Leona.

Out of respect, Eragon knelt before the altar and bowed his head. He did not pray but paid homage to the cathedral itself. The sorrows of the lives it had witnessed, as well as the unpleasantness of the elaborate pageantry that played out between its walls, emanated from the stones. It was a forbidding place, bare and cold. In that chilling touch, though, came a glimpse of eternity and perhaps the powers that lay there.

Finally Eragon inclined his head and rose. Calm and grave, he whispered words to himself in the ancient language, then turned to leave. He froze. His heart jumped, hammering like a drum.

The Ra'zac stood at the cathedral's entrance, watching him. Their swords were drawn, keen edges bloody in a crimson light. A sibilant hiss came from the smaller Ra'zac. Neither of them moved.

Rage welled up in Eragon. He had chased the Ra'zac for so many weeks that the pain of their murderous deed had dulled within him. But his vengeance was at hand. His wrath exploded like a volcano, fueled even more by his pent-up fury at the slaves' plight. A roar broke from his lips, echoing like a thunderstorm as he snatched his bow from his back. Deftly, he fit an arrow to the string and loosed it. Two more followed an instant later.

The Ra'zac leapt away from the arrows with inhuman swiftness. They hissed as they ran up the aisle between the pews, cloaks flapping like raven wings. Eragon reached for another arrow, but caution stayed his hand. *If they knew where to find me, Brom is in danger as well! I must warn him!* Then, to Eragon's horror, a line of soldiers filed into the cathedral, and he glimpsed a field of uniforms jostling outside the doorway.

Eragon gazed hungrily at the charging Ra'zac, then swept around, searching for means of escape. A vestibule to the left of the altar caught his attention. He bounded through the archway and dashed down a corridor that led to a priory with a belfry. The patter of the Ra'zac's feet behind him made him quicken his pace until the hall abruptly ended with a closed door.

He pounded against it, trying to break it open, but the wood was

too strong. The Ra'zac were nearly upon him. Frantic, he sucked in his breath and barked, "Jierda!" With a flash, the door splintered into pieces and fell to the floor. Eragon jumped into the small room and continued running.

He sped through several chambers, startling a group of priests. Shouts and curses followed him. The priory bell tolled an alarm. Eragon dodged through a kitchen, passed a pair of monks, then slipped through a side door. He skidded to stop in a garden surrounded by a high brick wall devoid of handholds. There were no other exits.

Eragon turned to leave, but there was a low hiss as the Ra'zac shouldered aside the door. Desperate, he rushed at the wall, arms pumping. Magic could not help him here—if he used it to break through the wall, he would be too tired to run.

He jumped. Even with his arms outstretched, only his fingertips cleared the edge of the wall. The rest of his body smashed against the bricks, driving out his breath. Eragon gasped and hung there, struggling not to fall. The Ra'zac prowled into the garden, swinging their heads from side to side like wolfhounds sniffing for prey.

Eragon sensed their approach and heaved with his arms. His shoulders shrieked with pain as he scrambled onto the wall and dropped to the other side. He stumbled, then regained his balance and darted down an alley just as the Ra'zac leapt over the wall. Galvanized, Eragon put on another burst of speed.

He ran for over a mile before he had to stop and catch his breath. Unsure if he had lost the Ra'zac, he found a crowded marketplace and dived under a parked wagon. *How did they find me?* he wondered, panting. *They shouldn't have known where I was … unless something happened to Brom!* He reached out with his mind to Saphira and said, *The Ra'zac found me. We're all in danger! Check if Brom's all right. If he is, warn him and have him meet me at the inn. And be ready to fly here as fast as you can. We may need your help to escape*.

She was silent, then said curtly, *He'll meet you at the inn. Don't stop moving; you're in great danger*.

"Don't I know it," muttered Eragon as he rolled out from under the wagon. He hurried back to the Golden Globe, quickly packed their belongings, saddled the horses, then led them to the street. Brom soon arrived, staff in hand, scowling dangerously. He swung onto Snowfire and asked, "What happened?"

"I was in the cathedral when the Ra'zac just appeared behind me," said Eragon, climbing onto Cadoc. "I ran back as fast as possible, but they could be here at any second. Saphira will join us once we're out of Dras-Leona."

"We have to get outside the city walls before they close the gates, if

they haven't already," said Brom. "If they're shut, it'll be nigh impossible for us to leave. Whatever you do, don't get separated from me." Eragon stiffened as ranks of soldiers marched down one end of the street.

Brom cursed, lashed Snowfire with his reins, and galloped away. Eragon bent low over Cadoc and followed. They nearly crashed several times during the wild, hazardous ride, plunging through masses of people that clogged the streets as they neared the city wall. When the gates finally came into view, Eragon pulled on Cadoc's reins with dismay. The gates were already half closed, and a double line of pikemen blocked their way.

"They'll cut us to pieces!" he exclaimed.

"We have to try and make it," said Brom, his voice hard. "I'll deal with the men, but you have to keep the gates open for us." Eragon nodded, gritted his teeth, and dug his heels into Cadoc.

They plowed toward the line of unwavering soldiers, who lowered their pikes toward the horses' chests and braced the weapons against the ground. Though the horses snorted with fear, Eragon and Brom held them in place. Eragon heard the soldiers shout but kept his attention on the gates inching shut.

As they neared the sharp pikes, Brom raised his hand and spoke. The words struck with precision; the soldiers fell to each side as if their legs had been cut out from under them. The gap between the gates shrank by the second. Hoping that the effort would not prove too much for him, Eragon drew on his power and shouted, "Du grind huildr!"

A deep grating sound emanated from the gates as they trembled, then ground to a stop. The crowd and guards fell silent, staring with amazement. With a clatter of the horses' hooves, Brom and Eragon shot out from behind Dras-Leona's wall. The instant they were free, Eragon released the gates. They shuddered, then boomed shut.

He swayed with the expected fatigue but managed to keep riding. Brom watched him with concern. Their flight continued through the outskirts of Dras-Leona as alarm trumpets sounded on the city wall. Saphira was waiting for them by the edge of the city, hidden behind some trees. Her eyes burned; her tail whipped back and forth. "Go, ride her," said Brom. "And this time stay in the air, no matter what happens to me. I'll head south. Fly nearby; I don't care if Saphira's seen." Eragon quickly mounted Saphira. As the ground dwindled away beneath him, he watched Brom gallop along the road.

Are you all right? asked Saphira.

Yes, said Eragon. *But only because we were very lucky*.

A puff of smoke blew from her nostrils. *All the time we've spent searching for the Ra'zac was useless*.

I know, he said, letting his head sag against her scales. *If the Ra'zac had been the only enemies back there, I would have stayed and fought, but with all the soldiers on their side, it was hardly a fair match!*

You understand that there will be talk of us now? This was hardly an unobtrusive escape. Evading the Empire will be harder than ever. There was an edge to her voice that he was unaccustomed to.

I know.

They flew low and fast over the road. Leona Lake receded behind them; the land became dry and rocky and filled with tough, sharp bushes and tall cactuses. Clouds darkened the sky. Lightning flashed in the distance. As the wind began to howl, Saphira glided steeply down to Brom. He stopped the horses and asked, "What's wrong?"

"The wind's too strong."

"It's not that bad," objected Brom.

"It is up there," said Eragon, pointing at the sky.

Brom swore and handed him Cadoc's reins. They trotted away with Saphira following on foot, though on the ground she had difficulty keeping up with the horses.

The gale grew stronger, flinging dirt through the air and twisting like a dervish. They wrapped scarves around their heads to protect their eyes. Brom's robe flapped in the wind while his beard whipped about as if it had a life of its own. Though it would make them miserable, Eragon hoped it would rain so their tracks would be obliterated.

Soon darkness forced them to stop. With only the stars to guide them, they left the road and made camp behind two boulders. It was too dangerous to light a fire, so they ate cold food while Saphira sheltered them from the wind.

After the sparse dinner, Eragon asked bluntly, "How did they find us?"

Brom started to light his pipe, but thought better of it and put it away. "One of the palace servants warned me there were spies among them. Somehow word of me and my questions must have reached Tábor … and through him, the Ra'zac."

"We can't go back to Dras-Leona, can we?" asked Eragon.

Brom shook his head. "Not for a few years."

Eragon held his head between his hands. "Then should we draw the Ra'zac out? If we let Saphira be seen, they'll come running to wherever she is."

"And when they do, there will be fifty soldiers with them," said Brom. "At any rate, this isn't the time to discuss it. Right now we have to concentrate on staying alive. Tonight will be the most dangerous because the Ra'zac will be hunting us in the dark, when they are strongest. We'll have to trade watches until morning."

“Right,” said Eragon, standing. He hesitated and squinted. His eyes had caught a flicker of movement, a small patch of color that stood out from the surrounding nightscape. He stepped toward the edge of their camp, trying to see it better.

“What is it?” asked Brom as he unrolled his blankets.

Eragon stared into the darkness, then turned back. “I don’t know. I thought I saw something. It must have been a bird.” Pain erupted in the back of his head, and Saphira roared. Then Eragon toppled to the ground, unconscious.

A dull throbbing roused Eragon. Every time blood pulsed through his head it brought a fresh wave of pain. He cracked his eyes open and winced; tears rushed to his eyes as he looked directly into a bright lantern. He blinked and looked away. When he tried to sit up, he realized that his hands were tied behind his back.

He turned lethargically and saw Brom's arms. Eragon was relieved to see that they were bound together. Why was that? He struggled to figure it out until the thought suddenly came to him, *They wouldn't tie up a dead man!* But then who were "they"? He swiveled his head further, then stopped as a pair of black boots entered his vision.

Eragon looked up, right into the cowled face of a Ra'zac. Fear jolted through him. He reached for the magic and started to voice a word that would kill the Ra'zac, but then halted, puzzled. He could not remember the word. Frustrated, he tried again, only to feel it slip out of his grasp.

Above him the Ra'zac laughed chillingly. "The drug is working, yesss? I think you will not be bothering us again."

There was a rattle off to the left, and Eragon was appalled to see the second Ra'zac fit a muzzle over Saphira's head. Her wings were pinioned to her sides by black chains; there were shackles on her legs. Eragon tried to contact her, but felt nothing.

"She was most cooperative once we threatened to kill you," hissed the Ra'zac. Squatting by the lantern, he rummaged through Eragon's bags, examining and discarding various items until he removed Zar'roc. "What a pretty thing for one so … insignificant. Maybe I will keep it." He leaned closer and sneered, "Or maybe, if you behave, our master will let you polish it." His moist breath smelled like raw meat.

Then he turned the sword over in his hands and screeched as he saw the symbol on the scabbard. His companion rushed over. They stood over the sword, hissing and clicking. At last they faced Eragon. "You will serve our master very well, yesss."

Eragon forced his thick tongue to form words: "If I do, I will kill you."

They chuckled coldly. "Oh no, we are too valuable. But you … you are *disposable*." A deep snarl came from Saphira; smoke roiled from her nostrils. The Ra'zac did not seem to care.

Their attention was diverted when Brom groaned and rolled onto his side. One of the Ra'zac grabbed his shirt and thrust him effortlessly into the air. "It'sss wearing off."

“Give him more.”

“Let’sss just kill him,” said the shorter Ra’zac. “He has caused us much grief.”

The taller one ran his finger down his sword. “A good plan. But remember, the king’s instructions were to keep them *alive*.”

“We can sssay he was killed when we captured them.”

“And what of thisss one?” the Ra’zac asked, pointing his sword at Eragon. “If he talksss?”

His companion laughed and drew a wicked dagger. “He would not dare.”

There was a long silence, then, “Agreed.”

They dragged Brom to the center of the camp and shoved him to his knees. Brom sagged to one side. Eragon watched with growing fear. *I have to get free!* He wrenched at the ropes, but they were too strong to break. “None of that now,” said the tall Ra’zac, poking him with a sword. He nosed the air and sniffed; something seemed to trouble him.

The other Ra’zac growled, yanked Brom’s head back, and swept the dagger toward his exposed throat. At that very moment a low buzz sounded, followed by the Ra’zac’s howl. An arrow protruded from his shoulder. The Ra’zac nearest Eragon dropped to the ground, barely avoiding a second arrow. He scuttled to his wounded companion, and they glared into the darkness, hissing angrily. They made no move to stop Brom as he blearily staggered upright. “Get down!” cried Eragon.

Brom wavered, then tottered toward Eragon. As more arrows hissed into the camp from the unseen attackers, the Ra’zac rolled behind some boulders. There was a lull, then arrows came from the opposite direction. Caught by surprise, the Ra’zac reacted slowly. Their cloaks were pierced in several places, and a shattered arrow buried itself in one’s arm.

With a wild cry, the smaller Ra’zac fled toward the road, kicking Eragon viciously in the side as he passed. His companion hesitated, then grabbed the dagger from the ground and raced after him. As he left the camp, he hurled the knife at Eragon.

A strange light suddenly burned in Brom’s eyes. He threw himself in front of Eragon, his mouth open in a soundless snarl. The dagger struck him with a soft thump, and he landed heavily on his shoulder. His head lolled limply.

“No!” screamed Eragon, though he was doubled over in pain. He heard footsteps, then his eyes closed and he knew no more.

For a long while, Eragon was aware only of the burning in his side. Each breath was painful. It felt as though he had been the one stabbed, not Brom. His sense of time was skewed; it was hard to tell if weeks had gone by, or only a few minutes. When consciousness finally came to him, he opened his eyes and peered curiously at a campfire several feet away. His hands were still tied together, but the drug must have worn off because he could think clearly again. *Saphira, are you injured?*

No, but you and Brom are. She was crouched over Eragon, wings spread protectively on either side.

Saphira, you didn't make that fire, did you? And you couldn't have gotten out of those chains by yourself.

No.

I didn't think so. Eragon struggled to his knees and saw a young man sitting on the far side of the fire.

The stranger, dressed in battered clothes, exuded a calm, assured air. In his hands was a bow, at his side a long hand-and-a-half sword. A white horn bound with silver fittings lay in his lap, and the hilt of a dagger protruded from his boot. His serious face and fierce eyes were framed by locks of brown hair. He appeared to be a few years older than Eragon and perhaps an inch or so taller. Behind him a gray war-horse was picketed. The stranger watched Saphira warily.

"Who are you?" asked Eragon, taking a shallow breath.

The man's hands tightened on his bow. "Murtagh." His voice was low and controlled, but curiously emotional.

Eragon pulled his hands underneath his legs so they were in front of him. He clenched his teeth as his side flared with pain. "Why did you help us?"

"You aren't the only enemies the Ra'zac have. I was tracking them."

"You know who they are?"

"Yes."

Eragon concentrated on the ropes that bound his wrists and reached for the magic. He hesitated, aware of Murtagh's eyes on him, then decided it didn't matter. "Jierda!" he grunted. The ropes snapped off his wrists. He rubbed his hands to get the blood flowing.

Murtagh sucked in his breath. Eragon braced himself and tried to stand, but his ribs seared with agony. He fell back, gasping between clenched teeth. Murtagh tried to come to his aid, but Saphira stopped him with a growl. "I would have helped you earlier, but your dragon

wouldn't let me near you."

"Her name's Saphira," said Eragon tightly. *Now let him by! I can't do this alone. Besides, he saved our lives*. Saphira growled again, but folded her wings and backed away. Murtagh eyed her flatly as he stepped forward.

He grasped Eragon's arm, gently pulling him to his feet. Eragon yelped and would have fallen without support. They went to the fire, where Brom lay on his back. "How is he?" asked Eragon.

"Bad," said Murtagh, lowering him to the ground. "The knife went right between his ribs. You can look at him in a minute, but first we'd better see how much damage the Ra'zac did to you." He helped Eragon remove his shirt, then whistled. "Ouch!"

"Ouch," agreed Eragon weakly. A blotchy bruise extended down his left side. The red, swollen skin was broken in several places. Murtagh put a hand on the bruise and pressed lightly. Eragon yelled, and Saphira growled a warning.

Murtagh glanced at Saphira as he grabbed a blanket. "I think you have some broken ribs. It's hard to tell, but at least two, maybe more. You're lucky you're not coughing up blood." He tore the blanket into strips and bound Eragon's chest.

Eragon slipped the shirt back on. "Yes … I'm lucky." He took a shallow breath, sidled over to Brom, and saw that Murtagh had cut open the side of his robe to bandage the wound. With trembling fingers, he undid the bandage.

"I wouldn't do that," warned Murtagh. "He'll bleed to death without it."

Eragon ignored him and pulled the cloth away from Brom's side. The wound was short and thin, belying its depth. Blood streamed out of it. As he had learned when Garrow was injured, a wound inflicted by the Ra'zac was slow to heal.

He peeled off his gloves while furiously searching his mind for the healing words Brom had taught him. *Help me, Saphira*, he implored. *I am too weak to do this alone*.

Saphira crouched next to him, fixing her eyes on Brom. *I am here, Eragon*. As her mind joined his, new strength infused his body. Eragon drew upon their combined power and focused it on the words. His hand trembled as he held it over the wound. "Waíse heill!" he said. His palm glowed, and Brom's skin flowed together, as if it had never been broken. Murtagh watched the entire process.

It was over quickly. As the light vanished, Eragon sat, feeling sick. *We've never done that before*, he said.

Saphira nodded. *Together we can cast spells that are beyond either of us*.

Murtagh examined Brom's side and asked, "Is he completely

healed?"

"I can only mend what is on the surface. I don't know enough to fix whatever's damaged inside. It's up to him now. I've done all I can." Eragon closed his eyes for a moment, utterly weary. "My … my head seems to be floating in clouds."

"You probably need to eat," said Murtagh. "I'll make soup."

While Murtagh fixed the meal, Eragon wondered who this stranger was. His sword and bow were of the finest make, as was his horn. Either he was a thief or accustomed to money—and lots of it. *Why was he hunting the Ra'zac? What have they done to make him an enemy? I wonder if he works for the Varden?*

Murtagh handed him a bowl of broth. Eragon spooned it down and asked, "How long has it been since the Ra'zac fled?"

"A few hours."

"We have to go before they return with reinforcements."

"You might be able to travel," said Murtagh, then gestured at Brom, "but he can't. You don't get up and ride away after being stabbed between the ribs."

If we make a litter, can you carry Brom with your claws like you did with Garrow? Eragon asked Saphira.

Yes, but landing will be awkward.

As long as it can be done. Eragon said to Murtagh, "Saphira can carry him, but we need a litter. Can you make one? I don't have the strength."

"Wait here." Murtagh left the camp, sword drawn. Eragon hobbled to his bags and picked up his bow from where it had been thrown by the Ra'zac. He strung it, found his quiver, then retrieved Zar'roc, which lay hidden in shadow. Last, he got a blanket for the litter.

Murtagh returned with two saplings. He laid them parallel on the ground, then lashed the blanket between the poles. After he carefully tied Brom to the makeshift litter, Saphira grasped the saplings and laboriously took flight. "I never thought I would see a sight like that," Murtagh said, an odd note in his voice.

As Saphira disappeared into the dark sky, Eragon limped to Cadoc and hoisted himself painfully into the saddle. "Thanks for helping us. You should leave now. Ride as far away from us as you can. You'll be in danger if the Empire finds you with us. We can't protect you, and I wouldn't see harm come to you on our account."

"A pretty speech," said Murtagh, grinding out the fire, "but where will you go? Is there a place nearby that you can rest in safety?"

"No," admitted Eragon.

Murtagh's eyes glinted as he fingered the hilt of his sword. "In that case, I think I'll accompany you until you're out of danger. I've no better place to be. Besides, if I stay with you, I might get another shot

at the Ra'zac sooner than if I were on my own. Interesting things are bound to happen around a Rider."

Eragon wavered, unsure if he should accept help from a complete stranger. Yet he was unpleasantly aware that he was too weak to force the issue either way. *If Murtagh proves untrustworthy, Saphira can always chase him away*. "Join us if you wish." He shrugged.

Murtagh nodded and mounted his gray war-horse. Eragon grabbed Snowfire's reins and rode away from the camp, into the wilderness. An oxbow moon provided wan light, but he knew that it would only make it easier for the Ra'zac to track them.

Though Eragon wanted to question Murtagh further, he kept silent, conserving his energy for riding. Near dawn Saphira said, *I must stop. My wings are tired and Brom needs attention. I discovered a good place to stay, about two miles ahead of where you are*.

They found her sitting at the base of a broad sandstone formation that curved out of the ground like a great hill. Its sides were pocked with caves of varying sizes. Similar domes were scattered across the land. Saphira looked pleased with herself. *I found a cave that can't be seen from the ground. It's large enough for all of us, including the horses. Follow me*. She turned and climbed up the sandstone, her sharp claws digging into the rock. The horses had difficulty, as their shod hooves could not grip the sandstone. Eragon and Murtagh had to pull and shove the animals for almost an hour before they managed to reach the cave.

The cavern was a good hundred feet long and more than twenty feet wide, yet it had a small opening that would protect them from bad weather and prying eyes. Darkness swallowed the far end, clinging to the walls like mats of soft black wool.

"Impressive," said Murtagh. "I'll gather wood for a fire." Eragon hurried to Brom. Saphira had set him on a small rock ledge at the rear of the cave. Eragon clasped Brom's limp hand and anxiously watched his craggy face. After a few minutes, he sighed and went to the fire Murtagh had built.

They ate quietly, then tried to give Brom water, but the old man would not drink. Stymied, they spread out their bedrolls and slept.

Wake up, Eragon. He stirred and groaned.

I need your help. Something is wrong! Eragon tried to ignore the voice and return to sleep.

Arise!

Go away, he grumbled.

Eragon! A bellow rang in the cave. He bolted upright, fumbling for his bow. Saphira was crouched over Brom, who had rolled off the ledge and was thrashing on the cave floor. His face was contorted in a grimace; his fists were clenched. Eragon rushed over, fearing the worst.

"Help me hold him down. He's going to hurt himself!" he cried to Murtagh, clasping Brom's arms. His side burned sharply as the old man spasmed. Together they restrained Brom until his convulsions ceased. Then they carefully returned him to the ledge.

Eragon touched Brom's forehead. The skin was so hot that the heat could be felt an inch away. "Get me water and a cloth," he said worriedly. Murtagh brought them, and Eragon gently bathed Brom's face, trying to cool him down. With the cave quiet again, he noticed the sun shining outside. *How long did we sleep?* he asked Saphira.

A good while. I've been watching Brom for most of that time. He was fine until a minute ago when he started thrashing. I woke you once he fell to the floor.

He stretched, wincing as his ribs twinged painfully. A hand suddenly gripped his shoulder. Brom's eyes snapped opened and fixed a glassy stare on Eragon. "You!" he gasped. "Bring me the wineskin!"

"Brom?" exclaimed Eragon, pleased to hear him talk. "You shouldn't drink wine; it'll only make you worse."

"Bring it, boy—just bring it …," sighed Brom. His hand slipped off Eragon's shoulder.

"I'll be right back—hold on." Eragon dashed to the saddlebags and rummaged through them frantically. "I can't find it!" he cried, looking around desperately.

"Here, take mine," said Murtagh, holding out a leather skin.

Eragon grabbed it and returned to Brom. "I have the wine," he said, kneeling. Murtagh retreated to the cave's mouth so they could have privacy.

Brom's next words were faint and indistinct. "Good …" He moved his arm weakly. "Now … wash my right hand with it."

"What—" Eragon started to ask.

“No questions! I haven’t time.” Mystified, Eragon unstoppered the wineskin and poured the liquid onto Brom’s palm. He rubbed it into the old man’s skin, spreading it around the fingers and over the back of the hand. “More,” croaked Brom. Eragon splashed wine onto his hand again. He scrubbed vigorously as a brown dye floated off Brom’s palm, then stopped, his mouth agape with amazement. There on Brom’s palm was the gedwëy ignasia.

“You’re a Rider?” he asked incredulously.

A painful smile flickered on Brom’s face. “Once upon a time that was true … but no more. When I was young … younger than you are now, I was chosen … chosen by the Riders to join their ranks. While they trained me, I became friends with another apprentice … Morzan, before he was a Forsworn.” Eragon gasped—that had been over a hundred years ago. “But then he betrayed us to Galbatorix … and in the fighting at Doru Araeba—Vroengard’s city—my young dragon was killed. Her name … was Saphira.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” asked Eragon softly.

Brom laughed. “Because … there was no need to.” He stopped. His breathing was labored; his hands were clenched. “I am old, Eragon … so old. Though my dragon was killed, my life has been longer than most. You don’t know what it is to reach my age, look back, and realize that you don’t remember much of it; then to look forward and know that many years still lie ahead of you.… After all this time I still grieve for my Saphira … and hate Galbatorix for what he tore from me.” His feverish eyes drilled into Eragon as he said fiercely, “Don’t let that happen to you. Don’t! Guard Saphira with your life, for without her it’s hardly worth living.”

“You shouldn’t talk like this. Nothing’s going to happen to her,” said Eragon, worried.

Brom turned his head to the side. “Perhaps I am rambling.” His gaze passed blindly over Murtagh, then he focused on Eragon. Brom’s voice grew stronger. “Eragon! I cannot last much longer. This … this is a grievous wound; it saps my strength. I have not the energy to fight it. … Before I go, will you take my blessing?”

“Everything will be all right,” said Eragon, tears in his eyes. “You don’t have to do this.”

“It is the way of things … I must. Will you take my blessing?” Eragon bowed his head and nodded, overcome. Brom placed a trembling hand on his brow. “Then I give it to you. May the coming years bring you great happiness.” He motioned for Eragon to bend closer. Very quietly, he whispered seven words from the ancient language, then even more softly told him what they meant. “That is all I can give you.… Use them only in great need.”

Brom blindly turned his eyes to the ceiling. “And now,” he

murmured, “for the greatest adventure of all.…”

Weeping, Eragon held his hand, comforting him as best he could. His vigil was unwavering and steadfast, unbroken by food or drink. As the long hours passed, a gray pallor crept over Brom, and his eyes slowly dimmed. His hands grew icy; the air around him took on an evil humor. Powerless to help, Eragon could only watch as the Ra’zac’s wound took its toll.

The evening hours were young and the shadows long when Brom suddenly stiffened. Eragon called his name and cried for Murtagh’s help, but they could do nothing. As a barren silence dampened the air, Brom locked his eyes with Eragon’s. Then contentment spread across the old man’s face, and a whisper of breath escaped his lips. And so it was that Brom the storyteller died.

With shaking fingers, Eragon closed Brom’s eyes and stood. Saphira raised her head behind him and roared mournfully at the sky, keening her lamentation. Tears rolled down Eragon’s cheeks as a sense of horrible loss bled through him. Haltingly, he said, “We have to bury him.”

“We might be seen,” warned Murtagh.

“I don’t care!”

Murtagh hesitated, then bore Brom’s body out of the cave, along with his sword and staff. Saphira followed them. “To the top,” Eragon said thickly, indicating the crown of the sandstone hill.

“We can’t dig a grave out of stone,” objected Murtagh.

“I can do it.”

Eragon climbed onto the smooth hilltop, struggling because of his ribs. There, Murtagh lay Brom on the stone.

Eragon wiped his eyes and fixed his gaze on the sandstone. Gesturing with his hand, he said, “Moi stenr!” The stone rippled. It flowed like water, forming a body-length depression in the hilltop. Molding the sandstone like wet clay, he raised waist-high walls around it.

They laid Brom inside the unfinished sandstone vault with his staff and sword. Stepping back, Eragon again shaped the stone with magic. It joined over Brom’s motionless face and flowed upward into a tall faceted spire. As a final tribute, Eragon set runes into the stone:

HERE LIES BROM
Who was a Dragon Rider
And like a father
To me.
May his name live on in glory.

Then he bowed his head and mourned freely. He stood like a living

statue until evening, when light faded from the land.

That night he dreamed of the imprisoned woman again.

He could tell that something was wrong with her. Her breathing was irregular, and she shook—whether from cold or pain, he did not know. In the semidarkness of the cell, the only thing clearly illuminated was her hand, which hung over the edge of the cot. A dark liquid dripped from the tips of her fingers. Eragon knew it was blood.

When Eragon woke, his eyes were gritty, his body stiff. The cave was empty except for the horses. The litter was gone; no sign of Brom remained. He walked to the entrance and sat on the pitted sandstone. *So the witch Angela was correct—there was a death in my future*, he thought, staring bleakly at the land. The topaz sun brought a desert heat to the early morning.

A tear slid down his listless face and evaporated in the sunlight, leaving a salty crust on his skin. He closed his eyes and absorbed the warmth, emptying his mind. With a fingernail, he aimlessly scratched the sandstone. When he looked, he saw that he had written *Why me?*

He was still there when Murtagh climbed up to the cave, carrying a pair of rabbits. Without a word he seated himself by Eragon. "How are you?" he asked.

"Very ill."

Murtagh considered him thoughtfully. "Will you recover?" Eragon shrugged. After a few minutes of reflection, Murtagh said, "I dislike asking this at such a time, but I must know … Is your Brom *the* Brom? The one who helped steal a dragon egg from the king, chased it across the Empire, and killed Morzan in a duel? I heard you say his name, and I read the inscription you put on his grave, but I must know for certain, Was that he?"

"It was," said Eragon softly. A troubled expression settled on Murtagh's face. "How do you know all that? You talk about things that are secret to most, and you were trailing the Ra'zac right when we needed help. Are you one of the Varden?"

Murtagh's eyes became inscrutable orbs. "I'm running away, like you." There was restrained sorrow in his words. "I do not belong to either the Varden or the Empire. Nor do I owe allegiance to any man but myself. As for my rescuing you, I will admit that I've heard whispered tales of a new Rider and reasoned that by following the Ra'zac I might discover if they were true."

"I thought you wanted to kill the Ra'zac," said Eragon.

Murtagh smiled grimly. "I do, but if I had, I never would have met you."

But Brom would still be alive.… I wish he were here. He would know whether to trust Murtagh. Eragon remembered how Brom had sensed Trevor's intentions in Daret and wondered if he could do the same with Murtagh. He reached for Murtagh's consciousness, but his probe abruptly ran into an iron-hard wall, which he tried to circumvent.

Murtagh's entire mind was fortified. *How did he learn to do that? Brom said that few people, if any, could keep others out of their mind without training. So who is Murtagh to have this ability?* Pensive and lonely, Eragon asked, "Where is Saphira?"

"I don't know," said Murtagh. "She followed me for a time when I went hunting, then flew off on her own. I haven't seen her since before noon." Eragon rocked onto his feet and returned to the cave. Murtagh followed. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm not sure." *And I don't want to think about it either*. He rolled up his blankets and tied them to Cadoc's saddlebags. His ribs hurt. Murtagh went to prepare the rabbits. As Eragon shifted things in his bags, he uncovered Zar'roc. The red sheath glinted brightly. He took out the sword … weighed it in his hands.

He had never carried Zar'roc nor used it in combat—except when he and Brom had sparred—because he had not wanted people to see it. That concerned Eragon no more. The Ra'zac had seemed surprised and frightened by the sword; that was more than enough reason for him to wear it. With a shudder he pulled off his bow and belted on Zar'roc. *From this moment on, I'll live by the sword. Let the whole world see what I am. I have no fear. I am a Rider now, fully and completely*.

He sorted through Brom's bags but found only clothes, a few odd items, and a small pouch of coins. Eragon took the map of Alagaësia and put the bags away, then crouched by the fire. Murtagh's eyes narrowed as he looked up from the rabbit he was skinning. "That sword. May I see it?" he asked, wiping his hands.

Eragon hesitated, reluctant to relinquish the weapon for even a moment, then nodded. Murtagh examined the symbol on the blade intently. His face darkened. "Where did you get this?"

"Brom gave it to me. Why?"

Murtagh shoved the sword back and crossed his arms angrily. He was breathing hard. "That sword," he said with emotion, "was once as well known as its owner. The last Rider to carry it was Morzan—a brutal, savage man. I thought you were a foe of the Empire, yet here I find you bearing one of the Forsworn's bloody swords!"

Eragon stared at Zar'roc with shock. He realized that Brom must have taken it from Morzan after they fought in Gil'ead. "Brom never told me where it came from," he said truthfully. "I had no idea it was Morzan's."

"He never told you?" asked Murtagh, a note of disbelief in his voice. Eragon shook his head. "That's strange. I can think of no reason for him to have concealed it."

"Neither can I. But then, he kept many secrets," said Eragon. It felt unsettling to hold the sword of the man who had betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix. *This blade probably killed many Riders in its time*, he

thought with revulsion. *And worse, dragons!* "Even so, I'm going to carry it. I don't have a sword of my own. Until such time as I get one, I'll use Zar'roc."

Murtagh flinched as Eragon said the name. "It's your choice," he said. He returned to skinning, keeping his gaze focused downward.

When the meal was ready, Eragon ate slowly, though he was quite hungry. The hot food made him feel better. As they scraped out their bowls, he said, "I have to sell my horse."

"Why not Brom's?" asked Murtagh. He seemed to have gotten over his bad temper.

"Snowfire? Because Brom promised to take care of him. Since he … isn't around, I'll do it for him."

Murtagh set his bowl on his lap. "If that's what you want, I'm sure we can find a buyer in some town or village."

"We?" asked Eragon.

Murtagh looked at him sideways in a calculating way. "You won't want to stay here for much longer. If the Ra'zac are nearby, Brom's tomb will be like a beacon for them." Eragon had not thought of that. "And your ribs are going to take time to heal. I know you can defend yourself with magic, but you need a companion who can lift things and use a sword. I'm asking to travel with you, at least for the time being. But I must warn you, the Empire is searching for me. There'll be blood over it eventually."

Eragon laughed weakly and found himself crying because it hurt so much. Once his breath was back, he said, "I don't care if the entire army is searching for you. You're right. I do need help. I would be glad to have you along, though I have to talk to Saphira about it. But I have to warn *you*, Galbatorix just *might* send the entire army after me. You won't be any safer with Saphira and me than if you were on your own."

"I know that," said Murtagh with a quick grin. "But all the same, it won't stop me."

"Good." Eragon smiled with gratitude.

While they spoke, Saphira crawled into the cave and greeted Eragon. She was glad to see him, but there was deep sadness in her thoughts and words. She laid her big blue head on the floor and asked, *Are you well again?*

Not quite.

I miss the old one.

As do I … I never suspected that he was a Rider. Brom! He really was an old man—as old as the Forsworn. Everything he taught me about magic he must have learned from the Riders themselves.

Saphira shifted slightly. *I knew what he was the moment he touched me at your farm.*

And you didn't tell me? Why?

*He asked me not to, s*he said simply.

Eragon decided not to make an issue of it. Saphira never meant to hurt him. *Brom kept more than that secret*, he told her, then explained about Zar'roc and Murtagh's reaction to it. *I understand now why Brom didn't explain Zar'roc's origins when he gave it to me. If he had, I probably would have run away from him at the first opportunity*.

You would do well to rid yourself of that sword, she said with distaste. *I know it's a peerless weapon, but you would be better off with a normal blade rather than Morzan's butchery tool*.

Perhaps. Saphira, where does our path go from here? Murtagh offered to come with us. I don't know his past, but he seems honest enough. Should we go to the Varden now? Only I don't know how to find them. Brom never told us.

He told me, said Saphira.

Eragon grew angry. *Why did he trust you, but not me, with all this knowledge?*

Her scales rustled over the dry rock as she stood above him, eyes profound. *After we left Teirm and were attacked by the Urgals, he told me many things, some of which I will not speak of unless necessary. He was concerned about his own death and what would happen to you after it. One fact he imparted to me was the name of a man, Dormnad, who lives in Gil'ead. He can help us find the Varden. Brom also wanted you to know that of all the people in Alagaësia, he believed you were the best suited to inherit the Riders' legacy*.

Tears welled in Eragon's eyes. This was the highest praise he could have ever received from Brom. *A responsibility I will bear honorably*.

Good.

We will go to Gil'ead, then, stated Eragon, strength and purpose returning to him. *And what of Murtagh? Do you think he should come with us?*

We owe him our lives, said Saphira. *But even if that weren't so, he has seen both you and me. We should keep him close so he doesn't furnish the Empire with our location and descriptions, willingly or not*.

He agreed with her, then told Saphira about his dream. *What I saw disturbed me. I feel that time is running out for her; something dreadful is going to happen soon. She's in mortal danger—I'm sure of it—but I don't know how to find her! She could be anywhere*.

What does your heart say? asked Saphira.

My heart died a while back, said Eragon with a hint of black humor. *However, I think we should go north to Gil'ead. With any luck, one of the towns or cities along our path is where this woman is being held. I'm afraid that my next dream of her will show a grave. I couldn't stand that*.

Why?

I'm not sure, he said, shrugging. *It's just that when I see her, I feel as if she's precious and shouldn't be lost.… It's very strange*. Saphira opened her long mouth and laughed silently, fangs gleaming. *What is it?* snapped Eragon. She shook her head and quietly padded away.

Eragon grumbled to himself, then told Murtagh what they had decided. Murtagh said, "If you find this Dormnad and then continue on to the Varden, I will leave you. Encountering the Varden would be as dangerous for me as walking unarmed into Urû'baen with a fanfare of trumpets to announce my arrival."

"We won't have to part anytime soon," said Eragon. "It's a long way to Gil'ead." His voice cracked slightly, and he squinted at the sun to distract himself. "We should leave before the day grows any older."

"Are you strong enough to travel?" asked Murtagh, frowning.

"I have to do something or I'll go crazy," said Eragon brusquely. "Sparring, practicing magic, or sitting around twiddling my thumbs aren't good options right now, so I choose to ride."

They doused the fire, packed, and led the horses out of the cave. Eragon handed Cadoc's and Snowfire's reins to Murtagh, saying, "Go on, I'll be right down." Murtagh began the slow descent from the cave.

Eragon struggled up the sandstone, resting when his side made it impossible to breathe. When he reached the top, he found Saphira already there. They stood together before Brom's grave and paid their last respects. *I can't believe he's gone … forever*. As Eragon turned to depart, Saphira snaked out her long neck to touch the tomb with the tip of her nose. Her sides vibrated as a low humming filled the air.

The sandstone around her nose shimmered like gilded dew, turning clear with dancing silver highlights. Eragon watched in wonder as tendrils of white diamond twisted over the tomb's surface in a web of priceless filigree. Sparkling shadows were cast on the ground, reflecting splashes of brilliant colors that shifted dazzlingly as the sandstone continued to change. With a satisfied snort, Saphira stepped back and examined her handiwork.

The sculpted sandstone mausoleum of moments before had transformed into a sparkling gemstone vault—under which Brom's untouched face was visible. Eragon gazed with yearning at the old man, who seemed to be only sleeping. "What did you do?" he asked Saphira with awe.

I gave him the only gift I could. Now time will not ravage him. He can rest in peace for eternity.

Thank you. Eragon put a hand on her side, and they left together.

Riding was extremely painful for Eragon—his broken ribs prevented them from going faster than a walk, and it was impossible for him to breathe deeply without a burst of agony. Nevertheless, he refused to stop. Saphira flew close by, her mind linked with his for solace and strength.

Murtagh rode confidently beside Cadoc, flowing smoothly with his horse's movements. Eragon watched the gray animal for a while. "You have a beautiful horse. What's his name?"

"Tornac, after the man who taught me how to fight." Murtagh patted the horse's side. "He was given to me when he was just a foal. You'd be hard pressed to find a more courageous and intelligent animal in all of Alagaësia, Saphira excepted, of course."

"He is a magnificent beast," said Eragon admiringly.

Murtagh laughed. "Yes, but Snowfire is as close to his match as I've ever seen."

They covered only a short distance that day, yet Eragon was glad to be on the move again. It kept his mind off other, more morbid matters. They were riding through unsettled land. The road to Dras-Leona was several leagues to their left. They would skirt the city by a wide margin on the way to Gil'ead, which was almost as far to the north as Carvahall.

They sold Cadoc in a small village. As the horse was led away by his new owner, Eragon regretfully pocketed the few coins he had gained from the transaction. It was difficult to relinquish Cadoc after crossing half of Alagaësia—and outracing Urgals—on him.

The days rolled by unnoticed as their small group traveled in isolation. Eragon was pleased to find that he and Murtagh shared many of the same interests; they spent hours debating the finer points of archery and hunting.

There was one subject, however, they avoided discussing by unspoken consent: their pasts. Eragon did not explain how he had found Saphira, met Brom, or where he came from. Murtagh was likewise mute as to why the Empire was chasing him. It was a simple arrangement, but it worked.

Yet because of their proximity, it was inevitable that they learned about each other. Eragon was intrigued by Murtagh's familiarity with the power struggles and politics within the Empire. He seemed to know what every noble and courtier was doing and how it affected

everyone else. Eragon listened carefully, suspicions whirling through his mind.

The first week went by without any sign of the Ra'zac, which allayed some of Eragon's fears. Even so, they still kept watches at night. Eragon had expected to encounter Urgals on the way to Gil'ead, but they found no trace of them. *I thought these remote places would be teeming with monsters*, he mused. *Still, I'm not one to complain if they've gone elsewhere*.

He dreamed of the woman no more. And though he tried to scry her, he saw only an empty cell. Whenever they passed a town or city, he checked to see if it had a jail. If it did, he would disguise himself and visit it, but she was not to be found. His disguises became increasingly elaborate as he saw notices featuring his name and description—and offering a substantial reward for his capture—posted in various towns.

Their travels north forced them toward the capital, Urû'baen. It was a heavily populated area, which made it difficult to escape notice. Soldiers patrolled the roads and guarded the bridges. It took them several tense, irritable days to skirt the capital.

Once they were safely past Urû'baen, they found themselves on the edge of a vast plain. It was the same one that Eragon had crossed after leaving Palancar Valley, except now he was on the opposite side. They kept to the perimeter of the plain and continued north, following the Ramr River.

Eragon's sixteenth birthday came and went during this time. At Carvahall a celebration would have been held for his entrance into manhood, but in the wilderness he did not even mention it to Murtagh.

At nearly six months of age, Saphira was much larger. Her wings were massive; every inch of them was needed to lift her muscular body and thick bones. The fangs that jutted from her jaw were nearly as thick around as Eragon's fist, their points as sharp as Zar'roc.

The day finally came when Eragon unwrapped his side for the last time. His ribs had healed completely, leaving him with only a small scar where the Ra'zac's boot had cut his side. As Saphira watched, he stretched slowly, then with increasing vigor when there was no pain. He flexed his muscles, pleased. In an earlier time he would have smiled, but after Brom's death, such expressions did not come easily.

He tugged his tunic on and walked back to the small fire they had made. Murtagh sat next to it, whittling a piece of wood. Eragon drew Zar'roc. Murtagh tensed, though his face remained calm. "Now that I am strong enough, would you like to spar?" asked Eragon.

Murtagh tossed the wood to the side. "With sharpened swords? We

could kill each other."

"Here, give me your sword," said Eragon. Murtagh hesitated, then handed over his long hand-and-a-half sword. Eragon blocked the edges with magic, the way Brom had taught him. While Murtagh examined the blade, Eragon said, "I can undo that once we're finished."

Murtagh checked the balance of his sword. Satisfied, he said, "It will do." Eragon safed Zar'roc, settled into a crouch, then swung at Murtagh's shoulder. Their swords met in midair. Eragon disengaged with a flourish, thrust, and then riposted as Murtagh parried, dancing away.

He's fast! thought Eragon.

They struggled back and forth, trying to batter each other down. After a particularly intense series of blows, Murtagh started laughing. Not only was it impossible for either of them to gain an advantage, but they were so evenly matched that they tired at the same rate. Acknowledging with grins each other's skill, they fought on until their arms were leaden and sweat poured off their sides.

Finally Eragon called, "Enough, halt!" Murtagh stopped in mid-blow and sat down with a gasp. Eragon staggered to the ground, his chest heaving. None of his fights with Brom had been this fierce.

As he gulped air, Murtagh exclaimed, "You're amazing! I've studied swordplay all my life, but never have I fought one like you. You could be the king's weapon master if you wanted to."

"You're just as good," observed Eragon, still panting. "The man who taught you, Tornac, could make a fortune with a fencing school. People would come from all parts of Alagaësia to learn from him."

"He's dead," said Murtagh shortly.

"I'm sorry."

Thus it became their custom to fight in the evening, which kept them lean and fit, like a pair of matched blades. With his return to health, Eragon also resumed practicing magic. Murtagh was curious about it and soon revealed that he knew a surprising amount about how it worked, though he lacked the precise details and could not use it himself. Whenever Eragon practiced speaking in the ancient language, Murtagh would listen quietly, occasionally asking what a word meant.

On the outskirts of Gil'ead they stopped the horses side by side. It had taken them nearly a month to reach it, during which time spring had finally nudged away the remnants of winter. Eragon had felt himself changing during the trip, growing stronger and calmer. He still thought about Brom and spoke about him with Saphira, but for the most part he tried not to awaken painful memories.

From a distance they could see the city was a rough, barbaric place, filled with log houses and yapping dogs. There was a rambling stone fortress at its center. The air was hazy with blue smoke. The place seemed more like a temporary trading post than a permanent city. Five miles beyond it was the hazy outline of Isenstar Lake.

They decided to camp two miles from the city, for safety. While their dinner simmered, Murtagh said, "I'm not sure you should be the one to go into Gil'ead."

"Why? I can disguise myself well enough," said Eragon. "And Dormnad will want to see the gedwëy ignasia as proof that I really am a Rider."

"Perhaps," said Murtagh, "but the Empire wants you much more than me. If I'm captured, I could eventually escape. But if *you* are taken, they'll drag you to the king, where you'll be in for a slow death by torture—unless you join him. Plus, Gil'ead is one of the army's major staging points. Those aren't houses out there; they're barracks. Going in there would be like handing yourself to the king on a gilded platter."

Eragon asked Saphira for her opinion. She wrapped her tail around his legs and lay next to him. *You shouldn't have to ask me; he speaks sense. There are certain words I can give him that will convince Dormnad of his truthfulness. And Murtagh's right; if anyone is to risk capture it should be him, because he would live through it.*

He grimaced. *I don't like letting him put himself in danger for us*. "All right, you can go," he said reluctantly. "But if anything goes wrong, I'm coming after you."

Murtagh laughed. "That would be fit for a legend: how a lone Rider took on the king's army single-handedly." He chuckled again and stood. "Is there anything I should know before going?"

"Shouldn't we rest and wait until tomorrow?" asked Eragon cautiously.

"Why? The longer we stay here, the greater the chance that we'll be discovered. If this Dormnad can take you to the Varden, then he needs to be found as quickly as possible. Neither of us should remain near Gil'ead longer than a few days."

Again wisdom flies from his mouth, commented Saphira dryly. She told Eragon what should be said to Dormnad, and he relayed the information to Murtagh.

"Very well," said Murtagh, adjusting his sword. "Unless there's trouble, I'll be back within a couple of hours. Make sure there's some food left for me." With a wave of his hand, he jumped onto Tornac and rode away. Eragon sat by the fire, tapping Zar'roc's pommel apprehensively.

Hours passed, but Murtagh did not return. Eragon paced around the

fire, Zar'roc in hand, while Saphira watched Gil'ead attentively. Only her eyes moved. Neither of them voiced their worries, though Eragon unobtrusively prepared to leave—in case a detachment of soldiers left the city and headed toward their camp.

Look, snapped Saphira.

Eragon swiveled toward Gil'ead, alert. He saw a distant horseman exit the city and ride furiously toward their camp. *I don't like this*, he said as he climbed onto Saphira. *Be ready to fly*.

I'm prepared for more than that.

As the rider approached, Eragon recognized Murtagh bent low over Tornac. No one seemed to be pursuing him, but he did not slow his reckless pace. He galloped into the camp and jumped to the ground, drawing his sword. "What's wrong?" asked Eragon.

Murtagh scowled. "Did anyone follow me from Gil'ead?"

"We didn't see anyone."

"Good. Then let me eat before I explain. I'm starving." He seized a bowl and began eating with gusto. After a few sloppy bites, he said through a full mouth, "Dormnad has agreed to meet us outside Gil'ead at sunrise tomorrow. If he's satisfied you really are a Rider and that it's not a trap, he'll take you to the Varden."

"Where are we supposed to meet him?" asked Eragon.

Murtagh pointed west. "On a small hill across the road."

"So what happened?"

Murtagh spooned more food into his bowl. "It's a rather simple thing, but all the more deadly because of it: I was seen in the street by someone who knows me. I did the only thing I could and ran away. It was too late, though; he recognized me."

It was unfortunate, but Eragon was unsure how bad it really was. "Since I don't know your friend, I have to ask: Will he tell anyone?"

Murtagh gave a strained laugh. "If you *had* met him, that wouldn't need answering. His mouth is loosely hinged and hangs open all the time, vomiting whatever happens to be in his mind. The question isn't *whether* he will tell people, but *whom* he will tell. If word of this reaches the wrong ears, we'll be in trouble."

"I doubt that soldiers will be sent to search for you in the dark," Eragon pointed out. "We can at least count on being safe until morning, and by then, if all goes well, we'll be leaving with Dormnad."

Murtagh shook his head. "No, only you will accompany him. As I said before, I won't go to the Varden."

Eragon stared at him unhappily. He wanted Murtagh to stay. They had become friends during their travels, and he was loath to tear that apart. He started to protest, but Saphira hushed him and said gently, *Wait until tomorrow. Now is not the time*.

Very well, he said glumly. They talked until the stars were bright in the sky, then slept as Saphira took the first watch.

Eragon woke two hours before dawn, his palm tingling. Everything was still and quiet, but something sought his attention, like an itch in his mind. He buckled on Zar'roc and stood, careful not to make a sound. Saphira looked at him curiously, her large eyes bright. *What is it?* she asked.

I don't know, said Eragon. He saw nothing amiss.

Saphira sniffed the air curiously. She hissed a little and lifted her head. *I smell horses nearby, but they're not moving. They reek with an unfamiliar stench*.

Eragon crept to Murtagh and shook his shoulder. Murtagh woke with a start, yanked a dagger from under his blankets, then looked at Eragon quizzically. Eragon motioned for him to be silent, whispering, "There are horses close by."

Murtagh wordlessly drew his sword. They quietly stationed themselves on either side of Saphira, prepared for an attack. As they waited, the morning star rose in the east. A squirrel chattered.

Then an angry snarl from behind made Eragon spin around, sword held high. A broad Urgal stood at the edge of the camp, carrying a mattock with a nasty spike. *Where did he come from? We haven't seen their tracks anywhere!* thought Eragon. The Urgal roared and waved his weapon, but did not charge.

"Brisingr!" barked Eragon, stabbing out with magic. The Urgal's face contorted with terror as he exploded in a flash of blue light. Blood splattered Eragon, and a brown mass flew through the air. Behind him, Saphira bugled with alarm and reared. Eragon twisted around. While he had been occupied with the first Urgal, a group of them had run up from the side. *Of all the stupid tricks to fall for!*

Steel clashed loudly as Murtagh attacked the Urgals. Eragon tried to join him but was blocked by four of the monsters. The first one swung a sword at his shoulder. He ducked the blow and killed the Urgal with magic. He caught a second one in the throat with Zar'roc, wheeled wildly, and slashed a third through the heart. As he did, the fourth Urgal rushed at him, swinging a heavy club.

Eragon saw him coming and tried to lift his sword to block the club, but was a second too slow. As the club came down on his head, he screamed, "Fly, Saphira!" A burst of light filled his eyes and he lost consciousness.

The first things Eragon noticed were that he was warm and dry, his cheek was pressed against rough fabric, and his hands were unbound. He stirred, but it was minutes before he was able to push himself upright and examine his surroundings.

He was sitting in a cell on a narrow, bumpy cot. A barred window was set high in the wall. The iron-bound door with a small window in its top half, barred like the one in the wall, was shut securely.

Dried blood cracked on Eragon's face when he moved. It took him a moment to remember that it was not his. His head hurt horribly—which was to be expected, considering the blow he had taken—and his mind was strangely fuzzy. He tried to use magic, but could not concentrate well enough to remember any of the ancient words. *They must have drugged me*, he finally decided.

With a groan he got up, missing the familiar weight of Zar'roc on his hip, and lurched to the window in the wall. He managed to see out of it by standing on his toes. It took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the bright light outside. The window was level with the ground. A street full of busy people ran past the side of his cell, beyond which were rows of identical log houses.

Feeling weak, Eragon slid to the floor and stared at it blankly. What he had seen outside disturbed him, but he was unsure why. Cursing his sluggish thinking, he leaned back his head and tried to clear his mind. A man entered the room and set a tray of food and a pitcher of water on the cot. *Wasn't that nice of him?* thought Eragon, smiling pleasantly. He took a couple of bites of the thin cabbage soup and stale bread, but was barely able to stomach it. *I wish he had brought me something better*, he complained, dropping the spoon.

He suddenly realized what was wrong. *I was captured by Urgals, not men! How did I end up here?* His befuddled brain grappled with the paradox unsuccessfully. With a mental shrug he filed the discovery away for a time when he would know what to do with it.

He sat on the cot and gazed into the distance. Hours later more food was brought in. *And I was just getting hungry*, he thought thickly. This time he was able to eat without feeling sick. When he finished, he decided it was time for a nap. After all, he was on a bed; what else was he going to do?

His mind drifted off; sleep began to envelop him. Then a gate clanged open somewhere, and the din of steel-shod boots marching on a stone floor filled the air. The noise grew louder and louder until it

sounded like someone banging a pot inside Eragon's head. He grumbled to himself. *Can't they let me rest in peace?* Fuzzy curiosity slowly overcame his exhaustion, so he dragged himself to the door, blinking like an owl.

Through the window he saw a wide hallway nearly ten yards across. The opposing wall was lined with cells similar to his own. A column of soldiers marched through the hall, their swords drawn and ready. Every man was dressed in matching armor; their faces bore the same hard expression, and their feet came down on the floor with mechanical precision, never missing a beat. The sound was hypnotic. It was an impressive display of force.

Eragon watched the soldiers until he grew bored. Just then he noticed a break in the middle of the column. Carried between two burly men was an unconscious woman.

Her long midnight-black hair obscured her face, despite a leather strip bound around her head to hold the tresses back. She was dressed in dark leather pants and shirt. Wrapped around her slim waist was a shiny belt, from which hung an empty sheath on her right hip. Knee-high boots covered her calves and small feet.

Her head lolled to the side. Eragon gasped, feeling like he had been struck in the stomach. She was the woman from his dreams. Her sculpted face was as perfect as a painting. Her round chin, high cheekbones, and long eyelashes gave her an exotic look. The only mar in her beauty was a scrape along her jaw; nevertheless, she was the fairest woman he had ever seen.

Eragon's blood burned as he looked at her. Something awoke in him —something he had never felt before. It was like an obsession, except stronger, almost a fevered madness. Then the woman's hair shifted, revealing pointed ears. A chill crept over him. She was an elf.

The soldiers continued marching, taking her from his sight. Next strode a tall, proud man, a sable cape billowing behind him. His face was deathly white; his hair was red. Red like blood.

As he walked by Eragon's cell, the man turned his head and looked squarely at him with maroon eyes. His upper lip pulled back in a feral smile, revealing teeth filed to points. Eragon shrank back. He knew what the man was. *A Shade. So help me … a Shade*. The procession continued, and the Shade vanished from view.

Eragon sank to the floor, hugging himself. Even in his bewildered state, he knew that the presence of a Shade meant that evil was loose in the land. Whenever they appeared, rivers of blood were sure to follow. *What is a Shade doing here? The soldiers should have killed him on sight!* Then his thoughts returned to the elf-woman, and he was grasped by strange emotions again.

I have to escape. But with his mind clouded, his determination

quickly faded. He returned to the cot. By the time the hallway fell silent, he was fast asleep.

As soon as Eragon opened his eyes, he knew something was different. It was easier for him to think; he realized that he was in Gil'ead. *They made a mistake; the drug's wearing off!* Hopeful, he tried to contact Saphira and use magic, but both activities were still beyond his reach. A pit of worry twisted inside him as he wondered if she and Murtagh had managed to escape. He stretched his arms and looked out the window. The city was just awakening; the street was empty except for two beggars.

He reached for the water pitcher, ruminating about the elf and Shade. As he started to drink, he noticed that the water had a faint odor, as if it contained a few drops of rancid perfume. Grimacing, he set the pitcher down. *The drug must be in there and maybe in the food as well!* He remembered that when the Ra'zac had drugged him, it had taken hours to wear off. *If I can keep from drinking and eating for long enough, I should be able to use magic. Then I can rescue the elf.…* The thought made him smile. He sat in a corner, dreaming about how it could be done.

The portly jailer entered the cell an hour later with a tray of food. Eragon waited until he departed, then carried the tray to the window. The meal was composed only of bread, cheese, and an onion, but the smell made his stomach grumble hungrily. Resigning himself to a miserable day, he shoved the food out the window and onto the street, hoping that no one would notice.

Eragon devoted himself to overcoming the drug's effects. He had difficulty concentrating for any length of time, but as the day progressed, his mental acuity increased. He began to remember several of the ancient words, though nothing happened when he uttered them. He wanted to scream with frustration.

When lunch was delivered, he pushed it out the window after his breakfast. His hunger was distracting, but it was the lack of water that taxed him most. The back of his throat was parched. Thoughts of drinking cool water tortured him as each breath dried his mouth and throat a bit more. Even so, he forced himself to ignore the pitcher.

He was diverted from his discomfort by a commotion in the hall. A man argued in a loud voice, "You can't go in there! The orders were clear: no one is to see him!"

"Really? Will you be the one to die stopping me, Captain?" cut in a smooth voice.

There was a subdued, "No … but the king—"

"*I* will handle the king," interrupted the second person. "Now, unlock the door."

After a pause, keys jangled outside Eragon's cell. He tried to adopt a languorous expression. *I have to act like I don't understand what's going on. I can't show surprise, no matter what this person says*.

The door opened. His breath caught as he looked into the Shade's face. It was like gazing at a death mask or a polished skull with skin pulled over it to give the appearance of life. "Greetings," said the Shade with a cold smile, showing his filed teeth. "I've waited a long time to meet you."

"Who—who're you?" asked Eragon, slurring his words.

"No one of consequence," answered the Shade, his maroon eyes alight with controlled menace. He sat with a flourish of his cloak. "My name does not matter to one in your position. It wouldn't mean a thing to you anyway. It's you that I'm interested in. Who are you?"

The question was posed innocently enough, but Eragon knew there had to be a catch or trap in it, though it eluded him. He pretended to struggle over the question for a while, then slowly said, frowning, "I'm not sure.… M'name's Eragon, but that's not all I am, is it?"

The Shade's narrow lips stretched tautly over his mouth as he laughed sharply. "No, it isn't. You have an interesting mind, my young Rider." He leaned forward. The skin on his forehead was thin and translucent. "It seems I must be more direct. What is your name?"

"Era—"

"No! Not that one." The Shade cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Don't you have another one, one that you use only rarely?"

He wants my true name so he can control me! realized Eragon. *But I can't tell him. I don't even know it myself*. He thought quickly, trying to invent a deception that would conceal his ignorance. *What if I made up a name?* He hesitated—it could easily give him away—then raced to create a name that would withstand scrutiny. As he was about to utter it, he decided to take a chance and try to scare the Shade. He deftly switched a few letters, then nodded foolishly and said, "Brom told it to me once. It was …" The pause stretched for a few seconds, then his face brightened as he appeared to remember. "It was Du Sundavar Freohr." Which meant almost literally "death of the shadows."

A grim chill settled over the cell as the Shade sat motionless, eyes veiled. He seemed to be deep in thought, pondering what he had learned. Eragon wondered if he had dared too much. He waited until the Shade stirred before asking ingenuously, "Why are you here?"

The Shade looked at him with contempt in his red eyes and smiled. "To gloat, of course. What use is a victory if one cannot enjoy it?" There was confidence in his voice, but he seemed uneasy, as if his plans had been disrupted. He stood suddenly. "I must attend to certain matters, but while I am gone you would do well to think on who you would rather serve: a Rider who betrayed your own order or a fellow

man like me, though one skilled in arcane arts. When the time comes to choose, there will be no middle ground." He turned to leave, then glanced at Eragon's water pitcher and stopped, his face granite hard. "Captain!" he snapped.

A broad-shouldered man rushed into the cell, sword in hand. "What is it, my lord?" he asked, alarmed.

"Put that toy away," instructed the Shade. He turned to Eragon and said in a deadly quiet voice, "The boy hasn't been drinking his water. Why is that?"

"I talked with the jailer earlier. Every bowl and plate was scraped clean."

"Very well," said the Shade, mollified. "But make sure that he starts drinking again." He leaned toward the captain and murmured into his ear. Eragon caught the last few words, "… extra dose, just in case." The captain nodded. The Shade returned his attention to Eragon. "We will talk again tomorrow when I am not so pressed for time. You should know, I have an endless fascination for names. I will greatly enjoy discussing yours in *much* greater detail."

The way he said it gave Eragon a sinking feeling.

Once they left, he lay on the cot and closed his eyes. Brom's lessons proved their worth now; he relied on them to keep himself from panicking and to reassure himself. *Everything has been provided for me; I only have to take advantage of it*. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of approaching soldiers.

Apprehensive, he went to the door and saw two soldiers dragging the elf down the hallway. When he could see her no more, Eragon slumped to the floor and tried to touch the magic again. Oaths flew from his lips when it eluded his grasp.

He looked out at the city and ground his teeth. It was only midafternoon. Taking a calming breath, he tried to wait patiently.

It was dark in Eragon's cell when he sat up with a start, electrified. The wrinkle had shifted! He had felt the magic at the edge of his consciousness for hours, but every time he tried to use it, nothing happened. Eyes bright with nervous energy, he clenched his hands and said, "Nagz reisa!" With a flap, the cot's blanket flew into the air and crumpled into a ball the size of his fist. It landed on the floor with a soft thump.

Exhilarated, Eragon stood. He was weak from his enforced fast, but his excitement overcame his hunger. *Now for the real test.* He reached out with his mind and felt the lock on the door. Instead of trying to break or cut it, he simply pushed its internal mechanism into the unlocked position. With a click, the door creaked inward.

When he had first used magic to kill the Urgals in Yazuac, it had consumed nearly all of his strength, but he had grown much stronger since then. What once would have exhausted him now only tired him slightly.

He cautiously stepped into the hall. *I have to find Zar'roc and the elf. She must be in one of these cells, but there isn't time to look in them all. As for Zar'roc, the Shade might have it with him*. He realized that his thinking was still muddled. *Why am I out here? I could escape right now if I went back into the cell and opened the window with magic. But then I wouldn't be able to rescue the elf.… Saphira, where are you? I need your help*. He silently berated himself for not contacting her sooner. That should have been the first thing he did after getting his power back.

Her reply came with surprising alacrity. *Eragon! I'm over Gil'ead. Don't do anything. Murtagh is on the way*.

What are—Footsteps interrupted him. He spun around, crouching as a squad of six soldiers marched into the hall. They halted abruptly, eyes flicking between Eragon and the open cell door. Blood drained from their faces. *Good, they know who I am. Maybe I can scare them off so we won't have to fight.*

"Charge!" yelled one of the soldiers, running forward. The rest of the men drew their blades and pounded down the hall.

It was madness to fight six men when he was unarmed and weak, but the thought of the elf kept him in place. He could not force himself to abandon her. Uncertain if the effort would leave him standing, he pulled on his power and raised his hand, the gedwëy ignasia glowing. Fear showed in the soldiers' eyes, but they were hardened warriors and did not slow. As Eragon opened his mouth to

pronounce the fatal words, there was a low buzz, a flicker of motion. One of the men crashed to the floor with an arrow in his back. Two more were struck before anyone understood what was happening.

At the end of the hall, where the soldiers had entered, stood a ragged, bearded man with a bow. A crutch lay on the floor by his feet, apparently unneeded, for he stood tall and straight.

The three remaining soldiers turned to face this new threat. Eragon took advantage of the confusion. "Thrysta!" he shouted. One of the men clutched his chest and fell. Eragon staggered as the magic took its toll. Another soldier fell, pierced through the neck with an arrow. "Don't kill him!" called Eragon, seeing his rescuer take aim at the last soldier. The bearded man lowered his bow.

Eragon concentrated on the soldier before him. The man was breathing hard; the whites of his eyes showed. He seemed to understand that his life was being spared.

"You've seen what I can do," said Eragon harshly. "If you don't answer my questions, the rest of your life will be spent in utter misery and torment. Now where's my sword—its sheath and blade are red—and what cell is the elf in?"

The man clamped his mouth shut.

Eragon's palm glowed ominously as he reached for the magic. "That was the wrong answer," he snapped. "Do you know how much pain a grain of sand can cause you when it's embedded red hot in your stomach? Especially when it doesn't cool off for the next twenty years and slowly burns its way down to your toes! By the time it gets out of you, you'll be an old man." He paused for effect. "Unless you tell me what I want."

The soldier's eyes bulged, but he remained silent. Eragon scraped some dirt off the stone floor and observed dispassionately, "This is a bit more than a piece of sand, but be comforted; it'll burn through you faster. Still, it'll leave a bigger hole." At his word, the dirt shone cherry red, though it did not burn his hand.

"All right, just don't put that in me!" yelped the soldier. "The elf's in the last cell to the left! I don't know about your sword, but it's probably in the guardroom upstairs. All the weapons are there."

Eragon nodded, then murmured, "Slytha." The soldier's eyes rolled up in his head, and he collapsed limply.

"Did you kill him?"

Eragon looked at the stranger, who was now only a few paces away. He narrowed his eyes, trying to see past the beard. "Murtagh! Is that you?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Murtagh, briefly lifting the beard from his shaven face. "I don't want my face seen. Did you kill him?"

"No, he's only asleep. How did you get in?"

“There’s no time to explain. We have to get up to the next floor before anyone finds us. There’ll be an escape route for us in a few minutes. We don’t want to miss it.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” asked Eragon, gesturing at the unconscious soldier. “There’s an elf in the prison. I saw her! We have to rescue her. I need your help.”

“An elf …!” Murtagh hurried down the hall, growling, “This is a mistake. We should flee while we have the chance.” He stopped before the cell the soldier had indicated and produced a ring of keys from under his ragged cloak. “I took it from one of the guards,” he explained.

Eragon motioned for the keys. Murtagh shrugged and handed them to him. Eragon found the right one and swung the door open. A single beam of moonlight slanted through the window, illuminating the elf’s face with cool silver.

She faced him, tense and coiled, ready for whatever would happen next. She held her head high, with a queen’s demeanor. Her eyes, dark green, almost black, and slightly angled like a cat’s, lifted to Eragon’s. Chills shot through him.

Their gaze held for a moment, then the elf trembled and collapsed soundlessly. Eragon barely caught her before she struck the floor. She was surprisingly light. The aroma of freshly crushed pine needles surrounded her.

Murtagh entered the cell. “She’s beautiful!”

“But hurt.”

“We can tend to her later. Are you strong enough to carry her?” Eragon shook his head. “Then I’ll do it,” said Murtagh as he slung the elf across his shoulders. “Now, upstairs!” He handed Eragon a dagger, then hurried back into the hall littered with soldiers’ bodies.

With heavy footsteps Murtagh led Eragon to a stone-hewn staircase at the end of the hall. As they climbed it, Eragon asked, “How are we going to get out without being noticed?”

“We’re not,” grunted Murtagh.

That did not allay Eragon’s fears. He listened anxiously for soldiers or anyone else who might be nearby, dreading what might happen if they met the Shade. At the head of the stairs was a banquet room filled with broad wooden tables. Shields lined the walls, and the wood ceiling was trussed with curved beams. Murtagh laid the elf on a table and looked at the ceiling worriedly. “Can you talk to Saphira for me?”

“Yes.”

“Tell her to wait another five minutes.”

There were shouts in the distance. Soldiers marched past the entrance to the banquet room. Eragon’s mouth tightened with pent-up tension. “Whatever you’re planning to do, I don’t think we have much

time."

"Just tell her, and stay out of sight," snapped Murtagh, running off.

As Eragon relayed the message, he was alarmed to hear men coming up the stairs. Fighting hunger and exhaustion, he dragged the elf off the table and hid her underneath it. He crouched next to her, holding his breath, tightly clenching the dagger.

Ten soldiers entered the room. They swept through it hurriedly, looking under only a couple of tables, and continued on their way. Eragon leaned against a table leg, sighing. The respite made him suddenly aware of his burning stomach and parched throat. A tankard and a plate of half-eaten food on the other side of the room caught his attention.

Eragon dashed from his hiding place, grabbed the food, then scurried back to the table. There was amber beer in the tankard, which he drank in two great gulps. Relief seeped through him as the cool liquid ran down his throat, soothing the irritated tissue. He suppressed a belch before ravenously tearing into a hunk of bread.

Murtagh returned carrying Zar'roc, a strange bow, and an elegant sword without a sheath. Murtagh gave Zar'roc to Eragon. "I found the other sword and bow in the guardroom. I've never seen weapons like them before, so I assumed they were the elf's."

"Let's find out," said Eragon through a mouthful of bread. The sword—slim and light with a curved crossguard, the ends of which narrowed into sharp points—fit the elf's sheath perfectly. There was no way to tell if the bow was hers, but it was shaped so gracefully he doubted it could be anyone else's. "What now?" he asked, cramming another bite of food into his mouth. "We can't stay here forever. Sooner or later the soldiers will find us."

"Now," said Murtagh, taking out his own bow and fitting an arrow to the string, "we wait. Like I said, our escape has been arranged."

"You don't understand; there's a Shade here! If he finds us, we're doomed."

"A Shade!" exclaimed Murtagh. "In that case, tell Saphira to come immediately. We were going to wait until the watch changed, but delaying even that long is too dangerous now." Eragon relayed the message succinctly, refraining from distracting Saphira with questions. "You messed up my plans by escaping yourself," groused Murtagh, watching the room's entrances for soldiers.

Eragon smiled. "In that case, perhaps I should have waited. *Your* timing was perfect, though. I wouldn't have been able to even crawl if I had been forced to fight all those soldiers with magic."

"Glad to be of some use," remarked Murtagh. He stiffened as they heard men running nearby. "Let's just hope the Shade doesn't find us."

A cold chuckle filled the banquet room. "I'm afraid it's far too late

for that."

Murtagh and Eragon spun around. The Shade stood alone at the end of the room. In his hand was a pale sword with a thin scratch on the blade. He unclasped the brooch that held his cape in place and let the garment fall to the floor. His body was like a runner's, thin and compact, but Eragon remembered Brom's warning and knew that the Shade's appearance was deceiving; he was many times stronger than a normal human.

"So, my young *Rider*, do you wish to test yourself against me?" sneered the Shade. "I shouldn't have trusted the captain when he said you ate all your food. I will not make that mistake again."

"I'll take care of him," said Murtagh quietly, putting down his bow and drawing his sword.

"No," said Eragon under his breath. "He wants me alive, not you. I can stall him for a short while, but then you'd better have a way out for us."

"Fine, go," said Murtagh. "You won't have to hold him off for long."

"I hope not," said Eragon grimly. He drew Zar'roc and slowly advanced. The red blade glinted with light from torches on the wall.

The Shade's maroon eyes burned like coals. He laughed softly. "Do you really think to defeat me, Du Sundavar Freohr? What a pitiful name. I would have expected something more subtle from you, but I suppose that's all you're capable of."

Eragon refused to let himself be goaded. He stared at the Shade's face, waiting for a flicker of his eyes or twitch of his lip, anything that would betray his next move. *I can't use magic for fear of provoking him to do the same. He has to think that he can win without resorting to it—which he probably can.*

Before either of them moved, the ceiling boomed and shook. Dust billowed from it and turned the air gray while pieces of wood fell around them, shattering on the floor. From the roof came screams and the sound of clashing metal. Afraid of being brained by the falling timber, Eragon flicked his eyes upward. The Shade took advantage of his distraction and attacked.

Eragon barely managed to get Zar'roc up in time to block a slash at his ribs. Their blades met with a clang that jarred his teeth and numbed his arm. *Hellfire! He's strong!* He grasped Zar'roc with both hands and swung with all of his might at the Shade's head. The Shade blocked him with ease, whipping his sword through the air faster than Eragon had thought possible.

Terrible screeches sounded above them, like iron spikes being drawn across rock. Three long cracks split the ceiling. Shingles from the slate roof fell through the fissures. Eragon ignored them, even when one smashed into the floor next to him. Though he had trained

with a master of the blade, Brom, and with Murtagh, who was also a deadly swordsman, he had never been this outclassed. The Shade was *playing* with him.

Eragon retreated toward Murtagh, arms trembling as he parried the Shade's blows. Each one seemed more powerful than the last. Eragon was no longer strong enough to call upon magic for help even if he had wanted to. Then, with a contemptuous flick of his wrist, the Shade knocked Zar'roc out of Eragon's hand. The force of the blow sent him to his knees, where he stayed, panting. The screeching was louder than ever. Whatever was happening, it was getting closer.

The Shade stared down at him haughtily. "A powerful piece you may be in the game that is being played, but I'm disappointed that this is your best. If the other Riders were this weak, they must have controlled the Empire only through sheer numbers."

Eragon looked up and shook his head. He had figured out Murtagh's plan. *Saphira, now would be a good time*. "No, you forget something."

"And what might that be?" asked the Shade mockingly.

There was a thunderous reverberation as a chunk of the ceiling was torn away to reveal the night sky. "The dragons!" roared Eragon over the noise, and threw himself out of the Shade's reach. The Shade snarled in rage, swinging his sword viciously. He missed and lunged. Surprise spread across his face as one of Murtagh's arrows sprouted from his shoulder.

The Shade laughed and snapped the arrow off with two fingers. "You'll have to do better than that if you want to stop me." The next arrow caught him between the eyes. The Shade howled with agony and writhed, covering his face. His skin turned gray. Mist formed in the air around him, obscuring his figure. There was a shattering cry; then the cloud vanished.

Where the Shade had been, nothing was left but his cape and a pile of clothes. "You killed him!" exclaimed Eragon. He knew of only two heroes of legend who had survived slaying a Shade.

"I'm not so sure," said Murtagh.

A man shouted, "That's it. He failed. Go in and get them!" Soldiers with nets and spears poured into the banquet room from both ends. Eragon and Murtagh backed up against the wall, dragging the elf with them. The men formed a menacing half-circle around them. Then Saphira stuck her head through the hole in the ceiling and roared. She gripped the edge of the opening with her powerful talons and ripped off another large section of the ceiling.

Three soldiers turned and ran, but the rest held their positions. With a resounding report, the center beam of the ceiling cracked and rained down heavy shingles. Confusion scattered the ranks as they tried to dodge the deadly barrage. Eragon and Murtagh pressed against the

wall to avoid the falling debris. Saphira roared again, and the soldiers fled, some getting crushed on the way.

With a final titanic effort, Saphira tore off the rest of the ceiling before jumping into the banquet hall with her wings folded. Her weight splintered a table with a sharp crunch. Crying out with relief, Eragon threw his arms around her. She hummed contentedly. *I've missed you, little one*.

Same here. There's someone else with us. Can you carry three?

Of course, she said, kicking shingles and tables out of the way so she could take off. Murtagh and Eragon pulled the elf out of hiding. Saphira hissed in surprise as she saw her. *An elf!*

Yes, and the woman I saw in my dreams, said Eragon, picking up Zar'roc. He helped Murtagh secure the elf into the saddle, then they both climbed onto Saphira. *I heard fighting on the roof. Are there men up there?*

There were, but no more. Are you ready?

Yes.

Saphira leapt out of the banquet hall and onto the fortress's roof, where the bodies of watchmen lay scattered. "Look!" said Murtagh, pointing. A row of archers filed out of a tower on the other side of the roofless hall.

"Saphira, you have to take off. Now!" warned Eragon.

She unfurled her wings, ran toward the edge of the building, and propelled them over it with her powerful legs. The extra weight on her back made her drop alarmingly. As she struggled to gain altitude, Eragon heard the musical twang of bowstrings being released.

Arrows whizzed toward them in the dark. Saphira roared with pain as she was struck and quickly rolled to the left to avoid the next volley. More arrows perforated the sky, but the night protected them from the shafts' deadly bite. Distressed, Eragon bent over Saphira's neck. *Where are you hurt?*

My wings are pierced … one of the arrows didn't go all the way through. It's still there. Her breathing was labored and heavy.

How far can you take us?

Far enough. Eragon clutched the elf tightly as they skimmed over Gil'ead, then left the city behind and veered eastward, soaring upward through the night.

Saphira drifted down to a clearing, landed on the crest of a hill, and rested her outstretched wings on the ground. Eragon could feel her shaking beneath him. They were only a half-league from Gil'ead.

Picketed in the clearing were Snowfire and Tornac, who snorted nervously at Saphira's arrival. Eragon slid to the ground and immediately turned to Saphira's injuries, while Murtagh readied the horses.

Unable to see well in the darkness, Eragon ran his hands blindly over Saphira's wings. He found three places where arrows had punctured the thin membrane, leaving bloody holes as thick around as his thumb. A small piece had also been torn out of the back edge of her left wing. She shivered when his fingers brushed the injuries. He tiredly healed the wounds with words from the ancient language. Then he went to the arrow that was embedded in one of the large muscles of her flying arm. The arrowhead poked through its underside. Warm blood dripped off it.

Eragon called Murtagh over and instructed, "Hold her wing down. I have to remove this arrow." He indicated where Murtagh should grip. *This will be painful*, he warned Saphira, *but it'll be over quickly. Try not to struggle—you'll hurt us*.

She extended her neck and grabbed a tall sapling between her curved teeth. With a yank of her head, she pulled the tree out of the ground and clamped it firmly in her jaws. *I'm ready*.

Okay, said Eragon. "Hold on," he whispered to Murtagh, then broke off the head of the arrow. Trying not to cause any more damage, he swiftly pulled the shaft out of Saphira. As it left her muscle, she threw back her head and whimpered past the tree in her mouth. Her wing jerked involuntarily, clipping Murtagh under the chin and knocking him to the ground.

With a growl, Saphira shook the tree, spraying them with dirt before tossing it away. After Eragon sealed the wound, he helped Murtagh up. "She caught me by surprise," admitted Murtagh, touching his scraped jaw.

I'm sorry.

"She didn't mean to hit you," assured Eragon. He checked on the unconscious elf. *You're going to have to carry her a bit longer*, he told Saphira. *We can't take her on the horses and ride fast enough. Flying should be easier for you now that the arrow is out*.

Saphira dipped her head. *I will do it.*

Thank you, said Eragon. He hugged her fiercely. *What you did was incredible; I'll never forget it.*

Her eyes softened. *I will go now.* He backed away as she flew up in a flurry of air, the elf's hair streaming back. Seconds later they were gone. Eragon hurried to Snowfire, pulled himself into the saddle, and galloped away with Murtagh.

While they rode, Eragon tried to remember what he knew about elves. They had long lives—that fact was oft repeated—although he knew not how long. They spoke the ancient language, and many could use magic. After the Riders' fall, elves had retreated into seclusion. None of them had been seen in the Empire since. *So why is one here now? And how did the Empire manage to capture her? If she can use magic, she's probably drugged as I was.*

They traveled through the night, not stopping even when their flagging strength began to slow them. They continued onward despite burning eyes and clumsy movements. Behind them, lines of torch-bearing horsemen searched around Gil'ead for their trail.

After many bleary hours, dawn lightened the sky. By unspoken consent Eragon and Murtagh stopped the horses. "We have to make camp," said Eragon wearily. "I must sleep—whether they catch us or not."

"Agreed," said Murtagh, rubbing his eyes. "Have Saphira land. We'll meet her."

They followed Saphira's directions and found her drinking from a stream at the base of a small cliff, the elf still slouched on her back. Saphira greeted them with a soft bugle as Eragon dismounted.

Murtagh helped him remove the elf from Saphira's saddle and lower her to the ground. Then they sagged against the rock face, exhausted. Saphira examined the elf curiously. *I wonder why she hasn't woken. It's been hours since we left Gil'ead.*

Who knows what they did to her? said Eragon grimly.

Murtagh followed their gaze. "As far as I know, she's the first elf the king has captured. Ever since they went into hiding, he's been looking for them without success—until now. So he's either found their sanctuary, or she was captured by chance. I think it was chance. If he had found the elf haven, he would have declared war and sent his army after the elves. Since that hasn't happened, the question is, Were Galbatorix's men able to extract the elves' location before we rescued her?"

"We won't know until she regains consciousness. Tell me what happened after I was captured. How did I end up in Gil'ead?"

"The Urgals are working for the Empire," said Murtagh shortly, pushing back his hair. "And, it seems, the Shade as well. Saphira and I saw the Urgals give you to him—though I didn't know who it was at

the time—and a group of soldiers. They were the ones who took you to Gil'ead."

It's true, said Saphira, curling up next to them.

Eragon's mind flashed back to the Urgals he had spoken with at Teirm and the "master" they had mentioned. *They meant the king! I insulted the most powerful man in Alagaësia!* he realized with dread. Then he remembered the horror of the slaughtered villagers in Yazuac. A sick, angry feeling welled in his stomach. *The Urgals were under Galbatorix's orders! Why would he commit such an atrocity on his own subjects?*

Because he is evil, stated Saphira flatly.

Glowering, Eragon exclaimed, "This will mean war! Once the people of the Empire learn of it, they will rebel and support the Varden."

Murtagh rested his chin in his hand. "Even if they heard of this outrage, few would make it to the Varden. With the Urgals under his command, the king has enough warriors to close the Empire's borders and remain in control, no matter how disruptive people are. With such a rule of terror, he will be able to shape the Empire however he wants. And though he is hated, people could be galvanized into joining him if they had a common enemy."

"Who would that be?" asked Eragon, confused.

"The elves and the Varden. With the right rumors they can be portrayed as the most despicable monsters in Alagaësia—fiends who are waiting to seize your land and wealth. The Empire could even say that the Urgals have been misunderstood all this time and that they are really friends and allies against such terrible enemies. I only wonder what the king promised them in return for their services."

"It wouldn't work," said Eragon, shaking his head. "No one could be deceived that easily about Galbatorix and the Urgals. Besides, why would he want to do that? He's already in power."

"But his authority is challenged by the Varden, with whom people sympathize. There's also Surda, which has defied him since it seceded from the Empire. Galbatorix is strong within the Empire, but his arm is weak outside of it. As for people seeing through his deceptions, they'll believe whatever he wants them to. It's happened before." Murtagh fell silent and gazed moodily into the distance.

His words troubled Eragon. Saphira touched him with her mind: *Where is Galbatorix sending the Urgals?*

What?

In both Carvahall and Teirm, you heard that Urgals were leaving the area and migrating southeast, as if to brave the Hadarac Desert. If the king truly does control them, why is he sending them in that direction? Maybe an Urgal army is being gathered for his private use or an Urgal city is being formed.

Eragon shuddered at the thought. *I'm too tired to figure it out. Whatever Galbatorix's plans, they'll only cause us trouble. I just wish that we knew where the Varden are. That's where we should be going, but we're lost without Dormnad. It doesn't matter what we do; the Empire will find us.*

Don't give up, she said encouragingly, then added dryly, *though you're probably right.*

Thanks. He looked at Murtagh. "You risked your life to rescue me; I owe you for that. I couldn't have escaped on my own." It was more than that, though. There was a bond between them now, welded in the brotherhood of battle and tempered by the loyalty Murtagh had shown.

"I'm just glad I could help. It …" Murtagh faltered and rubbed his face. "My main worry now is how we're going to travel with so many men searching for us. Gil'ead's soldiers will be hunting us tomorrow; once they find the horses' tracks, they'll know you didn't fly away with Saphira."

Eragon glumly agreed. "How did you manage to get into the castle?"

Murtagh laughed softly. "By paying a steep bribe and crawling through a filthy scullery chute. But the plan wouldn't have worked without Saphira. She," he stopped and directed his words at her, "that is, you, are the only reason we escaped alive."

Eragon solemnly put a hand on her scaly neck. As she hummed contentedly, he gazed at the elf's face, captivated. Reluctantly, he dragged himself upright. "We should make a bed for her."

Murtagh got to his feet and stretched out a blanket for the elf. When they lifted her onto it, the cuff of her sleeve tore on a branch. Eragon began to pinch the fabric together, then gasped.

The elf's arm was mottled with a layer of bruises and cuts; some were half healed, while others were fresh and oozing. Eragon shook his head with anger and pulled the sleeve up higher. The injuries continued to her shoulder. With trembling fingers, he unlaced the back of her shirt, dreading what might be under it.

As the leather slipped off, Murtagh cursed. The elf's back was strong and muscled, but it was covered with scabs that made her skin look like dry, cracked mud. She had been whipped mercilessly and branded with hot irons in the shape of claws. Where her skin was still intact, it was purple and black from numerous beatings. On her left shoulder was a tattoo inscribed with indigo ink. It was the same symbol that had been on the sapphire of Brom's ring. Eragon silently swore an oath that he would kill whoever was responsible for torturing the elf.

"Can you heal this?" asked Murtagh.

"I—I don't know," said Eragon. He swallowed back sudden

queasiness. “There’s so much.”

Eragon! said Saphira sharply. *This is an elf. She cannot be allowed to die. Tired or not, hungry or not, you must save her. I will meld my strength with yours, but you are the one who must wield the magic*.

Yes … you are right, he murmured, unable to tear his eyes from the elf. Determined, he pulled off his gloves and said to Murtagh, “This is going to take some time. Can you get me food? Also, boil rags for bandages; I can’t heal all her wounds.”

“We can’t make a fire without being seen,” objected Murtagh. “You’ll have to use unwashed cloths, and the food will be cold.” Eragon grimaced but acquiesced. As he gently laid a hand on the elf’s spine, Saphira settled next to him, her glittering eyes fixed on the elf. He took a deep breath, then reached for the magic and started working.

He spoke the ancient words, “Waíse heill!” A burn shimmered under his palm, and new, unmarked skin flowed over it, joining together without a scar. He passed over bruises or other wounds that were not life-threatening—healing them all would consume the energy he needed for more serious injuries. As Eragon toiled, he marveled that the elf was still alive. She had been repeatedly tortured to the edge of death with a precision that chilled him.

Although he tried to preserve the elf’s modesty, he could not help but notice that underneath the disfiguring marks, her body was exceptionally beautiful. He was exhausted and did not dwell upon it—though his ears turned red at times, and he fervently hoped that Saphira did not know what he was thinking.

He labored through dawn, pausing only at brief intervals to eat and drink, trying to replenish himself from his fast, the escape, and now healing the elf. Saphira remained by his side, lending her strength where she could. The sun was well into the sky when he finally stood, groaning as his cramped muscles stretched. His hands were gray and his eyes felt dry and gritty. He stumbled to the saddlebags and took a long drink from the wineskin. “Is it done?” asked Murtagh.

Eragon nodded, trembling. He did not trust himself to speak. The camp spun before him; he nearly fainted. *You did well*, said Saphira soothingly.

“Will she live?”

“I don’t—don’t know,” he said in a ravaged voice. “Elves are strong, but even they cannot endure abuse like this with impunity. If I knew more about healing, I might be able to revive her, but …” He gestured helplessly. His hand was shaking so badly he spilled some of the wine. Another swig helped to steady him. “We’d better start riding again.”

“No! You must sleep,” protested Murtagh.

“I … can sleep in the saddle. But we can’t afford to stay here, not

with the soldiers closing on us."

Murtagh reluctantly gave in. "In that case I'll lead Snowfire while you rest." They resaddled the horses, strapped the elf onto Saphira, and departed the camp. Eragon ate while he rode, trying to replace his depleted energy before he leaned forward against Snowfire and closed his eyes.

When they stopped for the evening, Eragon felt no better and his temper had worsened. Most of the day had been spent on long detours to avoid detection by soldiers with hunting dogs. He dismounted Snowfire and asked Saphira, *How is she?*

I think no worse than before. She stirred slightly a few times, but that was all. Saphira crouched low to the ground to let him lift the elf out of the saddle. For a moment her soft form pressed against Eragon. Then he hurriedly put her down.

He and Murtagh made a small dinner. It was difficult for them to fight off the urge to sleep. When they had eaten, Murtagh said, "We can't keep up this pace; we aren't gaining any ground on the soldiers. Another day or two of this and they'll be sure to overtake us."

"What else can we do?" snapped Eragon. "If it were just the two of us and you were willing to leave Tornac behind, Saphira could fly us out of here. But with the elf, too? Impossible."

Murtagh looked at him carefully. "If you want to go your own way, I won't stop you. I can't expect you and Saphira to stay and risk imprisonment."

"Don't insult me," Eragon muttered. "The only reason I'm free is because of you. I'm not going to abandon you to the Empire. Poor thanks that would be!"

Murtagh bowed his head. "Your words hearten me." He paused. "But they don't solve our problem."

"What can?" Eragon asked. He gestured at the elf. "I wish she could tell us where the elves are; perhaps we could seek sanctuary with them."

"Considering how they've protected themselves, I doubt she'd reveal their location. Even if she did, the others of her kind might not welcome us. Why would they want to shelter us anyway? The last Riders they had contact with were Galbatorix and the Forsworn. I doubt that left them with pleasant memories. And I don't even have the dubious honor of being a Rider like you. No, they would not want me at all."

They would accept us, said Saphira confidently as she shifted her wings to a more comfortable position.

Eragon shrugged. "Even if they would protect us, we can't find them, and it's impossible to ask the elf until she regains consciousness. We must flee, but in which direction—north, south, east, or west?"

Murtagh laced his fingers together and pressed his thumbs against

his temples. “I think the only thing we can do is leave the Empire. The few safe places within it are far from here. They would be difficult to reach without being caught or followed.… There’s nothing for us to the north except the forest Du Weldenvarden—which we might be able to hide in, but I don’t relish going back past Gil’ead. Only the Empire and the sea lie westward. To the south is Surda, where you might be able to find someone to direct you to the Varden. As for going east …” He shrugged. “To the east, the Hadarac Desert stands between us and whatever lands exist in that direction. The Varden are somewhere across it, but without directions it might take us years to find them.”

We would be safe, though, remarked Saphira. *As long as we didn’t encounter any Urgals*.

Eragon knitted his brow. A headache threatened to drown his thoughts in hot throbs. “It’s too dangerous to go to Surda. We would have to traverse most of the Empire, avoiding every town and village. There are too many people between us and Surda to get there unnoticed.”

Murtagh raised an eyebrow. “So you want to go across the desert?”

“I don’t see any other options. Besides, that way we can leave the Empire before the Ra’zac get here. With their flying steeds, they’ll probably arrive in Gil’ead in a couple of days, so we don’t have much time.”

“Even if we do reach the desert before they get here,” said Murtagh, “they could still overtake us. It’ll be hard to outdistance them at all.”

Eragon rubbed Saphira’s side, her scales rough under his fingers. “That’s assuming they can follow our trail. To catch us, though, they’ll have to leave the soldiers behind, which is to our advantage. If it comes to a fight, I think the three of us can defeat them … as long as we aren’t ambushed the way Brom and I were.”

“If we reach the other side of the Hadarac safely,” said Murtagh slowly, “where will we go? Those lands are well outside of the Empire. There will be few cities, if any. And then there is the desert itself. What do you know of it?”

“Only that it’s hot, dry, and full of sand,” confessed Eragon.

“That about sums it up,” replied Murtagh. “It’s filled with poisonous and inedible plants, venomous snakes, scorpions, and a blistering sun. You saw the great plain on our way to Gil’ead?”

It was a rhetorical question, but Eragon answered anyway, “Yes, and once before.”

“Then you are familiar with its immense range. It fills the heart of the Empire. Now imagine something two or three times its size, and you’ll understand the vastness of the Hadarac Desert. That is what you’re proposing to cross.”

Eragon tried to envision a piece of land that gigantic but was unable to grasp the distances involved. He retrieved the map of Alagaësia from his saddlebags. The parchment smelled musty as he unrolled it on the ground. He inspected the plains and shook his head in amazement. “No wonder the Empire ends at the desert. Everything on the other side is too far away for Galbatorix to control.”

Murtagh swept his hand over the right side of the parchment. “All the land beyond the desert, which is blank on this map, was under one rule when the Riders lived. If the king were to raise up new Riders under his command, it would allow him to expand the Empire to an unprecedented size. But that wasn’t the point I was trying to make. The Hadarac Desert is so huge and contains so many dangers, the chances are slim that we can cross it unscathed. It is a desperate path to take.”

“We *are* desperate,” said Eragon firmly. He studied the map carefully. “If we rode through the belly of the desert, it would take well over a month, perhaps even two, to cross it. But if we angle southeast, toward the Beor Mountains, we could cut through much faster. Then we can either follow the Beor Mountains farther east into the wilderness or go west to Surda. If this map is accurate, the distance between here and the Beors is roughly equal to what we covered on our way to Gil’ead.”

“But that took us nearly a month!”

Eragon shook his head impatiently. “Our ride to Gil’ead was slow on account of my injuries. If we press ourselves, it’ll take only a fraction of that time to reach the Beor Mountains.”

“Enough. You made your point,” acknowledged Murtagh. “Before I consent, however, something must be solved. As I’m sure you noticed, I bought supplies for us and the horses while I was in Gil’ead. But how can we get enough water? The roving tribes who live in the Hadarac usually disguise their wells and oases so no one can steal their water. And carrying enough for more than a day is impractical. Just think about how much Saphira drinks! She and the horses consume more water at one time than we do in a week. Unless you can make it rain whenever we need, I don’t see how we can go the direction you propose.”

Eragon rocked back on his heels. Making rain was well beyond his power. He suspected that not even the strongest Rider could have done it. Moving that much air was like trying to lift a mountain. He needed a solution that would not drain all of his strength. *I wonder if it’s possible to convert sand into water? That would solve our problem, but only if it doesn’t take too much energy*.

“I have an idea,” he said. “Let me experiment, then I’ll give you an answer.” Eragon strode out of the camp, with Saphira following

closely.

What are you going to try? she asked.

"I don't know," he muttered. *Saphira, could you carry enough water for us?*

She shook her enormous head. *No, I wouldn't even be able to lift that much weight, let alone fly with it.*

Too bad. He knelt and picked up a stone with a cavity large enough for a mouthful of water. He pressed a clump of dirt into the hollow and studied it thoughtfully. Now came the hard part. Somehow he had to convert the dirt into water. *But what words should I use?* He puzzled over it for a moment, then picked two he hoped would work. The icy magic rushed through him as he breached the familiar barrier in his mind and commanded, "Deloi moi!"

Immediately the dirt began to absorb his strength at a prodigious rate. Eragon's mind flashed back to Brom's warning that certain tasks could consume all of his power and take his life. Panic blossomed in his chest. He tried to release the magic but could not. It was linked to him until the task was complete or he was dead. All he could do was remain motionless, growing weaker every moment.

Just as he became convinced that he would die kneeling there, the dirt shimmered and morphed into a thimbleful of water. Relieved, Eragon sat back, breathing hard. His heart pounded painfully and hunger gnawed at his innards.

What happened? asked Saphira.

Eragon shook his head, still in shock from the drain on his body's reserves. He was glad that he had not tried to transmute anything larger. *This … this won't work*, he said. *I don't even have the strength to give myself a drink.*

You should have been more careful, she chided. *Magic can yield unexpected results when the ancient words are combined in new ways.*

He glared at her. *I know that, but this was the only way I could test my idea. I wasn't going to wait until we were in the desert!* He reminded himself that she was only trying to help. *How did you turn Brom's grave into diamond without killing yourself? I can barely handle a bit of dirt, much less all that sandstone.*

I don't know how I did it, she stated calmly. *It just happened.*

Could you do it again, but this time make water?

Eragon, she said, looking him squarely in the face. *I've no more control over my abilities than a spider does. Things like that occur whether I will them or not. Brom told you that unusual events happen around dragons. He spoke truly. He gave no explanation for it, nor do I have one. Sometimes I can work changes just by feel, almost without thought. The rest of the time—like right now—I'm as powerless as Snowfire.*

You're never powerless, he said softly, putting a hand on her neck.

For a long period they were both quiet. Eragon remembered the grave he had made and how Brom lay within it. He could still see the sandstone flowing over the old man's face. "At least we gave him a decent burial," he whispered.

He idly swirled a finger in the dirt, making twisting ridges. Two of the ridges formed a miniature valley, so he added mountains around it. With his fingernail he scratched a river down the valley, then deepened it because it seemed too shallow. He added a few more details until he found himself staring at a passable reproduction of Palancar Valley. Homesickness welled up within him, and he obliterated the valley with a swipe of his hand.

I don't want to talk about it, he muttered angrily, staving off Saphira's questions. He crossed his arms and glared at the ground. Almost against his will, his eyes flicked back to where he had gouged the earth. He straightened, surprised. Though the ground was dry, the furrow he had made was lined with moisture. Curious, he scraped away more dirt and found a damp layer a few inches under the surface. "Look at this!" he said excitedly.

Saphira lowered her nose to his discovery. *How does this help us? Water in the desert is sure to be buried so deeply we would have to dig for weeks to find it.*

Yes, said Eragon delightedly, *but as long as it's there, I can get it. Watch!* He deepened the hole, then mentally accessed the magic. Instead of changing the dirt into water, he simply summoned forth the moisture that was already in the earth. With a faint trickle, water rushed into the hole. He smiled and sipped from it. The liquid was cool and pure, perfect for drinking. *See! We can get all we need.*

Saphira sniffed the pool. *Here, yes. But in the desert? There may not be enough water in the ground for you to bring to the surface.*

It will work, Eragon assured her. *All I'm doing is lifting the water, an easy enough task. As long as it's done slowly, my strength will hold. Even if I have to draw the water from fifty paces down, it won't be a problem. Especially if you help me.*

Saphira looked at him dubiously. *Are you sure? Think carefully upon your answer, for it will mean our lives if you are wrong.*

Eragon hesitated, then said firmly, *I'm sure.*

Then go tell Murtagh. I will keep watch while you sleep.

But you've stayed up all night like us, he objected. *You should rest.*

I'll be fine—I'm stronger than you know, she said gently. Her scales rustled as she curled up with a watchful eye turned northward, toward their pursuers. Eragon hugged her, and she hummed deeply, sides vibrating. *Go.*

He lingered, then reluctantly returned to Murtagh, who asked, "Well? Is the desert open to us?"

“It is,” acknowledged Eragon. He flopped onto his blankets and explained what he had learned. When he finished, Eragon turned to the elf. Her face was the last thing he saw before falling asleep.

They forced themselves to rise early in the gray predawn hours. Eragon shivered in the cool air. “How are we going to transport the elf? She can’t ride on Saphira’s back much longer without getting sores from her scales. Saphira can’t carry her in her claws—it tires her and makes landing dangerous. A sledge won’t work; it would get battered to pieces while we ride, and I don’t want the horses slowed by the weight of another person.”

Murtagh considered the matter as he saddled Tornac. “If you were to ride Saphira, we could lash the elf onto Snowfire, but we’d have the same problem with sores.”

I have a solution, said Saphira unexpectedly. *Why don’t you tie the elf to my belly? I’ll still be able to move freely, and she will be safer than anywhere else. The only danger will be if soldiers shoot arrows at me, but I can easily fly above those*.

None of them could come up with a better idea, so they quickly adopted hers. Eragon folded one of his blankets in half lengthwise, secured it around the elf’s petite form, then took her to Saphira. Blankets and spare clothes were sacrificed to form ropes long enough to encircle Saphira’s girth. With those ropes, the elf was tied back-first against Saphira’s belly, her head between Saphira’s front legs. Eragon looked critically at their handiwork. “I’m afraid your scales may rub through the ropes.”

“We’ll have to check them occasionally for fraying,” commented Murtagh.

Shall we go now? Saphira asked, and Eragon repeated the question.

Murtagh’s eyes sparked dangerously, a tight smile lifting his lips. He glanced back the way they had come, where smoke from soldiers’ camps was clearly visible, and said, “I always did like races.”

“And now we are in one for our lives!”

Murtagh swung into Tornac’s saddle and trotted out of the camp. Eragon followed close behind on Snowfire. Saphira jumped into the air with the elf. She flew low to the ground to avoid being seen by the soldiers. In this fashion, the three of them made their way southeast toward the distant Hadarac Desert.

Eragon kept a quick eye out for pursuers as he rode. His mind repeatedly wandered back to the elf. *An elf!* He had actually seen one, and she was with them! He wondered what Roran would think of that. It struck him that if he ever returned to Carvahall, he would have a hard time convincing anyone that his adventures had actually

occurred.

For the rest of the day, Eragon and Murtagh sped through the land, ignoring discomfort and fatigue. They drove the horses as hard as they could without killing them. Sometimes they dismounted and ran on foot to give Tornac and Snowfire a rest. Only twice did they stop—both times to let the horses eat and drink.

Though the soldiers of Gil'ead were far behind now, Eragon and Murtagh found themselves having to avoid new soldiers every time they passed a town or village. Somehow the alarm had been sent ahead of them. Twice they were nearly ambushed along the trail, escaping only because Saphira happened to smell the men ahead of them. After the second incident, they avoided the trail entirely.

Dusk softened the countryside as evening drew a black cloak across the sky. Through the night they traveled, relentlessly pacing out the miles. In the deepest hours of night, the ground rose beneath them to form low cactus-dotted hills.

Murtagh pointed forward. "There's a town, Bullridge, some leagues ahead that we must bypass. They're sure to have soldiers watching for us. We should try to slip past them now while it's dark."

After three hours they saw the straw-yellow lanterns of Bullridge. A web of soldiers patrolled between watch fires scattered around the town. Eragon and Murtagh muffled their sword sheaths and carefully dismounted. They led the horses in a wide detour around Bullridge, listening attentively to avoid stumbling on an encampment.

With the town behind them, Eragon relaxed slightly. Daybreak finally flooded the sky with a delicate blush and warmed the chilly night air. They halted on the crest of a hill to observe their surroundings. The Ramr River was to their left, but it was also five miles to their right. The river continued south for several leagues, then doubled back on itself in a narrow loop before curving west. They had covered over sixteen leagues in one day.

Eragon leaned against Snowfire's neck, happy with the distance they had gone. "Let's find a gully or hollow where we can sleep undisturbed." They stopped at a small stand of juniper trees and laid their blankets beneath them. Saphira waited patiently as they untied the elf from her belly.

"I'll take the first watch and wake you at midmorning," said Murtagh, setting his bare sword across his knees. Eragon mumbled his assent and pulled the blankets over his shoulders.

Nightfall found them worn and drowsy but determined to continue. As they prepared to leave, Saphira observed to Eragon, *This is the third night since we rescued you from Gil'ead, and the elf still hasn't woken. I'm worried. And*, she continued, *she has neither drunk nor eaten in that time.*

I know little of elves, but she is slender, and I doubt she can survive much longer without nourishment.

"What's wrong?" asked Murtagh over Tornac's back.

"The elf," said Eragon, looking down at her. "Saphira is troubled that she hasn't woken or eaten; it disturbs me too. I healed her wounds, at least on the surface, but it doesn't seem to have done her any good."

"Maybe the Shade tampered with her mind," suggested Murtagh.

"Then we have to help her."

Murtagh knelt by the elf. He examined her intently, then shook his head and stood. "As far as I can tell, she's only sleeping. It seems as if I could wake her with a word or a touch, yet she slumbers on. Her coma might be something elves self-induce to escape the pain of injury, but if so, why doesn't she end it? There's no danger to her now."

"But does she know that?" asked Eragon quietly.

Murtagh put a hand on his shoulder. "This must wait. We have to leave now or risk losing our hard-won lead. You can tend to her later when we stop."

"One thing first," said Eragon. He soaked a rag, then squeezed the cloth so water dripped between the elf's sculpted lips. He did that several times and dabbed above her straight, angled eyebrows, feeling oddly protective.

They headed through the hills, avoiding the tops for fear of being spotted by sentries. Saphira stayed with them on the ground for the same reason. Despite her bulk, she was stealthy; only her tail could be heard scraping over the ground, like a thick blue snake.

Eventually the sky brightened in the east. The morning star Aiedail appeared as they reached the edge of a steep bank covered with mounds of brush. Water roared below as it tore over boulders and sluiced through branches.

"The Ramr!" said Eragon over the noise.

Murtagh nodded. "Yes! We have to find a place to ford safely."

That isn't necessary, said Saphira. *I can carry you across, no matter how wide the river is.*

Eragon looked up at her blue-gray form. *What about the horses? We can't leave them behind. They're too heavy for you to lift.*

As long as you're not on them and they don't struggle too much, I'm sure that I can carry them. If I can dodge arrows with three people on my back, I can certainly fly a horse in a straight line over a river.

I believe you, but let's not attempt it unless we have to. It's too dangerous.

She clambered down the embankment. *We can't afford to squander*

time here.

Eragon followed her, leading Snowfire. The bank came to an abrupt end at the Ramr, where the river ran dark and swift. White mist wafted up from the water, like blood steaming in winter. It was impossible to see the far side. Murtagh tossed a branch into the torrent and watched it race away, bobbing on the rough water.

"How deep do you think it is?" asked Eragon.

"I can't tell," said Murtagh, worry coloring his voice. "Can you see how far across it is with magic?"

"I don't think so, not without lighting up this place like a beacon."

With a gust of air, Saphira took off and soared over the Ramr. After a short time, she said, *I'm on the other bank. The river is over a half-mile wide. You couldn't have chosen a worse place to cross; the Ramr bends at this point and is at its widest*.

"A half-mile!" exclaimed Eragon. He told Murtagh about Saphira's offer to fly them.

"I'd rather not try it, for the horses' sake. Tornac isn't as accustomed to Saphira as Snowfire. He might panic and injure them both. Ask Saphira to look for shallows where we can swim over safely. If there aren't any within a mile in either direction, then I suppose she can ferry us."

At Eragon's request, Saphira agreed to search for a ford. While she explored, they hunkered next to the horses and ate dry bread. It was not long before Saphira returned, her velvet wings whispering in the early dawn sky. *The water is both deep and strong, upstream as well as downstream*.

Once he was told, Murtagh said, "I'd better go over first, so I can watch the horses." He scrambled onto Saphira's saddle. "Be careful with Tornac. I've had him for many years. I don't want anything to happen to him." Then Saphira took off.

When she returned, the unconscious elf had been untied from her belly. Eragon led Tornac to Saphira, ignoring the horse's low whinnies. Saphira reared back on her haunches to grasp the horse around the belly with her forelegs. Eragon eyed her formidable claws and said, "Wait!" He repositioned Tornac's saddle blanket, strapping it to the horse's belly so it protected his soft underside, then gestured for Saphira to proceed.

Tornac snorted in fright and tried to bolt when Saphira's forelegs clamped around his sides, but she held him tightly. The horse rolled his eyes wildly, the whites rimming his dilated pupils. Eragon tried to gentle Tornac with his mind, but the horse's panic resisted his touch. Before Tornac could try to escape again, Saphira jumped skyward, her hind legs thrusting with such force that her claws gouged the rocks underneath. Her wings strained furiously, struggling to lift the

enormous load. For a moment it seemed she would fall back to the ground. Then, with a lunge, she shot into the air. Tornac screamed in terror, kicking and tossing. It was a terrible sound, like screeching metal.

Eragon swore, wondering if anyone was close enough to hear. *You'd better hurry, Saphira*. He listened for soldiers as he waited, scanning the inky landscape for the telltale flash of torches. It soon met his eye in a line of horsemen sliding down a bluff almost a league away.

As Saphira landed, Eragon brought Snowfire to her. *Murtagh's silly animal is in hysterics. He had to tie Tornac down to prevent him from running away*. She gripped Snowfire and carried him off, ignoring the horse's trumpeted protestations. Eragon watched her go, feeling lonely in the night. The horsemen were only a mile away.

Finally Saphira came for him, and they were soon on firm ground once more, with the Ramr to their backs. Once the horses were calmed and the saddles readjusted, they resumed their flight toward the Beor Mountains. The air filled with the calls of birds waking to a new day.

Eragon dozed even when walking. He was barely aware that Murtagh was just as drowsy. There were times when neither of them guided the horses, and it was only Saphira's vigilance that kept them on course.

Eventually the ground became soft and gave way under their feet, forcing them to halt. The sun was high overhead. The Ramr River was no more than a fuzzy line behind them.

They had reached the Hadarac Desert.

The Hadarac Desert

A vast expanse of dunes spread to the horizon like ripples on an ocean. Bursts of wind twirled the reddish gold sand into the air. Scraggly trees grew on scattered patches of solid ground—ground any farmer would have declared unfit for crops. Rising in the distance was a line of purple crags. The imposing desolation was barren of any animals except for a bird gliding on the zephyrs.

"You're sure we'll find food for the horses out there?" queried Eragon, slurring his words. The hot, dry air stung his throat.

"See those?" asked Murtagh, indicating the crags. "Grass grows around them. It's short and tough, but the horses will find it sufficient."

"I hope you're right," said Eragon, squinting at the sun. "Before we continue, let's rest. My mind is slow as a snail, and I can barely move my legs."

They untied the elf from Saphira, ate, then lay in the shadow of a dune for a nap. As Eragon settled into the sand, Saphira coiled up next to him and spread her wings over them. *This is a wondrous place*, she said. *I could spend years here and not notice the passing time*.

Eragon closed his eyes. *It would be a nice place to fly*, he agreed drowsily.

Not only that, I feel as though I was made for this desert. It has the space I need, mountains where I could roost, and camouflaged prey that I could spend days hunting. And the warmth! Cold does not disturb me, but this heat makes me feel alive and full of energy. She craned her head toward the sky, stretching happily.

You like it that much? mumbled Eragon.

Yes.

Then when this is all done, perhaps we can return…. He drifted into slumber even as he spoke. Saphira was pleased and hummed gently while he and Murtagh rested.

It was the morning of the fourth day since leaving Gil'ead. They had already covered thirty-five leagues.

They slept just long enough to clear their minds and rest the horses. No soldiers could be seen to the rear, but that did not lull them into slowing their pace. They knew that the Empire would keep searching until they were far beyond the king's reach. Eragon said, "Couriers must have carried news of my escape to Galbatorix. He would have alerted the Ra'zac. They're sure to be on our trail by now. It'll take

them a while to catch us even by flying, but we should be ready for them at all times."

And this time they will find I am not so easily bound with chains, said Saphira.

Murtagh scratched his chin. "I hope they won't be able to follow us past Bullridge. The Ramr was an effective way to lose pursuers; there's a good chance our tracks won't be found again."

"Something to hope for indeed," said Eragon as he checked the elf. Her condition was unchanged; she still did not react to his ministrations. "I place no faith in luck right now, though. The Ra'zac could be on our trail even as we speak."

At sunset they arrived at the crags they had viewed from afar that morning. The imposing stone bluffs towered over them, casting thin shadows. The surrounding area was free of dunes for a half mile. Heat assailed Eragon like a physical blow as he dismounted Snowfire onto the baked, cracked ground. The back of his neck and his face were sunburned; his skin was hot and feverish.

After picketing the horses where they could nibble the sparse grass, Murtagh started a small fire. "How far do you think we went?" Eragon asked, releasing the elf from Saphira.

"I don't know!" snapped Murtagh. His skin was red, his eyes bloodshot. He picked up a pot and muttered a curse. "We don't have enough water. And the horses have to drink."

Eragon was just as irritated by the heat and dryness, but he held his temper in check. "Bring the horses." Saphira dug a hole for him with her claws, then he closed his eyes, releasing the spell. Though the ground was parched, there was enough moisture for the plants to live on and enough for him to fill the hole several times over.

Murtagh refilled the waterskins as water pooled in the hole, then stood aside and let the horses drink. The thirsty animals quaffed gallons. Eragon was forced to draw the liquid from ever deeper in the earth to satisfy their desire. It taxed his strength to the limit. When the horses were finally sated, he said to Saphira, *If you need a drink, take it now*. Her head snaked around him and she took two long draughts, but no more.

Before letting the water flow back into the ground, Eragon gulped down as much as he could, then watched the last drops melt back into the dirt. Holding the water on the surface was harder than he had expected. *But at least it's within my abilities*, he reflected, remembering with some amusement how he had once struggled to lift even a pebble.

It was freezing when they rose the next day. The sand had a pink hue in the morning light, and the sky was hazy, concealing the horizon.

Murtagh's mood had not improved with sleep, and Eragon found his own rapidly deteriorating. During breakfast, he asked, "Do you think it'll be long before we leave the desert?"

Murtagh glowered. "We're only crossing a small section of it, so I can't imagine that it'll take us more than two or three days."

"But look how far we've already come."

"All right, maybe it won't! All I care about right now is getting out of the Hadarac as quickly as possible. What we're doing is hard enough without having to pick sand from our eyes every few minutes."

They finished eating, then Eragon went to the elf. She lay as one dead—a corpse except for her measured breathing. "Where lies your injury?" whispered Eragon, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "How can you sleep like this and yet live?" The image of her, alert and poised in the prison cell, was still vivid in his mind. Troubled, he prepared the elf for travel, then saddled and mounted Snowfire.

As they left the camp, a line of dark smudges became visible on the horizon, indistinct in the hazy air. Murtagh thought they were distant hills. Eragon was not convinced, but he could make out no details.

The elf's plight filled his thoughts. He was sure that something had to be done to help her or she would die, though he knew not what that might be. Saphira was just as concerned. They talked about it for hours, but neither of them knew enough about healing to solve the problem confronting them.

At midday they stopped for a brief rest. When they resumed their journey, Eragon noticed that the haze had thinned since morning, and the distant smudges had gained definition.

No longer were they indistinct purple-blue lumps, but rather broad, forest-covered mounds with clear outlines. The air above them was pale white, bleached of its usual hue—all color seemed to have been leached out of a horizontal band of sky that lay on top of the hills and extended to the horizon's edges.

He stared, puzzled, but the more he tried to make sense of it, the more confused he became. He blinked and shook his head, thinking that it must be some illusion of the desert air. Yet when he opened his eyes, the annoying incongruity was still there. Indeed, the whiteness blanketed half the sky before them. Sure that something was terribly wrong, he started to point this out to Murtagh and Saphira when he suddenly understood what he was seeing.

What they had taken to be hills were actually the bases of gigantic mountains, scores of miles wide. Except for the dense forest along their lower regions, the mountains were entirely covered with snow and ice. It was this that had deceived Eragon into thinking the sky white. He craned back his neck, searching for the peaks, but they were

not visible. The mountains stretched up into the sky until they faded from sight. Narrow, jagged valleys with ridges that nearly touched split the mountains like deep gorges. It was like a ragged, toothy wall linking Alagaësia with the heavens.

There's no end to them! he thought, awestruck. Stories that mentioned the Beor Mountains always noted their size, but he had discounted such reports as fanciful embellishments. Now, however, he was forced to acknowledge their authenticity.

Sensing his wonder and surprise, Saphira followed his gaze with her own. Within a few seconds she recognized the mountains for what they were. *I feel like a hatchling again. Compared to them, even I feel small!*

We must be near the edge of the desert, said Eragon. *It's only taken two days and we can already see the far side and beyond!*

Saphira spiraled above the dunes. *Yes, but considering the size of those peaks, they could still be fifty leagues from here. It's hard to gauge distances against something so immense. Wouldn't they be a perfect hiding place for the elves or the Varden?*

You could hide more than the elves and Varden, he stated. *Entire nations could exist in secret there, hidden from the Empire. Imagine living with those behemoths looming over you!* He guided Snowfire to Murtagh and pointed, grinning.

"What?" grunted Murtagh, scanning the land.

"Look closely," urged Eragon.

Murtagh peered closely at the horizon. He shrugged. "What, I don't —" The words died in his mouth and gave way to slack-jawed wonder. Murtagh shook his head, muttering, "That's impossible!" He squinted so hard that the corners of his eyes crinkled. He shook his head again. "I knew the Beor Mountains were large, but not that monstrous size!"

"Let's hope the animals that live there aren't in proportion to the mountains," said Eragon lightly.

Murtagh smiled. "It will be good to find some shade and spend a few weeks in leisure. I've had enough of this forced march."

"I'm tired too," admitted Eragon, "but I don't want to stop until the elf is cured … or she dies."

"I don't see how continuing to travel will help her," said Murtagh gravely. "A bed will do her more good than hanging underneath Saphira all day."

Eragon shrugged. "Maybe … When we reach the mountains, I could take her to Surda—it's not that far. There must be a healer there who can help her; we certainly can't."

Murtagh shaded his eyes with his hand and stared at the mountains. "We can talk about it later. For now our goal is to reach the Beors. There, at least, the Ra'zac will have trouble finding us, and we will be

safe from the Empire."

As the day wore on, the Beor Mountains seemed to get no closer, though the landscape changed dramatically. The sand slowly transformed from loose grains of reddish hue to hard-packed, dusky-cream dirt. In place of dunes were ragged patches of plants and deep furrows in the ground where flooding had occurred. A cool breeze wafted through the air, bringing welcome refreshment. The horses sensed the change of climate and hurried forward eagerly.

When evening subdued the sun, the mountains' foothills were a mere league away. Herds of gazelles bounded through lush fields of waving grass. Eragon caught Saphira eyeing them hungrily. They camped by a stream, relieved to be out of the punishing Hadarac Desert.

Fatigued and haggard, but with triumphant smiles, they sat around the fire, congratulating each other. Saphira crowed jubilantly, which startled the horses. Eragon stared at the flames. He was proud that they had covered roughly sixty leagues in five days. It was an impressive feat, even for a rider able to change mounts regularly.

I am outside of the Empire. It was a strange thought. He had been born in the Empire, lived his entire life under Galbatorix's rule, lost his closest friends and family to the king's servants, and had nearly died several times within his domain. Now Eragon was free. No more would he and Saphira have to dodge soldiers, avoid towns, or hide who they were. It was a bittersweet realization, for the cost had been the loss of his entire world.

He looked at the stars in the gloaming sky. And though the thought of building a home in the safety of isolation appealed to him, he had witnessed too many wrongs committed in Galbatorix's name, from murder to slavery, to turn his back on the Empire. No longer was it just vengeance—for Brom's death as well as Garrow's—that drove him. As a Rider, it was his duty to assist those without strength to resist Galbatorix's oppression.

With a sigh he abandoned his deliberation and observed the elf stretched out by Saphira. The fire's orange light gave her face a warm cast. Smooth shadows flickered under her cheekbones. As he stared, an idea slowly came to him.

He could hear the thoughts of people and animals—and communicate with them in that manner if he chose to—but it was something he had done infrequently except with Saphira. He always remembered Brom's admonishment not to violate someone's mind unless absolutely necessary. Save for the one time he had tried to probe Murtagh's consciousness, he had refrained from doing so.

Now, however, he wondered if it were possible to contact the elf in her comatose state. *I might be able to learn from her memories why she remains like this. But if she recovers, would she forgive me for such an intrusion? … Whether she does or not, I must try. She's been in this condition for almost a week*. Without speaking of his intentions to Murtagh or Saphira, he knelt by the elf and placed his palm on her brow.

Eragon closed his eyes and extended a tendril of thought, like a probing finger, toward the elf's mind. He found it without difficulty. It was not fuzzy and filled with pain as he had anticipated, but lucid and

clear, like a note from a crystal bell. Suddenly an icy dagger drove into his mind. Pain exploded behind his eyes with splashes of color. He recoiled from the attack but found himself held in an iron grip, unable to retreat.

Eragon fought as hard as he could and used every defense he could think of. The dagger stabbed into his mind again. He frantically threw his own barriers before it, blunting the attack. The pain was less excruciating than the first time, but it jarred his concentration. The elf took the opportunity to ruthlessly crush his defenses.

A stifling blanket pressed down on Eragon from all directions, smothering his thoughts. The overpowering force slowly contracted, squeezing the life out of him bit by bit, though he held on, unwilling to give up.

The elf tightened her relentless grip even more, so as to extinguish him like a snuffed candle. He desperately cried in the ancient language, "Eka aí fricai un Shur'tugal!" I am a Rider and friend! The deadly embrace did not loosen its hold, but its constriction halted and surprise emanated from her.

Suspicion followed a second later, but he knew she would believe him; he could not have lied in the ancient language. However, while he had said he was a friend, that did not mean he meant her no harm. For all she knew, Eragon believed himself to be her friend, making the statement true for him, though *she* might not consider him one. *The ancient language does have its limitations*, thought Eragon, hoping that the elf would be curious enough to risk freeing him.

She was. The pressure lifted, and the barriers around her mind hesitantly lowered. The elf warily let their thoughts touch, like two wild animals meeting for the first time. A cold shiver ran down Eragon's side. Her mind was alien. It felt vast and powerful, weighted with memories of uncounted years. Dark thoughts loomed out of sight and touch, artifacts of her race that made him cringe when they brushed his consciousness. Yet through all the sensations shimmered a melody of wild, haunting beauty that embodied her identity.

What is your name? she asked, speaking in the ancient language. Her voice was weary and filled with quiet despair.

Eragon. And yours? Her consciousness lured him closer, inviting him to submerge himself in the lyric strains of her blood. He resisted the summons with difficulty, though his heart ached to accept it. For the first time he understood the fey attraction of elves. They were creatures of magic, unbound by the mortal laws of the land—as different from humans as dragons were from animals.

… Arya. Why have you contacted me in this manner? Am I still a captive of the Empire?

No, you are free! said Eragon. Though he knew only scattered words

in the ancient language, he managed to convey: *I was imprisoned in Gil'ead, like you, but I escaped and rescued you. In the five days since then, we've crossed the edge of the Hadarac Desert and are now camped by the Beor Mountains. You've not stirred nor said a word in all that time*.

Ah … so it was Gil'ead. She paused. *I know that my wounds were healed. At the time I did not understand why—preparation for some new torture, I was certain. Now I realize it was you*. Softly she added, *Even so, I have not risen, and you are puzzled*.

Yes.

During my captivity, a rare poison, the Skilna Bragh, was given to me, along with the drug to suppress my power. Every morning the antidote for the previous day's poison was administered to me, by force if I refused to take it. Without it I will die within a few hours. That is why I lie in this trance—it slows the Skilna Bragh's progress, though does not stop it.… I contemplated waking for the purpose of ending my life and denying Galbatorix, but I refrained from doing so out of hope that you might be an ally.… Her voice dwindled off weakly.

How long can you remain like this? asked Eragon.

For weeks, but I'm afraid I haven't that much time. This dormancy cannot restrain death forever … I can feel it in my veins even now. Unless I receive the antidote, I will succumb to the poison in three or four days.

Where can the antidote be found?

It exists in only two places outside of the Empire: with my own people and with the Varden. However, my home is beyond the reach of dragonback.

What about the Varden? We would have taken you straight to them, but we don't know where they are.

I will tell you—if you give me your word that you will never reveal their location to Galbatorix or to anyone who serves him. In addition you must swear that you have not deceived me in some manner and that you intend no harm to the elves, dwarves, Varden, or the race of dragons.

What Arya asked for would have been simple enough—if they had not been conversing in the ancient language. Eragon knew she wanted oaths more binding than life itself. Once made, they could never be broken. That weighed heavily on him as he gravely pledged his word in agreement.

It is understood.… A series of vertigo-inducing images suddenly flashed through his mind. He found himself riding along the Beor Mountain range, traveling eastward many leagues. Eragon did his best to remember the route as craggy mountains and hills flashed past. He was heading south now, still following the mountains. Then everything wheeled abruptly, and he entered a narrow, winding valley. It snaked through the mountains to the base of a frothy waterfall that pounded into a deep lake.

The images stopped. *It is far*, said Arya, *but do not let the distance dissuade you. When you arrive at the lake Kóstha-mérna at the end of the Beartooth River, take a rock, bang on the cliff next to the waterfall, and cry*, Aí varden abr du Shur'tugalar gata vanta. *You will be admitted. You will be challenged, but do not falter no matter how perilous it seems*.

What should they give you for the poison? he asked.

Her voice quavered, but then she regained her strength. *Tell them—to give me Tunivor's Nectar. You must leave me now … I have expended too much energy already. Do not talk with me again unless there is no hope of reaching the Varden. If that is the case, there is information I must impart to you so the Varden will survive. Farewell, Eragon, rider of dragons … my life is in your hands*.

Arya withdrew from their contact. The unearthly strains that had echoed across their link were gone. Eragon took a shuddering breath and forced his eyes open. Murtagh and Saphira stood on either side of him, watching with concern. "Are you all right?" asked Murtagh. "You've been kneeling here for almost fifteen minutes."

"I have?" asked Eragon, blinking.

Yes, and grimacing like a pained gargoyle, commented Saphira dryly.

Eragon stood, wincing as his cramped knees stretched. "I talked with Arya!" Murtagh frowned quizzically, as if to inquire if he had gone mad. Eragon explained, "The elf—that's her name."

And what is it that ails her? asked Saphira impatiently.

Eragon swiftly told them of his entire discussion. "How far away are the Varden?" asked Murtagh.

"I'm not exactly sure," confessed Eragon. "From what she showed me, I think it's even farther than from here to Gil'ead."

"And we're supposed to cover that in three or four days?" demanded Murtagh angrily. "It took us five *long* days to get here! What do you want to do, kill the horses? They're exhausted as it is."

"But if we do nothing, she'll die! If it's too much for the horses, Saphira can fly ahead with Arya and me; at least we would get to the Varden in time. You could catch up with us in a few days."

Murtagh grunted and crossed his arms. "Of course. Murtagh the pack animal. Murtagh the horse leader. I should have remembered that's all I'm good for nowadays. Oh, and let's not forget, every soldier in the Empire is searching for me now because you couldn't defend yourself, and I had to go and *save* you. Yes, I suppose I'll just follow your instructions and bring up the horses in the rear like a good servant."

Eragon was bewildered by the sudden venom in Murtagh's voice. "What's wrong with you? I'm grateful for what you did. There's no reason to be angry with me! I didn't ask you to accompany me or to rescue me from Gil'ead. You chose that. I haven't forced you to do

anything."

"Oh, not openly, no. What else could I do but help you with the Ra'zac? And then later, at Gil'ead, how could I have left with a clear conscience? The problem with you," said Murtagh, poking Eragon in the chest, "is that you're so totally helpless you force everyone to take care of you!"

The words stung Eragon's pride; he recognized a grain of truth in them. "Don't touch me," he growled.

Murtagh laughed, a harsh note in his voice. "Or what, you'll punch me? You couldn't hit a brick wall." He went to shove Eragon again, but Eragon grabbed his arm and struck him in the stomach.

"I said, don't touch me!"

Murtagh doubled over, swearing. Then he yelled and launched himself at Eragon. They fell in a tangle of arms and legs, pounding on each other. Eragon kicked at Murtagh's right hip, missed, and grazed the fire. Sparks and burning embers scattered through the air.

They scrabbled across the ground, trying to get leverage. Eragon managed to get his feet under Murtagh's chest and kicked mightily. Murtagh flew upside down over Eragon's head, landing flat on his back with a solid thump.

Murtagh's breath whooshed out. He rolled stiffly to his feet, then wheeled to face Eragon, panting heavily. They charged each other once more. Saphira's tail slapped between them, accompanied by a deafening roar. Eragon ignored her and tried to jump over her tail, but a taloned paw caught him in midair and flung him back to the ground.

Enough!

He futilely tried to push Saphira's muscled leg off his chest and saw that Murtagh was likewise pinned. Saphira roared again, snapping her jaws. She swung her head over Eragon and glared at him. *You of all people should know better! Fighting like starving dogs over a scrap of meat. What would Brom say?*

Eragon felt his cheeks burn and averted his eyes. He knew what Brom would have said. Saphira held them on the ground, letting them simmer, then said to Eragon pointedly, *Now, if you don't want to spend the night under my foot, you will politely ask Murtagh what is troubling him.* She snaked her head over to Murtagh and stared down at him with an impassive blue eye. *And tell him that I won't stand for insults from either of you.*

Won't you let us up? complained Eragon.

No.

Eragon reluctantly turned his head toward Murtagh, tasting blood in the side of his mouth. Murtagh avoided his eyes and looked up at the sky. "Well, is she going to get off us?"

"No, not unless we talk.… She wants me to ask you what's really

the problem," said Eragon, embarrassed.

Saphira growled an affirmative and continued to stare at Murtagh. It was impossible for him to escape her piercing glare. Finally he shrugged, muttering something under his breath. Saphira's claws tightened on his chest, and her tail whistled through the air. Murtagh shot her an angry glance, then grudgingly said louder, "I told you before: I don't want to go to the Varden."

Eragon frowned. Was that all that was the matter? "Don't want to … or can't?"

Murtagh tried to shove Saphira's leg off him, then gave up with a curse. "Don't want to! They'll expect things from me that I can't deliver."

"Did you steal something from them?"

"I wish it were that simple."

Eragon rolled his eyes, exasperated. "Well, what is it, then? Did you kill someone important or bed the wrong woman?"

"No, I was born," said Murtagh cryptically. He pushed at Saphira again. This time she released them both. They got to their feet under her watchful eye and brushed dirt from their backs.

"You're avoiding the question," Eragon said, dabbing his split lip.

"So what?" spat Murtagh as he stomped to the edge of the camp. After a minute he sighed. "It doesn't matter why I'm in this predicament, but I can tell you that the Varden wouldn't welcome me even if I came bearing the king's head. Oh, they might greet me nicely enough and let me into their councils, but trust me? Never. And if I were to arrive under less fortuitous circumstances, like the present ones, they'd likely clap me in irons."

"Won't you tell me what this is about?" asked Eragon. "I've done things I'm not proud of, too, so it's not as if I'm going to pass judgment."

Murtagh shook his head slowly, eyes glistening. "It isn't like that. I haven't *done* anything to deserve this treatment, though it would have been easier to atone for if I had. No … my only wrongdoing is existing in the first place." He stopped and took a shaky breath. "You see, my father—"

A sharp hiss from Saphira cut him off abruptly. *Look!*

They followed her gaze westward. Murtagh's face paled. "Demons above and below!"

A league or so away, parallel to the mountain range, was a column of figures marching east. The line of troops, hundreds strong, stretched for nearly a mile. Dust billowed from their heels. Their weapons glinted in the dying light. A standard-bearer rode before them in a black chariot, holding aloft a crimson banner.

"It's the Empire," said Eragon tiredly. "They've found

us … somehow.” Saphira poked her head over his shoulder and gazed at the column.

“Yes … but those are Urgals, not men,” said Murtagh.

“How can you tell?”

Murtagh pointed at the standard. “That flag bears the personal symbol of an Urgal chieftain. He’s a ruthless brute, given to violent fits and insanity.”

“You’ve met him?”

Murtagh’s eyes tightened. “Once, briefly. I still have scars from that encounter. These Urgals might not have been sent here for us, but I’m sure we’ve been seen by now and that they will follow us. Their chieftain isn’t the sort to let a dragon escape his grasp, especially if he’s heard about Gil’ead.”

Eragon hurried to the fire and covered it with dirt. “We have to flee! You don’t want to go to the Varden, but I have to take Arya to them before she dies. Here’s a compromise: come with me until I reach the lake Kóstha-mérna, then go your own way.” Murtagh hesitated. Eragon added quickly, “If you leave now, in sight of the column, Urgals will follow you. And then where will you be, facing them alone?”

“Very well,” said Murtagh, tossing his saddlebags over Tornac’s flanks, “but when we near the Varden, I *will* leave.”

Eragon burned to question Murtagh further, but not with Urgals so near. He gathered his belongings and saddled Snowfire. Saphira fanned her wings, took off in a rush, and circled above. She kept guard over Murtagh and Eragon as they left camp.

What direction shall I fly? she asked.

East, along the Beors.

Stilling her wings, Saphira rose on an updraft and teetered on the pillar of warm air, hovering in the sky over the horses. *I wonder why the Urgals are here. Maybe they were sent to attack the Varden*.

Then we should try to warn them, he said, guiding Snowfire past half-visible obstacles. As the night deepened, the Urgals faded into the gloom behind them.

When morning came, Eragon's cheek was raw from chafing against Snowfire's neck, and he was sore from his fight with Murtagh. They had alternated sleeping in their saddles throughout the night. It had allowed them to outdistance the Urgal troops, but neither of them knew if the lead could be retained. The horses were exhausted to the point of stopping, yet they still maintained a relentless pace. Whether it would be enough to escape depended on how rested the monsters were … and if Eragon and Murtagh's horses survived.

The Beor Mountains cast great shadows over the land, stealing the sun's warmth. To the north was the Hadarac Desert, a thin white band as bright as noonday snow.

I must eat, said Saphira. *Days have passed since I last hunted. Hunger claws my belly. If I start now, I might be able to catch enough of those bounding deer for a few mouthfuls*.

Eragon smiled at her exaggeration. *Go if you must, but leave Arya here*.

I will be swift. He untied the elf from her belly and transferred her to Snowfire's saddle. Saphira soared away, disappearing in the direction of the mountains. Eragon ran beside the horses, close enough to Snowfire to keep Arya from falling. Neither he nor Murtagh intruded on the silence. Yesterday's fight no longer seemed as important because of the Urgals, but the bruises remained.

Saphira made her kills within the hour and notified Eragon of her success. Eragon was pleased that she would soon return. Her absence made him nervous.

They stopped at a pond to let the horses drink. Eragon idly plucked a stalk of grass, twirling it while he stared at the elf. He was startled from his reverie by the steely rasp of a sword being unsheathed. He instinctively grasped Zar'roc and spun around in search of the enemy. There was only Murtagh, his long sword held ready. He pointed at a hill ahead of them, where a tall, brown-cloaked man sat on a sorrel horse, mace in hand. Behind him was a group of twenty horsemen. No one moved. "Could they be Varden?" asked Murtagh.

Eragon surreptitiously strung his bow. "According to Arya, they're still scores of leagues away. This might be one of their patrols or raiding groups."

“Assuming they’re not bandits.” Murtagh swung onto Tornac and readied his own bow.

“Should we try to outrun them?” asked Eragon, draping a blanket over Arya. The horsemen must have seen her, but he hoped to conceal the fact that she was an elf.

“It wouldn’t do any good,” said Murtagh, shaking his head. “Tornac and Snowfire are fine war-horses, but they’re tired, and they aren’t sprinters. Look at the horses those men have; they’re meant for running. They would catch us before we had gone a half-mile. Besides, they may have something important to say. You’d better tell Saphira to hurry back.”

Eragon was already doing that. He explained the situation, then warned, *Don’t show yourself unless it’s necessary. We’re not in the Empire, but I still don’t want anyone to know about you.*

Never mind that, she replied. *Remember, magic can protect you where speed and luck fail.* He felt her take off and race toward them, skimming close to the ground.

The band of men watched them from the hill.

Eragon nervously gripped Zar’roc. The wire-wrapped hilt was secure under his glove. He said in a low voice, “If they threaten us, I can frighten them away with magic. If that doesn’t work, there’s Saphira. I wonder how they’d react to a Rider? So many stories have been told about their powers.… It might be enough to avoid a fight.”

“Don’t count on it,” said Murtagh flatly. “If there’s a fight, we’ll just have to kill enough of them to convince them we’re not worth the effort.” His face was controlled and unemotional.

The man on the sorrel horse signaled with his mace, sending the horsemen cantering toward them. The men shook javelins over their heads, whooping loudly as they neared. Battered sheaths hung from their sides. Their weapons were rusty and stained. Four of them trained arrows on Eragon and Murtagh.

Their leader swirled the mace in the air, and his men responded with yells as they wildly encircled Eragon and Murtagh. Eragon’s lips twitched. He almost loosed a blast of magic into their midst, then restrained himself. *We don’t know what they want yet,* he reminded himself, containing his growing apprehension.

The moment Eragon and Murtagh were thoroughly surrounded, the leader reined in his horse, then crossed his arms and examined them critically. He raised his eyebrows. “Well, these are better than the usual dregs we find! At least we got healthy ones this time. And we didn’t even have to shoot them. Grieg will be pleased.” The men chuckled.

At his words, a sinking sensation filled Eragon’s gut. A suspicion stirred in his mind. *Saphira …*

"Now as for you two," said the leader, speaking to Eragon and Murtagh, "if you would be so good as to drop your weapons, you'll avoid being turned into living quivers by my men." The archers grinned suggestively; the men laughed again.

Murtagh's only movement was to shift his sword. "Who are you and what do you want? We are free men traveling through this land. You have no right to stop us."

"Oh, I have every right," said the man contemptuously. "And as for my name, *slaves* do not address their masters in that manner, unless they want to be beaten."

Eragon cursed to himself. *Slavers!* He remembered vividly the people he had seen at auction in Dras-Leona. Rage boiled within him. He glared at the men around him with new hatred and disgust.

The lines deepened on the leader's face. "Throw down your swords and surrender!" The slavers tensed, staring at them with cold eyes as neither Eragon nor Murtagh lowered his weapon. Eragon's palm tingled. He heard a rustle behind him, then a loud curse. Startled, he spun around.

One of the slavers had pulled the blanket off Arya, revealing her face. He gaped in astonishment, then shouted, "Torkenbrand, this one's an elf!" The men stirred with surprise while the leader spurred his horse over to Snowfire. He looked down at Arya and whistled.

"Well, 'ow much is she worth?" someone asked.

Torkenbrand was quiet for a moment, then spread his hands and said, "At the very least? Fortunes upon fortunes. The Empire will pay a mountain of gold for her!"

The slavers yelled with excitement and pounded each other on the back. A roar filled Eragon's mind as Saphira banked sharply far overhead. *Attack now!* he cried. *But let them escape if they run*. She immediately folded her wings and plummeted downward. Eragon caught Murtagh's attention with a sharp signal. Murtagh took the cue. He smashed his elbow into a slaver's face, knocking the man out of his saddle, and jabbed his heels into Tornac.

With a toss of his mane, the war-horse jumped forward, twirled around, and reared. Murtagh brandished his sword as Tornac plunged back down, driving his forehooves into the back of the dismounted slaver. The man screamed.

Before the slavers could gather their senses, Eragon scrambled out of the commotion and raised his hands, invoking words in the ancient language. A globule of indigo fire struck the ground in the midst of the fray, bursting into a fountain of molten drops that dissipated like sun-warmed dew. A second later, Saphira dropped from the sky and landed next to him. She parted her jaws, displaying her massive fangs, and bellowed. "Behold!" cried Eragon over the furor, "I am a Rider!"

He raised Zar'roc over his head, the red blade dazzling in the sunlight, then pointed it at the slavers. "Flee if you wish to live!"

The men shouted incoherently and scrambled over each other in their haste to escape. In the confusion, Torkenbrand was struck in the temple with a javelin. He tumbled to the ground, stunned. The men ignored their fallen leader and raced away in a ragged mass, casting fearful looks at Saphira.

Torkenbrand struggled to his knees. Blood ran from his temple, branching across his cheek with crimson tendrils. Murtagh dismounted and strode over to him, sword in hand. Torkenbrand weakly raised his arm as if to ward off a blow. Murtagh gazed at him coldly, then swung his blade at Torkenbrand's neck. "No!" shouted Eragon, but it was too late.

Torkenbrand's decapitated trunk crumpled to the ground in a puff of dirt. His head landed with a hard thump. Eragon rushed to Murtagh, his jaw working furiously. "Is your brain rotten?" he yelled, enraged. "Why did you kill him?"

Murtagh wiped his sword on the back of Torkenbrand's jerkin. The steel left a dark stain. "I don't see why you're so upset—"

"Upset!" exploded Eragon. "I'm well past that! Did it even occur to you that we could just leave him here and continue on our way? No! Instead you turn into an executioner and chop off his head. He was defenseless!"

Murtagh seemed perplexed by Eragon's wrath. "Well, we couldn't keep him around—he *was* dangerous. The others ran off … without a horse he wouldn't have made it far. I didn't want the Urgals to find him and learn about Arya. So I thought it would—"

"But to *kill* him?" interrupted Eragon. Saphira sniffed Torkenbrand's head curiously. She opened her mouth slightly, as if to snap it up, then appeared to decide better of it and prowled to Eragon's side.

"I'm only trying to stay alive," stated Murtagh. "No stranger's life is more important than my own."

"But you can't indulge in wanton violence. Where is your empathy?" growled Eragon, pointing at the head.

"Empathy? Empathy? What empathy can I afford my enemies? Shall I dither about whether to defend myself because it will cause someone pain? If that had been the case, I would have died years ago! You must be willing to protect yourself and what you cherish, no matter what the cost."

Eragon slammed Zar'roc back into its sheath, shaking his head savagely. "You can justify any atrocity with that reasoning."

"Do you think I enjoy this?" Murtagh shouted. "My life has been threatened from the day I was born! All of my waking hours have been spent avoiding danger in one form or another. And sleep never

comes easily because I always worry if I'll live to see the dawn. If there ever was a time I felt secure, it must have been in my mother's womb, though I wasn't safe even there! You don't understand—if you lived with this *fear*, you would have learned the same lesson I did: *Do not take chances*." "He gestured at Torkenbrand's body. "He was a risk that I removed. I refuse to repent, and I won't plague myself over what is done and past."

Eragon shoved his face into Murtagh's. "It was still the wrong thing to do." He lashed Arya to Saphira, then climbed onto Snowfire. "Let's go." Murtagh guided Tornac around Torkenbrand's prone form in the bloodstained dust.

They rode at a rate that Eragon would have thought impossible a week ago; leagues melted away before them as if wings were attached to their feet. They turned south, between two outstretched arms of the Beor Mountains. The arms were shaped like pincers about to close, the tips a day's travel apart. Yet the distance seemed less because of the mountains' size. It was as if they were in a valley made for giants.

When they stopped for the day, Eragon and Murtagh ate dinner in silence, refusing to look up from their food. Afterward, Eragon said tersely, "I'll take the first watch." Murtagh nodded and lay on his blankets with his back to Eragon.

Do you want to talk? asked Saphira.

Not right now, murmured Eragon. *Give me some time to think; I'm … confused.*

She withdrew from his mind with a gentle touch and a whisper. *I love you, little one.*

And I you, he said. She curled into a ball next to him, lending him her warmth. He sat motionless in the dark, wrestling with his disquiet.

In the morning Saphira took off with both Eragon and Arya. Eragon wanted to get away from Murtagh for a time. He shivered, pulling his clothes tighter. It looked like it might snow. Saphira ascended lazily on an updraft and asked, *What are you thinking?*

Eragon contemplated the Beor Mountains, which towered above them even though Saphira flew far above the ground. *That was murder yesterday. I've no other word for it.*

Saphira banked to the left. *It was a hasty deed and ill considered, but Murtagh tried to do the right thing. The men who buy and sell other humans deserve every misfortune that befalls them. If we weren't committed to helping Arya, I would hunt down every slaver and tear them apart!*

Yes, said Eragon miserably, *but Torkenbrand was helpless. He couldn't shield himself or run. A moment more and he probably would have surrendered. Murtagh didn't give him that chance. If Torkenbrand had at least been able to fight, it wouldn't have been so bad.*

Eragon, even if Torkenbrand had fought, the results would have been the same. You know as well as I do that few can equal you or Murtagh with the blade. Torkenbrand would have still died, though you seem to think it would have been more just or honorable in a mismatched duel.

I don't know what's right! admitted Eragon, distressed. *There aren't any answers that make sense.*

Sometimes, said Saphira gently, *there are no answers. Learn what you can about Murtagh from this. Then forgive him. And if you can't forgive, at least forget, for he meant you no harm, however rash the act was. Your head is still attached, yes?*

Frowning, Eragon shifted in the saddle. He shook himself, like a horse trying to rid itself of a fly, and checked Murtagh's position over Saphira's shoulder. A patch of color farther back along their route caught his attention.

Camped by a streambed they had crossed late yesterday were the Urgals. Eragon's heartbeat quickened. How could the Urgals be on foot, yet still gain on them? Saphira saw the monsters as well and tilted her wings, brought them close to her body, and slipped into a steep dive, splitting the air. *I don't think they spotted us*, she said.

Eragon hoped not. He squinted against the blast of air as she increased the angle of their dive. *Their chieftain must be driving them at a breakneck pace*, he said.

Yes—maybe they'll all die of exhaustion.

When they landed, Murtagh asked curtly, “What now?”

“The Urgals are overtaking us,” said Eragon. He pointed back toward the column’s camp.

“How far do we still have to go?” asked Murtagh, putting his hands against the sky and measuring the hours until sunset.

“Normally? … I would guess another five days. At the speed we’ve been traveling, only three. But unless we get there tomorrow, the Urgals will probably catch us, and Arya will certainly die.”

“She might last another day.”

“We can’t count on it,” objected Eragon. “The only way we can get to the Varden in time is if we don’t stop for anything, least of all sleep. That’s our only chance.”

Murtagh laughed bitterly. “How can you expect to do that? We’ve already gone days without adequate sleep. Unless Riders are made of different stuff than us mortals, you’re as tired as I am. We’ve covered a staggering distance, and the horses, in case you haven’t noticed, are ready to drop. Another day of this might kill us all.”

Eragon shrugged. “So be it. We don’t have a choice.”

Murtagh gazed at the mountains. “I could leave and let you fly ahead with Saphira.… That would force the Urgals to divide their troops and would give you a better chance of reaching the Varden.”

“It would be suicide,” said Eragon, crossing his arms. “Somehow those Urgals are faster on foot than we are on horseback. They would run you down like a deer. The only way to evade them is to find sanctuary with the Varden.” Despite his words, he was unsure if he wanted Murtagh to stay. *I like him*, Eragon confessed to himself, *but I’m no longer certain if that’s a good thing*.

“I’ll escape later,” said Murtagh abruptly. “When we get to the Varden, I can disappear down a side valley and find my way to Surda, where I can hide without attracting too much attention.”

“So you’re staying?”

“Sleep or no sleep, I’ll see you to the Varden,” promised Murtagh.

With newfound determination, they struggled to distance themselves from the Urgals, yet their pursuers continued to creep nearer. At nightfall the monsters were a third closer than they had been that morning. As fatigue eroded his and Murtagh’s strength, they slept in turns on the horses, while whoever was awake led the animals in the right direction.

Eragon relied heavily on Arya’s memories to guide them. Because of the alien nature of her mind, he sometimes made mistakes as to the route, costing them precious time. They gradually angled toward the foothills of the eastern arm of mountains, looking for the valley that would lead them to the Varden. Midnight arrived and passed without

any sign of it.

When the sun returned, they were pleased to see that the Urgals were far behind. “This is the last day,” said Eragon, yawning widely. “If we’re not reasonably close to the Varden by noon, I’m going to fly ahead with Arya. You’ll be free to go wherever you want then, but you’ll have to take Snowfire with you. I won’t be able to come back for him.”

“That might not be necessary; we could still get there in time,” said Murtagh. He rubbed the pommel of his sword.

Eragon shrugged. “We could.” He went to Arya and put a hand on her forehead. It was damp and dangerously hot. Her eyes wandered uneasily beneath her eyelids, as if she suffered a nightmare. Eragon pressed a damp rag to her brow, wishing he could do more.

Late in the morning, after they circumnavigated an especially broad mountain, Eragon saw a narrow valley tucked against its far side. The valley was so restricted it could easily be overlooked. The Beartooth River, which Arya had mentioned, flowed out of it and looped carelessly across the land. He smiled with relief; that was where they needed to go.

Looking back, Eragon was alarmed to see that the distance between them and the Urgals had shrunk to little more than a league. He pointed out the valley to Murtagh. “If we can slip in there without being seen, it might confuse them.”

Murtagh looked skeptical. “It’s worth a try. But they’ve followed us easily enough so far.”

As they approached the valley, they passed under the knotted branches of the Beor Mountains’ forest. The trees were tall, with creviced bark that was almost black, dull needles of the same color, and knobby roots that rose from the soil like bare knees. Cones littered the ground, each the size of a horse’s head. Sable squirrels chattered from the treetops, and eyes gleamed from holes in the trunks. Green beards of tangled wolfsbane hung from the gnarled branches.

The forest gave Eragon an uneasy feeling; the hair on the back of his neck prickled. There was something hostile in the air, as if the trees resented their intrusion. *They are very old*, said Saphira, touching a trunk with her nose.

Yes, said Eragon, *but not friendly*. The forest grew denser the farther in they traveled. The lack of space forced Saphira to take off with Arya. Without a clear trail to follow, the tough underbrush slowed Eragon and Murtagh. The Beartooth River wound next to them, filling the air with the sound of gurgling water. A nearby peak obscured the sun, casting them into premature dusk.

At the valley's mouth, Eragon realized that although it looked like a slim gash between the peaks, the valley was really as wide as many of the Spine's vales. It was only the enormous size of the ridged and shadowy mountains that made it appear so confined. Waterfalls dotted its sheer sides. The sky was reduced to a thin strip winding overhead, mostly hidden by gray clouds. From the dank ground rose a clinging fog that chilled the air until their breath was visible. Wild strawberries crawled among a carpet of mosses and ferns, fighting for the meager sunlight. Sprouting on piles of rotting wood were red and yellow toadstools.

All was hushed and quiet, sounds dampened by the heavy air. Saphira landed by them in a nearby glade, the rush of her wings strangely muted. She took in the view with a swing of her head. *I just passed a flock of birds that were black and green with red markings on their wings. I've never seen birds like that before*.

Everything in these mountains seems unusual, replied Eragon. *Do you mind if I ride you awhile? I want to keep an eye on the Urgals*.

Of course.

He turned to Murtagh. "The Varden are hidden at the end of this valley. If we hurry, we might get there before nightfall."

Murtagh grunted, hands on his hips. "How am I going to get out of here? I don't see any valleys joining this one, and the Urgals are going to hem us in pretty soon. I need an escape route."

"Don't worry about it," said Eragon impatiently. "This is a long valley; there's sure to be an exit further in." He released Arya from Saphira and lifted the elf onto Snowfire. "Watch Arya—I'm going to fly with Saphira. We'll meet you up ahead." He scrambled onto Saphira's back and strapped himself onto her saddle.

"Be careful," Murtagh warned, his brow furrowed in thought, then clucked to the horses and hurried back into the forest.

As Saphira jumped toward the sky, Eragon said, *Do you think you could fly up to one of those peaks? We might be able to spot our destination, as well as a passage for Murtagh. I don't want to listen to him griping through the entire valley*.

We can try, agreed Saphira, *but it will get much colder*.

I'm dressed warmly.

Hold on, then! Saphira suddenly swooped straight up, throwing him back in the saddle. Her wings flapped strongly, driving their weight upward. The valley shrank to a green line below them. The Beartooth River shimmered like braided silver where light struck it.

They rose to the cloud layer, and icy moisture saturated the air. A formless gray blanket engulfed them, limiting their vision to an arm's length. Eragon hoped they would not collide with anything in the murk. He stuck out a hand experimentally, swinging it through the

air. Water condensed on it and ran down his arm, soaking his sleeve.

A blurred gray mass fluttered past his head, and he glimpsed a dove, its wings pumping frantically. There was a white band around its leg. Saphira struck at the bird, tongue lashing out, jaws gaping. The dove squawked as Saphira's sharp teeth snapped together a hair's breadth behind its tail feathers. Then it darted away and disappeared into the haze, the frenzied thumping of its wings fading to silence.

When they breached the top of the clouds, Saphira's scales were covered with thousands of water droplets that reflected tiny rainbows and shimmered with the blue of her scales. Eragon shook himself, spraying water from his clothes, and shivered. He could no longer see the ground, only hills of clouds snaking between the mountains.

The trees on the mountains gave way to thick glaciers, blue and white under the sun. The glare from the snow forced Eragon to close his eyes. He tried to open them after a minute, but the light dazzled him. Irritated, he stared into the crook of his arm. *How can you stand it?* he asked Saphira.

My eyes are stronger than yours, she replied.

It was frigid. The water in Eragon's hair froze, giving him a shiny helmet. His shirt and pants were hard shells around his limbs. Saphira's scales became slick with ice; hoarfrost laced her wings. They had never flown this high before, yet the mountaintops were still miles above them.

Saphira's flapping gradually slowed, and her breathing became labored. Eragon gasped and panted; there didn't seem to be enough air. Fighting back panic, he clutched Saphira's neck spikes for support.

We … have to get out of here, he said. Red dots swam before his eyes. *I can't … breathe*. Saphira seemed not to hear him, so he repeated the message, louder this time. Again there was no response. *She can't hear me*, he realized. He swayed, finding it hard to think, then pounded on her side and shouted, "Take us down!"

The effort made him lightheaded. His vision faded into swirling darkness.

He regained consciousness as they emerged from the bottom of the clouds. His head was pounding. *What happened?* he asked, pushing himself upright and looking around with confusion.

You blacked out, answered Saphira.

He tried to run his fingers through his hair, but stopped when he felt icicles. *Yes, I know that, but why didn't you answer me?*

My brain was confused. Your words didn't make any sense. When you lost consciousness, I knew something was wrong and descended. I didn't have to sink far before I realized what had occurred.

It's a good thing you didn't pass out as well, said Eragon with a

nervous laugh. Saphira only swished her tail. He looked wistfully at where the mountain peaks were now concealed by clouds. *A pity we couldn't stand upon one of those summits.… Well, now we know: we can only fly out of this valley the way we came in. Why did we run out of air? How can we have it down here, but not up above?*

I don't know, but I'll never dare to fly so close to the sun again. We should remember this experience. The knowledge may be useful if we ever have to fight another Rider.

I hope that never happens, said Eragon. *Let's stay down below for now. I've had enough adventure for one day*.

They floated on the gentle air currents, drifting from one mountain to the next, until Eragon saw that the Urgal column had reached the valley's mouth. *What drives them to such speed, and how can they bear to sustain it?*

Now that we are closer to them, Saphira said, *I can see that these Urgals are bigger than the ones we've met before. They would stand chest and shoulders over a tall man. I don't know what land they march from, but it must be a fierce place to produce such brutes*.

Eragon glared at the ground below—he could not see the detail that she did. *If they keep to this pace, they'll catch Murtagh before we find the Varden*.

Have hope. The forest may hamper their progress.… Would it be possible to stop them with magic?

Eragon shook his head. *Stop them … no. There are too many*. He thought of the thin layer of mist on the valley floor and grinned. *But I might be able to delay them a bit*. He closed his eyes, selected the words he needed, stared at the mist, and then commanded, "Gath un reisa du rakr!"

There was a disturbance below. From above, it looked as if the ground was flowing together like a great sluggish river. A leaden band of mist gathered in front of the Urgals and thickened into an intimidating wall, dark as a thunderhead. The Urgals hesitated before it, then continued forward like an unstoppable battering ram. The barrier swirled around them, concealing the lead ranks from view.

The drain on Eragon's strength was sudden and massive, making his heart flutter like a dying bird. He gasped, eyes rolling. He struggled to sever the magic's hold on him—to plug the breach through which his life streamed. With a savage growl he jerked away from the magic and broke contact. Tendrils of magic snapped through his mind like decapitated snakes, then reluctantly retreated from his consciousness, clutching at the dregs of his strength. The wall of mist dissipated, and the fog sluggishly collapsed across the ground like a tower of mud sliding apart. The Urgals had not been hindered at all.

Eragon lay limply on Saphira, panting. Only now did he remember

Brom saying, “Magic is affected by distance, just like an arrow or a spear. If you try to lift or move something a mile away, it’ll take more energy than if you were closer.” *I won’t forget that again*, he thought grimly.

You shouldn’t have forgotten in the first place, Saphira inserted pointedly. *First the dirt at Gil’ead and now this. Weren’t you paying attention to anything Brom told you? You’ll kill yourself if you keep this up*.

I paid attention, he insisted, rubbing his chin. *It’s just been a while, and I haven’t had an opportunity to think back on it. I’ve never used magic at a distance, so how could I know it would be so difficult?*

She growled. *Next thing I know you’ll be trying to bring corpses back to life. Don’t forget what Brom said about that, too*.

I won’t, he said impatiently. Saphira dipped toward the ground, searching for Murtagh and the horses. Eragon would have helped her, but he barely had the energy to sit up.

Saphira settled in a small field with a jolt, and Eragon was puzzled to see the horses stopped and Murtagh kneeling, examining the ground. When Eragon did not dismount, Murtagh hurried over and inquired, “What’s wrong?” He sounded angry, worried, and tired at the same time.

“… I made a mistake,” said Eragon truthfully. “The Urgals have entered the valley. I tried to confuse them, but I forgot one of the rules of magic, and it cost me a great deal.”

Scowling, Murtagh jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I just found some wolf tracks, but the footprints are as wide as both of my hands and an inch deep. There are animals around here that could be dangerous even to you, Saphira.” He turned to her. “I know you can’t enter the forest, but could you circle above me and the horses? That should keep these beasts away. Otherwise there may only be enough left of me to roast in a thimble.”

“Humor, Murtagh?” asked Eragon, a quick smile coming to his face. His muscles trembled, making it hard for him to concentrate.

“Only on the gallows.” Murtagh rubbed his eyes. “I can’t believe that the same Urgals have been following us the whole time. They would have to be birds to catch up with us.”

“Saphira said they’re larger than any we’ve seen,” remarked Eragon.

Murtagh cursed, clenching the pommel of his sword. “That explains it! Saphira, if you’re right, then those are Kull, elite of the Urgals. I should have guessed that the chieftain had been put in charge of them. They don’t ride because horses can’t carry their weight—not one of them is under eight feet tall—and they can run for days without sleep and still be ready for battle. It can take five men to kill one. Kull never leave their caves except for war, so they must expect a

great slaughter if they are out in such force."

"Can we stay ahead of them?"

"Who knows?" said Murtagh. "They're strong, determined, and large in numbers. It's possible that we may have to face them. If that happens, I only hope that the Varden have men posted nearby who'll help us. Despite our skill and Saphira, we can't hold off Kull."

Eragon swayed. "Could you get me some bread? I need to eat." Murtagh quickly brought him part of a loaf. It was old and hard, but Eragon chewed on it gratefully. Murtagh scanned the valley walls, worry in his eyes. Eragon knew he was searching for a way out. "There'll be one farther in."

"Of course," said Murtagh with forced optimism, then slapped his thigh. "We must go."

"How is Arya?" asked Eragon.

Murtagh shrugged. "The fever's worse. She's been tossing and turning. What do you expect? Her strength is failing. You should fly her to the Varden before the poison does any more damage."

"I won't leave you behind," insisted Eragon, gaining strength with each bite. "Not with the Urgals so near."

Murtagh shrugged again. "As you wish. But I'm warning you, she won't live if you stay with me."

"Don't say that," insisted Eragon, pushing himself upright in Saphira's saddle. "Help me save her. We can still do it. Consider it a life for a life—atonement for Torkenbrand's death."

Murtagh's face darkened instantly. "It's not a debt owed. You—" He stopped as a horn echoed through the dark forest. "I'll have more to say to you later," he said shortly, stomping to the horses. He grabbed their reins and trotted away, shooting an angry glare at Eragon.

Eragon closed his eyes as Saphira took flight. He wished that he could lie on a soft bed and forget all their troubles. *Saphira*, he said at last, cupping his ears to warm them, *what if we did take Arya to the Varden? Once she was safe, we could fly back to Murtagh and help him out of here*.

The Varden wouldn't let you, said Saphira. *For all they know, you might be returning to inform the Urgals of their hiding place. We aren't arriving under the best conditions to gain their trust. They'll want to know why we've brought an entire company of Kull to their very gates*.

We'll just have to tell them the truth and hope they believe us, said Eragon.

And what will we do if the Kull attack Murtagh?

Fight them, of course! I won't let him and Arya be captured or killed, said Eragon indignantly.

There was a touch of sarcasm in her words. *How noble. Oh, we would fell many of the Urgals—you with magic and blade, whilst my weapons*

would be tooth and claw—but it would be futile in the end. They are too numerous.… We cannot defeat them, only be defeated.

What, then? he demanded. *I'll not leave Arya or Murtagh to their mercy*.

Saphira waved her tail, the tip whistling loudly. *I'm not asking you to. However, if we attack first, we may gain the advantage*.

Have you gone crazy? They'll … Eragon's voice trailed off as he thought about it. *They won't be able to do a thing*, he concluded, surprised.

Exactly, said Saphira. *We can inflict lots of damage from a safe height*.

Let's drop rocks on them! proposed Eragon. *That should scatter them*.

If their skulls aren't thick enough to protect them. Saphira banked to the right and quickly descended to the Beartooth River. She grasped a mid-sized boulder with her strong talons while Eragon scooped up several fist-sized rocks. Laden with the stones, Saphira glided on silent wings until they were over the Urgal host. *Now!* she exclaimed, releasing the boulder. There were muffled cracks as the missiles plummeted through the forest top, smashing branches. A second later howls echoed through the valley.

Eragon smiled tightly as he heard the Urgals scramble for cover. *Let's find more ammunition*, he suggested, bending low over Saphira. She growled in agreement and returned to the riverbed.

It was hard work, but they were able to hinder the Urgals' progress —though it was impossible to stop them altogether. The Urgals gained ground whenever Saphira went for stones. Despite that, their efforts allowed Murtagh to stay ahead of the advancing column.

The valley darkened as the hours slipped by. Without the sun to provide warmth, the sharp bite of frost crept into the air and the ground mist froze on the trees, coating them white. Night animals began to creep from their dens to peer from shadowed hideouts at the strangers trespassing on their land.

Eragon continued to examine the mountainsides, searching for the waterfall that would signify the end of their journey. He was painfully aware that every passing minute brought Arya closer to death. "Faster, faster," he muttered to himself, looking down at Murtagh. Before Saphira scooped up more rocks, he said, *Let's take a respite and check on Arya. The day is almost over, and I'm afraid her life is measured in hours, if not minutes*.

Arya's life is in Fate's hands now. You made your choice to stay with Murtagh; it's too late to change that, so stop agonizing over it.… You're making my scales itch. The best thing we can do right now is to keep bombarding the Urgals. Eragon knew she was right, yet her words did nothing to calm his anxiety. He resumed his search for the waterfall, but whatever lay before them was hidden by a thick mountain ridge.

True darkness began to fill the valley, settling over the trees and mountains like an inky cloud. Even with her keen hearing and delicate sense of smell, Saphira could no longer locate the Urgals through the dense forest. There was no moon to help them; it would be hours before it rose above the mountains.

Saphira made a long, gentle left turn and glided around the mountain ridge. Eragon vaguely sensed it pass by them, then squinted as he saw a faint white line ahead. *Could that be the waterfall?* he wondered.

He looked at the sky, which still held the afterglow of sunset. The mountains' dark silhouettes curved together and formed a rough bowl that closed off the valley. *The head of the valley isn't much farther!* he exclaimed, pointing at the mountains. *Do you think that the Varden know we're coming? Maybe they'll send men out to help us*.

I doubt they'll assist us until they know if we are friend or foe, Saphira said as she abruptly dropped toward the ground. *I'm returning to Murtagh—we should stay with him now. Since I can't find the Urgals, they could sneak up on him without us knowing*.

Eragon loosened Zar'roc in its sheath, wondering if he was strong enough to fight. Saphira landed to the left of the Beartooth River, then crouched expectantly. The waterfall rumbled in the distance. *He comes*, she said. Eragon strained his ears and caught the sound of pounding hooves. Murtagh ran out of the forest, driving the horses before him. He saw them but did not slow.

Eragon jumped off Saphira, stumbling a bit as he matched Murtagh's pace. Behind him Saphira went to the river so she could follow them without being hindered by the trees. Before Eragon could relay his news, Murtagh said, "I saw you dropping rocks with Saphira —ambitious. Have the Kull stopped or turned back?"

"They're still behind us, but we're almost to the head of the valley. How's Arya?"

"She hasn't died," Murtagh said harshly. His breath came in short bursts. His next words were deceptively calm, like those of a man concealing a terrible passion. "Is there a valley or gorge ahead that I can leave through?"

Apprehensive, Eragon tried to remember if he had seen any breaks in the mountains around them; he had not thought about Murtagh's dilemma for a while. "It's dark," he began evasively, dodging a low branch, "so I might have missed something, but … no."

Murtagh swore explosively and came to an abrupt stop, dragging on the horses' reins until they halted as well. "Are you saying that the only place I can go is to the Varden?"

"Yes, but keep running. The Urgals are almost upon us!"

"No!" said Murtagh angrily. He stabbed a finger at Eragon. "I

warned you that I wouldn't go to the Varden, but you went ahead and trapped me between a hammer and an anvil! You're the one with the elf's memories. Why didn't you tell me this was a dead end?"

Eragon bristled at the barrage and retorted, "All I knew was where we had to go, not what lay in between. Don't blame me for choosing to come."

Murtagh's breath hissed between his teeth as he furiously spun away. All Eragon could see of him was a motionless, bowed figure. His own shoulders were tense, and a vein throbbed on the side of his neck. He put his hands on his hips, impatience rising.

Why have you stopped? asked Saphira, alarmed.

Don't distract me. "What's your quarrel with the Varden? It can't be so terrible that you must keep it hidden even now. Would you rather fight the Kull than reveal it? How many times will we go through this before you trust me?"

There was a long silence.

The Urgals! reminded Saphira urgently.

I know, said Eragon, pushing back his temper. *But we have to resolve this*.

Quickly, quickly.

"Murtagh," said Eragon earnestly, "unless you wish to die, we must go to the Varden. Don't let me walk into their arms without knowing how they will react to you. It's going to be dangerous enough without unnecessary surprises."

Finally Murtagh turned to Eragon. His breathing was hard and fast, like that of a cornered wolf. He paused, then said with a tortured voice, "You have a right to know. I … I am the son of Morzan, first and last of the Forsworn."

Eragon was speechless. Disbelief roared through his mind as he tried to reject Murtagh's words. *The Forsworn never had any children, least of all Morzan. Morzan! The man who betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix and remained the king's favorite servant for the rest of his life. Could it be true?*

Saphira's own shock reached him a second later. She crashed through trees and brush as she barreled from the river to his side, fangs bared, tail raised threateningly. *Be ready for anything*, she warned. *He may be able to use magic*.

"You are his heir?" asked Eragon, surreptitiously reaching for Zar'roc. *What could he want with me? Is he really working for the king?*

"I didn't choose this!" cried Murtagh, anguish twisting his face. He ripped at his clothes with a desperate air, tearing off his tunic and shirt to bare his torso. "Look!" he pleaded, and turned his back to Eragon.

Unsure, Eragon leaned forward, straining his eyes in the darkness. There, against Murtagh's tanned and muscled skin, was a knotted white scar that stretched from his right shoulder to his left hip—a testament to some terrible agony.

"See that?" demanded Murtagh bitterly. He talked quickly now, as if relieved to have his secret finally revealed. "I was only three when I got it. During one of his many drunken rages, Morzan threw his sword at me as I ran by. My back was laid open by the very sword you now carry—the only thing I expected to receive as inheritance, until Brom stole it from my father's corpse. I was lucky, I suppose—there was a healer nearby who kept me from dying. You must understand, I don't love the Empire or the king. I have no allegiance to them, nor do I mean you harm!" His pleas were almost frantic.

Eragon uneasily lifted his hand from Zar'roc's pommel. "Then your father," he said in a faltering voice, "was killed by …"

"Yes, Brom," said Murtagh. He pulled his tunic back on with a detached air.

A horn rang out behind them, prompting Eragon to cry, "Come, run with me." Murtagh shook the horses' reins and forced them into a tired trot, eyes fixed straight ahead, while Arya bounced limply in Snowfire's saddle. Saphira stayed by Eragon's side, easily keeping pace with her long legs. *You could walk unhindered in the riverbed*, he said as she was forced to smash through a dense web of branches.

I'll not leave you with him.

Eragon was glad for her protection. *Morzan's son!* He said between

strides, “Your tale is hard to believe. How do I know you aren’t lying?”

“Why would I lie?”

“You could be—”

Murtagh interrupted him quickly. “I can’t prove anything to you now. Keep your doubts until we reach the Varden. They’ll recognize me quickly enough.”

“I must know,” pressed Eragon. “Do you serve the Empire?”

“No. And if I did, what would I accomplish by traveling with you? If I were trying to capture or kill you, I would have left you in prison.” Murtagh stumbled as he jumped over a fallen log.

“You could be leading the Urgals to the Varden.”

“Then,” said Murtagh shortly, “why am I still with you? I know where the Varden are now. What reason could I have for delivering myself to them? If I were going to attack them, I’d turn around and join the Urgals.”

“Maybe you’re an assassin,” stated Eragon flatly.

“Maybe. You can’t really know, can you?”

Saphira? Eragon asked simply.

Her tail swished over his head. *If he wanted to harm you, he could have done it long ago*.

A branch whipped Eragon’s neck, causing a line of blood to appear on his skin. The waterfall was growing louder. *I want you to watch Murtagh closely when we get to the Varden. He may do something foolish, and I don’t want him killed by accident*.

I’ll do my best, she said as she shouldered her way between two trees, scraping off slabs of bark. The horn sounded behind them again. Eragon glanced over his shoulder, expecting Urgals to rush out of the darkness. The waterfall throbbed dully ahead of them, drowning out the sounds of the night.

The forest ended, and Murtagh pulled the horses to a stop. They were on a pebble beach directly to the left of the mouth of the Beartooth River. The deep lake Kóstha-mérna filled the valley, blocking their way. The water gleamed with flickering starlight. The mountain walls restricted passage around Kóstha-mérna to a thin strip of shore on either side of the lake, both no more than a few steps wide. At the lake’s far end, a broad sheet of water tumbled down a black cliff into boiling mounds of froth.

“Do we go to the falls?” asked Murtagh tightly.

“Yes.” Eragon took the lead and picked his way along the lake’s left side. The pebbles underfoot were damp and slime covered. There was barely enough room for Saphira between the sheer valley wall and the lake; she had to walk with two feet in the water.

They were halfway to the waterfall when Murtagh warned,

“Urgals!”

Eragon whirled around, rocks spraying from under his heel. By the shore of Kóstha-mérna, where they had been only minutes before, hulking figures streamed out of the forest. The Urgals massed before the lake. One of them gestured at Saphira; guttural words drifted over the water. Immediately the horde split and started around both sides of the lake, leaving Eragon and Murtagh without an escape route. The narrow shore forced the bulky Kull to march single file.

“Run!” barked Murtagh, drawing his sword and slapping the horses on their flanks. Saphira took off without warning and wheeled back toward the Urgals.

“No!” cried Eragon, shouting with his mind, *Come back!* but she continued, heedless to his pleas. With an agonizing effort, he tore his gaze from her and plunged forward, wrenching Zar’roc from its sheath.

Saphira dived at the Urgals, bellowing fiercely. They tried to scatter but were trapped against the mountainside. She caught a Kull between her talons and carried the screaming creature aloft, tearing at him with her fangs. The silent body crashed into the lake a moment later, an arm and a leg missing.

The Kull continued around Kóstha-mérna undeterred. With smoke streaming from her nostrils, Saphira dived at them again. She twisted and rolled as a cloud of black arrows shot toward her. Most of the darts glanced off her scaled sides, leaving no more than bruises, but she roared as the rest pierced her wings.

Eragon’s arms twinged with sympathetic pain, and he had to restrain himself from rushing to her defense. Fear flooded his veins as he saw the line of Urgals closing in on them. He tried to run faster, but his muscles were too tired, the rocks too slippery.

Then, with a loud splash, Saphira plunged into Kóstha-mérna. She submerged completely, sending ripples across the lake. The Urgals nervously eyed the dark water lapping their feet. One growled something indecipherable and jabbed his spear at the lake.

The water exploded as Saphira’s head shot out of the depths. Her jaws closed on the spear, breaking it like a twig as she tore it out of the Kull’s hands with a vicious twist. Before she could seize the Urgal himself, his companions thrust at her with their spears, bloodying her nose.

Saphira jerked back and hissed angrily, beating the water with her tail. Keeping his spear pointed at her, the lead Kull tried to edge past, but halted when she snapped at his legs. The string of Urgals was forced to stop as she held him at bay. Meanwhile, the Kull on the other side of the lake still hurried toward the falls.

I’ve trapped them, she told Eragon tersely, *but hurry—I cannot hold*

them long. Archers on the shore were already taking aim at her. Eragon concentrated on going faster, but a rock gave under his boot and he pitched forward. Murtagh's strong arm kept him on his feet, and clasping each other's forearms, they urged the horses forward with shouts.

They were almost to the waterfall. The noise was overwhelming, like an avalanche. A white wall of water gushed down the cliff, pounding the rocks below with a fury that sent mist spraying through the air to run down their faces. Four yards from the thunderous curtain, the beach widened, giving them room to maneuver.

Saphira roared as an Urgal spear grazed her haunch, then retreated underwater. With her withdrawal the Kull rushed forward with long strides. They were only a few hundred feet away. "What do we do now?" Murtagh demanded coldly.

"I don't know. Let me think!" cried Eragon, searching Arya's memories for her final instructions. He scanned the ground until he found a rock the size of an apple, grabbed it, then pounded on the cliff next to the falls, shouting, "Aí varden abr du Shur'tugalar gata vanta!"

Nothing happened.

He tried again, shouting louder than before, but only succeeded in bruising his hand. He turned in despair to Murtagh. "We're trap—" His words were cut off as Saphira leapt out of the lake, dousing them with icy water. She landed on the beach and crouched, ready to fight.

The horses backpedaled wildly, trying to bolt. Eragon reached out with his mind to steady them. *Behind you!* cried Saphira. He turned and glimpsed the lead Urgal running at him, heavy spear raised. Up close a Kull was as tall as a small giant, with legs and arms as thick as tree trunks.

Murtagh drew back his arm and threw his sword with incredible speed. The long weapon revolved once, then struck the Kull point first in the chest with a dull crunch. The huge Urgal toppled to the ground with a strangled gurgle. Before another Kull could attack, Murtagh dashed forward and yanked his sword out of the body.

Eragon raised his palm, shouting, "Jierda theirra kalfis!" Sharp cracks resounded off the cliff. Twenty of the charging Urgals fell into Kóstha-mérna, howling and clutching their legs where shards of bone protruded. Without breaking stride, the rest of the Urgals advanced over their fallen companions. Eragon struggled against his weariness, putting a hand on Saphira for support.

A flight of arrows, impossible to see in the darkness, brushed past them and clattered against the cliff. Eragon and Murtagh ducked, covering their heads. With a small growl, Saphira jumped over them so that her armored sides shielded them and the horses. A chorus of clinks sounded as a second volley of arrows bounced off her scales.

“What now?” shouted Murtagh. There was still no opening in the cliff. “We can’t stay here!”

Eragon heard Saphira snarl as an arrow caught the edge of her wing, tearing the thin membrane. He looked around wildly, trying to understand why Arya’s instructions had not worked. “I don’t know! This is where we’re supposed to be!”

“Why don’t you ask the elf to make sure?” demanded Murtagh. He dropped his sword, snatched his bow from Tornac’s saddlebags, and with a swift motion loosed an arrow from between the spikes on Saphira’s back. A moment later an Urgal toppled into the water.

“Now? She’s barely alive! How’s she going to find the energy to say anything?”

“I don’t *know*,” “shouted Murtagh, “but you’d better think of *something* because we can’t stave off an entire army!”

Eragon, growled Saphira urgently.

What!

We’re on the wrong side of the lake! I’ve seen Arya’s memories through you, and I just realized that this isn’t the right place. She tucked her head against her breast as another flight of arrows sped toward them. Her tail flicked in pain as they struck her. *I can’t keep this up! They’re tearing me to pieces!*

Eragon slammed Zar’roc back into its sheath and exclaimed, “The Varden are on the other side of the lake. We have to go through the waterfall!” He noted with dread that the Urgals across Kóstha-mérna were almost to the falls.

Murtagh’s eyes shot toward the violent deluge blocking their way. “We’ll never get the horses through there, even if we can hold our own footing.”

“I’ll convince them to follow us,” snapped Eragon. “And Saphira can carry Arya.” The Urgals’ cries and bellows made Snowfire snort angrily. The elf lolled on his back, oblivious to the danger.

Murtagh shrugged. “It’s better than being hacked to death.” He swiftly cut Arya loose from Snowfire’s saddle, and Eragon caught the elf as she slid to the ground.

I’m ready, said Saphira, rising into a half-crouch. The approaching Urgals hesitated, unsure of her intentions.

“Now!” cried Eragon. He and Murtagh heaved Arya onto Saphira, then secured her legs in the saddle’s straps. The second they were finished, Saphira swept up her wings and soared over the lake. The Urgals behind her howled as they saw her escaping. Arrows clattered off her belly. The Kull on the other shore redoubled their pace so as to attain the waterfall before she landed.

Eragon reached out with his mind to force himself into the frightened thoughts of the horses. Using the ancient language, he told

them that unless they swam through the waterfall, they would be killed and eaten by the Urgals. Though they did not understand everything he said, the meaning of his words was unmistakable.

Snowfire and Tornac tossed their heads, then dashed into the thundering downpour, whinnying as it struck their backs. They floundered, struggling to stay above water. Murtagh sheathed his sword and jumped after them; his head disappeared under a froth of bubbles before he bobbed up, sputtering.

The Urgals were right behind Eragon; he could hear their feet crunching on the gravel. With a fierce war cry he leapt after Murtagh, closing his eyes a second before the cold water pummeled him.

The tremendous weight of the waterfall slammed down on his shoulders with backbreaking force. The water's mindless roar filled his ears. He was driven to the bottom, where his knees gouged the rocky lakebed. He kicked off with all his strength and shot partway out of the water. Before he could take a gulp of air, the cascade rammed him back underwater.

All he could see was a white blur as foam billowed around him. He frantically tried to surface and relieve his burning lungs, but he only rose a few feet before the deluge halted his ascent. He panicked, thrashing his arms and legs, fighting the water. Weighed down by Zar'roc and his drenched clothes, he sank back to the lakebed, unable to speak the ancient words that could save him.

Suddenly a strong hand grasped the back of his tunic and dragged him through the water. His rescuer sliced through the lake with quick, short strokes; Eragon hoped it was Murtagh, not an Urgal. They surfaced and stumbled onto the pebble beach. Eragon was trembling violently; his entire body shivered in bursts.

Sounds of combat erupted to his right, and he whirled toward them, expecting an Urgal attack. The monsters on the opposite shore—where he had stood only moments before—fell beneath a withering hail of arrows from crevasses that pockmarked the cliff. Scores of Urgals already floated belly up in the water, riddled with shafts. The ones on Eragon's shore were similarly engaged. Neither group could retreat from their exposed positions, for rows of warriors had somehow appeared behind them, where the lake met the mountainsides. All that prevented the nearest Kull from rushing Eragon was the steady rain of arrows—the unseen archers seemed determined to keep the Urgals at bay.

A gruff voice next to Eragon said, "Akh Gûnteraz dorzada! What were they thinking? You would have drowned!" Eragon jerked with surprise. It was not Murtagh standing by him but a diminutive man no taller than his elbow.

The dwarf was busy wringing water out of his long braided beard.

His chest was stocky, and he wore a chain-mail jacket cut off at the shoulders to reveal muscular arms. A war ax hung from a wide leather belt strapped around his waist. An iron-bound oxhide cap, bearing the symbol of a hammer surrounded by twelve stars, sat firmly on his head. Even with the cap, he barely topped four feet. He looked longingly at the fighting and said, "Barzûl, but I wish I could join them!"

A dwarf! Eragon drew Zar'roc and looked for Saphira and Murtagh. Two twelve-foot-thick stone doors had opened in the cliff, revealing a broad tunnel nearly thirty feet tall that burrowed its way into the mysterious depths of the mountain. A line of flameless lamps filled the passageway with a pale sapphire light that spilled out onto the lake.

Saphira and Murtagh stood before the tunnel, surrounded by a grim mixture of men and dwarves. At Murtagh's elbow was a bald, beardless man dressed in purple and gold robes. He was taller than all the other humans—and he was holding a dagger to Murtagh's throat.

Eragon reached for his power, but the robed man said in a sharp, dangerous voice, "Stop! If you use magic, I'll kill your lovely friend here, who was so kind as to mention you're a Rider. Don't think I won't know if you're drawing upon it. You can't hide anything from me." Eragon tried to speak, but the man snarled and pressed the dagger harder against Murtagh's throat. "None of that! If you say or do anything I don't tell you to, he will die. Now, everyone inside." He backed into the tunnel, pulling Murtagh with him and keeping his eyes on Eragon.

Saphira, what should I do? Eragon asked quickly as the men and dwarves followed Murtagh's captor, leading the horses along with them.

Go with them, she counseled, *and hope that we live*. She entered the tunnel herself, eliciting nervous glances from those around her. Reluctantly, Eragon followed her, aware that the warriors' eyes were upon him. His rescuer, the dwarf, walked alongside him with a hand on the haft of his war ax.

Utterly exhausted, Eragon staggered into the mountain. The stone doors swung shut behind them with only a whisper of sound. He looked back and saw a seamless wall where the opening had been. They were trapped inside. But were they any safer?

"This way," snapped the bald man. He stepped back, keeping the dagger pressed under Murtagh's chin, then wheeled to the right, disappearing through an arched doorway. The warriors cautiously followed him, their attention centered on Eragon and Saphira. The horses were led into a different tunnel.

Dazed by the turn of events, Eragon started after Murtagh. He glanced at Saphira to confirm that Arya was still tied to her back. *She has to get the antidote!* he thought frantically, knowing that even then the Skilna Bragh was fulfilling its deadly purpose within her flesh.

He hurried through the arched doorway and down a narrow corridor after the bald man. The warriors kept their weapons pointed at him. They swept past a sculpture of a peculiar animal with thick quills. The corridor curved sharply to the left, then to the right. A door opened and they entered a bare room large enough for Saphira to move around with ease. There was a hollow boom as the door closed, followed by a loud scrape as a bolt was secured on the outside.

Eragon slowly examined his surroundings, Zar'roc tight in his hand. The walls, floor, and ceiling were made of polished white marble that reflected a ghost image of everyone, like a mirror of veined milk. One of the unusual lanterns hung in each corner. "There's an injured—" he began, but a sharp gesture from the bald man cut him off.

"Do not speak! It must wait until you have been tested." He shoved Murtagh over to one of the warriors, who pressed a sword against Murtagh's neck. The bald man clasped his hands together softly. "Remove your weapons and slide them to me." A dwarf unbuckled Murtagh's sword and dropped it on the floor with a clank.

Loath to be parted with Zar'roc, Eragon unfastened the sheath and set it and the blade on the floor. He placed his bow and quiver next to them, then pushed the pile toward the warriors. "Now step away from your dragon and slowly approach me," commanded the bald man.

Puzzled, Eragon moved forward. When they were a yard apart, the man said, "Stop there! Now remove the defenses from around your mind and prepare to let me inspect your thoughts and memories. If you try to hide anything from me, I will take what I want by force … which would drive you mad. If you don't submit, your companion will be killed."

"Why?" asked Eragon, aghast.

"To be sure you aren't in Galbatorix's service and to understand why hundreds of Urgals are banging on our front door," growled the

bald man. His close-set eyes shifted from point to point with cunning speed. “No one may enter Farthen Dûr without being tested.”

“There isn’t time. We need a healer!” protested Eragon.

“Silence!” roared the man, pressing down his robe with thin fingers. “Until you are examined, your words are meaningless!”

“But she’s dying!” retorted Eragon angrily, pointing at Arya. They were in a precarious position, but he would let nothing else happen until Arya was cared for.

“It will have to wait! No one will leave this room until we have discovered the truth of this matter. Unless you wish—”

The dwarf who had saved Eragon from the lake jumped forward. “Are you blind, Egraz Carn? Can’t you see that’s an elf on the dragon? We cannot keep her here if she’s in danger. Ajihad and the king will have our heads if she’s allowed to die!”

The man’s eyes tightened with anger. After a moment he relaxed and said smoothly, “Of course, Orik, we wouldn’t want that to happen.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at Arya. “Remove her from the dragon.” Two human warriors sheathed their swords and hesitantly approached Saphira, who watched them steadily. “Quickly, quickly!”

The men unstrapped Arya from the saddle and lowered the elf to the floor. One of the men inspected her face, then said sharply, “It’s the dragon-egg courier, Arya!”

“What?” exclaimed the bald man. The dwarf Orik’s eyes widened with astonishment. The bald man fixed his steely gaze on Eragon and said flatly, “You have much explaining to do.”

Eragon returned the intense stare with all the determination he could muster. “She was poisoned with the Skilna Bragh while in prison. Only Tunivor’s Nectar can save her now.”

The bald man’s face became inscrutable. He stood motionless, except for his lips, which twitched occasionally. “Very well. Take her to the healers, and tell them what she needs. Guard her until the ceremony is completed. I will have new orders for you by then.” The warriors nodded curtly and carried Arya out of the room. Eragon watched them go, wishing that he could accompany her. His attention snapped back to the bald man as he said, “Enough of this, we have wasted too much time already. Prepare to be examined.”

Eragon did not want this hairless threatening man inside his mind, laying bare his every thought and feeling, but he knew that resistance would be useless. The air was strained. Murtagh’s gaze burned into his forehead. Finally he bowed his head. “I am ready.”

“Good, then—”

He was interrupted as Orik said abruptly, “You’d better not harm him, Egraz Carn, else the king will have words for you.”

The bald man looked at him irritably, then faced Eragon with a small smile. “Only if he resists.” He bowed his head and chanted several inaudible words.

Eragon gasped with pain and shock as a mental probe clawed its way into his mind. His eyes rolled up into his head, and he automatically began throwing up barriers around his consciousness. The attack was incredibly powerful.

Don’t do that! cried Saphira. Her thoughts joined his, filling him with strength. *You’re putting Murtagh at risk!* Eragon faltered, gritted his teeth, then forced himself to remove his shielding, exposing himself to the ravening probe. Disappointment emanated from the bald man. His battering intensified. The force coming from his mind felt decayed and unwholesome; there was something profoundly wrong about it.

He wants me to fight him! cried Eragon as a fresh wave of pain racked him. A second later it subsided, only to be replaced by another. Saphira did her best to suppress it, but even she could not block it entirely.

Give him what he wants, she said quickly, *but protect everything else. I’ll help you. His strength is no match for mine; I’m already shielding our words from him.*

Then why does it still hurt?

The pain comes from you.

Eragon winced as the probe dug in farther, hunting for information, like a nail being driven through his skull. The bald man roughly seized his childhood memories and began sifting through them. *He doesn’t need those—get him out of there!* growled Eragon angrily.

I can’t, not without endangering you, said Saphira. *I can conceal things from his view, but it must be done before he reaches them. Think quickly, and tell me what you want hidden!*

Eragon tried to concentrate through the pain. He raced through his memories, starting from when he had found Saphira’s egg. He hid sections of his discussions with Brom, including all the ancient words he had been taught. Their travels through Palancar Valley, Yazuac, Daret, and Teirm he left mostly untouched. But he had Saphira conceal everything he remembered of Angela’s fortune-telling and Solembum. He skipped from their burglary at Teirm, to Brom’s death, to his imprisonment in Gil’ead, and lastly to Murtagh’s revelation of his true identity.

Eragon wanted to hide that as well, but Saphira balked. *The Varden have a right to know who they shelter under their roof, especially if it’s a son of the Forsworn!*

Just do it, he said tightly, fighting another wave of agony. *I won’t be the one to unmask him, at least not to this man.*

It'll be discovered as soon as Murtagh is scanned, warned Saphira sharply.

Just do it.

With the most important information hidden, there was nothing else for Eragon to do but wait for the bald man to finish his inspection. It was like sitting still while his fingernails were extracted with rusty tongs. His entire body was rigid, jaw locked tightly. Heat radiated from his skin, and a line of sweat rolled down his neck. He was acutely aware of each second as the long minutes crept by.

The bald man wound through his experiences sluggishly, like a thorny vine pushing its way toward the sunlight. He paid keen attention to many things Eragon considered irrelevant, such as his mother, Selena, and seemed to linger on purpose so as to prolong the suffering. He spent a long time examining Eragon's recollections of the Ra'zac, and then later the Shade. It was not until his adventures had been exhaustively analyzed that the bald man began to withdraw from Eragon's mind.

The probe was extracted like a splinter being removed. Eragon shuddered, swayed, then fell toward the floor. Strong arms caught him at the last second, lowering him to the cool marble. He heard Orik exclaim from behind him, "You went too far! He wasn't strong enough for this."

"He'll live. That's all that is needed," answered the bald man curtly.

There was an angry grunt. "What did you find?"

Silence.

"Well, is he to be trusted or not?"

The words came reluctantly. "He … is not your enemy." There were audible sighs of relief throughout the room.

Eragon's eyes fluttered open. He gingerly pushed himself upright. "Easy now," said Orik, wrapping a thick arm around him and helping him to his feet. Eragon wove unsteadily, glaring at the bald man. A low growl rumbled in Saphira's throat.

The bald man ignored them. He turned to Murtagh, who was still being held at sword point. "It's your turn now."

Murtagh stiffened and shook his head. The sword cut his neck slightly. Blood dripped down his skin. "No."

"You will not be protected here if you refuse."

"Eragon has been declared trustworthy, so you cannot threaten to kill him to influence me. Since you can't do that, nothing you say or do will convince me to open my mind."

Sneering, the bald man cocked what would have been an eyebrow, if he had any. "What of your own life? I can still threaten that."

"It won't do any good," said Murtagh stonily and with such conviction that it was impossible to doubt his word.

The bald man's breath exploded angrily. "You don't have a choice!" He stepped forward and placed his palm on Murtagh's brow, clenching his hand to hold him in place. Murtagh stiffened, face growing as hard as iron, fists clenched, neck muscles bulging. He was obviously fighting the attack with all his strength. The bald man bared his teeth with fury and frustration at the resistance; his fingers dug mercilessly into Murtagh.

Eragon winced in sympathy, knowing the battle that raged between them. *Can't you help him?* he asked Saphira.

No, she said softly. *He will allow no one into his mind.*

Orik scowled darkly as he watched the combatants. "Ilf carnz orodûm," he muttered, then leapt forward and cried, "That is enough!" He grabbed the bald man's arm and tore him away from Murtagh with strength disproportional to his size.

The bald man stumbled back, then turned on Orik furiously. "How dare you!" he shouted. "You questioned my leadership, opened the gates without permission, and now this! You've shown nothing but insolence and treachery. Do you think your king will protect you now?"

Orik bristled. "You would have let them die! If I had waited any longer, the Urgals would have killed them." He pointed at Murtagh, whose breath came in great heaves. "We don't have any right to torture him for information! Ajihad won't sanction it. Not after you've examined the Rider and found him free of fault. *And* they've brought us Arya."

"Would you allow him to enter unchallenged? Are you so great a fool as to put us all at risk?" demanded the bald man. His eyes were feral with loosely chained rage; he looked ready to tear the dwarf into pieces.

"Can he use magic?"

"That is—"

"Can he use magic?" roared Orik, his deep voice echoing in the room. The bald man's face suddenly grew expressionless. He clasped his hands behind his back.

"No."

"Then what do you fear? It's impossible for him to escape, and he can't work any devilry with all of us here, especially if your powers are as great as you say. But don't listen to me; ask Ajihad what he wants done."

The bald man stared at Orik for a moment, his face indecipherable, then looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes. A peculiar stiffness set into his shoulders while his lips moved soundlessly. An intense frown wrinkled the pale skin above his eyes, and his fingers clenched, as if they were throttling an invisible enemy. For several minutes he stood

thus, wrapped in silent communication.

When his eyes opened, he ignored Orik and snapped at the warriors, "Leave, now!" As they filed through the doorway, he addressed Eragon coldly, "Because I was unable to complete my examination, you and … your friend will remain here for the night. He will be killed if he attempts to leave." With those words he turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, pale scalp gleaming in the lantern light.

"Thank you," whispered Eragon to Orik.

The dwarf grunted. "I'll make sure some food is brought." He muttered a string of words under his breath, then left, shaking his head. The bolt was secured once again on the outside of the door.

Eragon sat, feeling strangely dreamy from the day's excitement and their forced march. His eyelids were heavy. Saphira settled next to him. *We must be careful. It seems we have as many enemies here as we did in the Empire*. He nodded, too tired to talk.

Murtagh, eyes glazed and empty, leaned against the far wall and slid to the shiny floor. He held his sleeve against the cut on his neck to stop the bleeding. "Are you all right?" asked Eragon. Murtagh nodded jerkily. "Did he get anything from you?"

"No."

"How were you able to keep him out? He's so strong."

"I've … I've been well trained." There was a bitter note to his voice.

Silence enshrouded them. Eragon's gaze drifted to one of the lanterns hanging in a corner. His thoughts meandered until he abruptly said, "I didn't let them know who you are."

Murtagh looked relieved. He bowed his head. "Thank you for not betraying me."

"They didn't recognize you."

"No."

"And you still say that you are Morzan's son?"

"Yes," he sighed.

Eragon started to speak, but stopped when he felt hot liquid splash onto his hand. He looked down and was startled to see a drop of dark blood roll off his skin. It had fallen from Saphira's wing. *I forgot. You're injured!* he exclaimed, getting up with an effort. *I'd better heal you.*

Be careful. It's easy to make mistakes when you're this tired.

I know. Saphira unfolded one of her wings and lowered it to the floor. Murtagh watched as Eragon ran his hands over the warm blue membrane, saying, "Waíse heill," whenever he found an arrow hole. Luckily, all the wounds were relatively easy to heal, even those on her nose.

Task completed, Eragon slumped against Saphira, breathing hard. He could feel her great heart beating with the steady throb of life. "I

hope they bring food soon," said Murtagh.

Eragon shrugged; he was too exhausted to be hungry. He crossed his arms, missing Zar'roc's weight by his side. "Why are you here?"

"What?"

"If you really are Morzan's son, Galbatorix wouldn't let you wander around Alagaësia freely. How is it that you managed to find the Ra'zac by yourself? Why is it I've never heard of any of the Forsworn having children? And what are you doing here?" His voice rose to a near shout at the end.

Murtagh ran his hands over his face. "It's a long story."

"We're not going anywhere," rebutted Eragon.

"It's too late to talk."

"There probably won't be time for it tomorrow."

Murtagh wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his chin on his knees, rocking back and forth as he stared at the floor. "It's not a —" he said, then interrupted himself. "I don't want to stop … so make yourself comfortable. My story will take a while." Eragon shifted against Saphira's side and nodded. Saphira watched both of them intently.

Murtagh's first sentence was halting, but his voice gained strength and confidence as he spoke. "As far as I know … I am the only child of the Thirteen Servants, or the Forsworn as they're called. There may be others, for the Thirteen had the skill to hide whatever they wanted, but I doubt it, for reasons I'll explain later.

"My parents met in a small village—I never learned where—while my father was traveling on the king's business. Morzan showed my mother some small kindness, no doubt a ploy to gain her confidence, and when he left, she accompanied him. They traveled together for a time, and as is the nature of these things, she fell deeply in love with him. Morzan was delighted to discover this not only because it gave him numerous opportunities to torment her but also because he recognized the advantage of having a servant who wouldn't betray him.

"Thus, when Morzan returned to Galbatorix's court, my mother became the tool he relied upon most. He used her to carry his secret messages, and he taught her rudimentary magic, which helped her remain undiscovered and, on occasion, extract information from people. He did his best to protect her from the rest of the Thirteen—not out of any feelings for her, but because they would have used her against him, given the chance.… For three years things proceeded in this manner, until my mother became pregnant."

Murtagh paused for a moment, fingering a lock of his hair. He continued in a clipped tone, "My father was, if nothing else, a cunning man. He knew that the pregnancy put both him and my mother in

danger, not to mention the baby—that is, me. So, in the dead of night, he spirited her away from the palace and took her to his castle. Once there, he laid down powerful spells that prevented anyone from entering his estate except for a few chosen servants. In this way the pregnancy was kept secret from everyone but Galbatorix.

"Galbatorix knew the intimate details of the Thirteen's lives: their plots, their fights—and most importantly—their thoughts. He enjoyed watching them battle each other and often helped one or the other for his own amusement. But for some reason he never revealed my existence.

"I was born in due time and given to a wet nurse so my mother could return to Morzan's side. She had no choice in the matter. Morzan allowed her to visit me every few months, but otherwise we were kept apart. Another three years passed like this, during which time he gave me the … scar on my back." Murtagh brooded a minute before continuing.

"I would have grown to manhood in this fashion if Morzan hadn't been summoned away to hunt for Saphira's egg. As soon as he departed, my mother, who had been left behind, vanished. No one knows where she went, or why. The king tried to hunt her down, but his men couldn't find her trail—no doubt because of Morzan's training.

"At the time of my birth, only five of the Thirteen were still alive. By the time Morzan left, that number had been reduced to three; when he finally faced Brom in Gil'ead, he was the only one remaining. The Forsworn died through various means: suicide, ambush, overuse of magic … but it was mostly the work of the Varden. I'm told that the king was in a terrible rage because of those losses.

"However, before word of Morzan's and the others' deaths reached us, my mother returned. Many months had passed since she had disappeared. Her health was poor, as if she had suffered a great illness, and she grew steadily worse. Within a fortnight, she died."

"What happened then?" prompted Eragon.

Murtagh shrugged. "I grew up. The king brought me to the palace and arranged for my upbringing. Aside from that, he left me alone."

"Then why did you leave?"

A hard laugh broke from Murtagh. "Escaped is more like it. At my last birthday, when I turned eighteen, the king summoned me to his quarters for a private dinner. The message surprised me because I had always distanced myself from the court and had rarely met him. We'd talked before, but always within earshot of eavesdropping nobles.

"I accepted the offer, of course, aware that it would be unwise to refuse. The meal was sumptuous, but throughout it his black eyes never left me. His gaze was disconcerting; it seemed that he was

searching for something hidden in my face. I didn't know what to make of it and did my best to provide polite conversation, but he refused to talk, and I soon ceased my efforts.

"When the meal was finished, he finally began to speak. You've never heard his voice, so it's hard for me to make you understand what it was like. His words were entrancing, like a snake whispering gilded lies into my ears. A more convincing and frightening man I've never heard. He wove a vision: a fantasy of the Empire as he imagined it. There would be beautiful cities built across the country, filled with the greatest warriors, artisans, musicians, and philosophers. The Urgals would finally be eradicated. And the Empire would expand in every direction until it reached the four corners of Alagaësia. Peace and prosperity would flourish, but more wondrous yet, the Riders would be brought back to gently govern over Galbatorix's fiefdoms.

"Entranced, I listened to him for what must have been hours. When he stopped, I eagerly asked how the Riders would be reinstated, for everyone knew there were no dragon eggs left. Galbatorix grew still then and stared at me thoughtfully. For a long time he was silent, but then he extended his hand and asked, 'Will you, O son of my friend, serve me as I labor to bring about this paradise?'

"Though I knew the history behind his and my father's rise to power, the dream he had painted for me was too compelling, too seductive to ignore. Ardor for this mission filled me, and I fervently pledged myself to him. Obviously pleased, Galbatorix gave me his blessing, then dismissed me, saying, 'I shall call upon you when the need arises.'

"Several months passed before he did. When the summons came, I felt all of my old excitement return. We met in private as before, but this time he was not pleasant or charming. The Varden had just destroyed three brigades in the south, and his wrath was out in full force. He charged me in a terrible voice to take a detachment of troops and destroy Cantos, where rebels were known to hide occasionally. When I asked what we should do with the people there and how we would know if they were guilty, he shouted, 'They're all traitors! Burn them at the stake and bury their ashes with dung!' He continued to rant, cursing his enemies and describing how he would scourge the land of everyone who bore him ill will.

"His tone was so different from what I had encountered before; it made me realize he didn't possess the mercy or foresight to gain the people's loyalty, and he ruled only through brute force guided by his own passions. It was at that moment I determined to escape him and Urû'baen forever.

"As soon as I was free of his presence, I and my faithful servant, Tornac, made ready for flight. We left that very night, but somehow

Galbatorix anticipated my actions, for there were soldiers waiting for us outside the gates. Ah, my sword was bloody, flashing in the dim lantern glow. We defeated the men … but in the process Tornac was killed.

"Alone and filled with grief, I fled to an old friend who sheltered me in his estate. While I hid, I listened carefully to every rumor, trying to predict Galbatorix's actions and plan my future. During that time, talk reached me that the Ra'zac had been sent to capture or kill someone. Remembering the king's plans for the Riders, I decided to find and follow the Ra'zac, just in case they *did* discover a dragon. And that's how I found you.… I have no more secrets."

We still don't know if he's telling the truth, warned Saphira.

I know, said Eragon, *but why would he lie to us?*

He might be mad.

I doubt it. Eragon ran a finger over Saphira's hard scales, watching the light reflect off them. "So why don't you join the Varden? They'll distrust you for a time, but once you prove your loyalty they'll treat you with respect. And aren't they in a sense your allies? They strive to end the king's reign. Isn't that what you want?"

"Must I spell everything out for you?" demanded Murtagh. "I don't want Galbatorix to learn where I am, which is inevitable if people start saying that I've sided with his enemies, which I've never done. These," he paused, then said with distaste, "*rebels* are trying not only to overthrow the king but to destroy the Empire … and I don't want that to happen. It would sow mayhem and anarchy. The king is flawed, yes, but the system itself is sound. As for earning the Varden's respect: Ha! Once I am exposed, they'll treat me like a criminal or worse. Not only that, suspicion will fall upon you because we traveled together!"

He's right, said Saphira.

Eragon ignored her. "It isn't that bad," he said, trying to sound optimistic. Murtagh snorted derisively and looked away. "I'm sure that they won't be—" His words were cut short as the door opened a hand's breadth and two bowls were pushed through the space. A loaf of bread and a hunk of raw meat followed, then the door was shut again.

"Finally!" grumbled Murtagh, going to the food. He tossed the meat to Saphira, who snapped it out of the air and swallowed it whole. Then he tore the loaf in two, gave half to Eragon, picked up his bowl, and retreated to a corner.

They ate silently. Murtagh jabbed at his food. "I'm going to sleep," he announced, putting down his bowl without another word.

"Good night," said Eragon. He lay next to Saphira, his arms under his head. She curled her long neck around him, like a cat wrapping its

tail around itself, and laid her head alongside his. One of her wings extended over him like a blue tent, enveloping him in darkness.

Good night, little one.

A small smile lifted Eragon's lips, but he was already asleep.

Eragon jolted upright as a growl sounded in his ear. Saphira was still asleep, her eyes wandering sightlessly under her eyelids, and her upper lip trembled, as if she were going to snarl. He smiled, then jerked as she growled again.

She must be dreaming, he realized. He watched her for a minute, then carefully slid out from under her wing. He stood and stretched. The room was cool, but not unpleasantly so. Murtagh lay on his back in the far corner, his eyes closed.

As Eragon stepped around Saphira, Murtagh stirred. "Morning," he said quietly, sitting up.

"How long have you been awake?" asked Eragon in a hushed voice.

"Awhile. I'm surprised Saphira didn't wake you sooner."

"I was tired enough to sleep through a thunderstorm," said Eragon wryly. He sat by Murtagh and rested his head against the wall. "Do you know what time it is?"

"No. It's impossible to tell in here."

"Has anyone come to see us?"

"Not yet."

They sat together without moving or speaking. Eragon felt oddly bound to Murtagh. *I've been carrying his father's sword, which would have been his … his inheritance. We're alike in many ways, yet our outlook and upbringing are totally different.* He thought of Murtagh's scar and shivered. *What man could do that to a child?*

Saphira lifted her head and blinked to clear her eyes. She sniffed the air, then yawned expansively, her rough tongue curling at the tip. *Has anything happened?* Eragon shook his head. *I hope they give me more food than that snack last night. I'm hungry enough to eat a herd of cows.*

They'll feed you, he assured her.

They'd better. She positioned herself near the door and settled down to wait, tail flicking. Eragon closed his eyes, enjoying the rest. He dozed awhile, then got up and paced around. Bored, he examined one of the lanterns. It was made of a single piece of teardrop-shaped glass, about twice the size of a lemon, and filled with soft blue light that neither wavered nor flickered. Four slim metal ribs wrapped smoothly around the glass, meeting at the top to form a small hook and again at the bottom where they melded together into three graceful legs. The whole piece was quite attractive.

Eragon's inspection was interrupted by voices outside the room. The door opened, and a dozen warriors marched inside. The first man

gulped when he saw Saphira. They were followed by Orik and the bald man, who declared, “You have been summoned to Ajihad, leader of the Varden. If you must eat, do so while we march.” Eragon and Murtagh stood together, watching him warily.

“Where are our horses? And can I have my sword and bow back?” asked Eragon.

The bald man looked at him with disdain. “Your weapons will be returned to you when Ajihad sees fit, not before. As for your horses, they await you in the tunnel. Now come!”

As he turned to leave, Eragon asked quickly, “How is Arya?”

The bald man hesitated. “I do not know. The healers are still with her.” He exited the room, accompanied by Orik.

One of the warriors motioned. “You go first.” Eragon went through the doorway, followed by Saphira and Murtagh. They returned through the corridor they had traversed the night before, passing the statue of the quilled animal. When they reached the huge tunnel through which they had first entered the mountain, the bald man was waiting with Orik, who held Tornac’s and Snowfire’s reins.

“You will ride single file down the center of the tunnel,” instructed the bald man. “If you attempt to go anywhere else, you will be stopped.” When Eragon started to climb onto Saphira, the bald man shouted, “No! Ride your horse until I tell you otherwise.”

Eragon shrugged and took Snowfire’s reins. He swung into the saddle, guided Snowfire in front of Saphira, and told her, *Stay close in case I need your help*.

Of course, she said.

Murtagh mounted Tornac behind Saphira. The bald man examined their small line, then gestured at the warriors, who divided in half to surround them, giving Saphira as wide a berth as possible. Orik and the bald man went to the head of the procession.

After looking them over once more, the bald man clapped twice and started walking forward. Eragon tapped Snowfire lightly on his flanks. The entire group headed toward the heart of the mountain. Echoes filled the tunnel as the horses’ hooves struck the hard floor, the sounds amplified in the deserted passageway. Doors and gates occasionally disturbed the smooth walls, but they were always closed.

Eragon marveled at the sheer size of the tunnel, which had been mined with incredible skill—the walls, floor, and ceiling were crafted with flawless precision. The angles at the bases of the walls were perfectly square, and as far as he could tell, the tunnel itself did not vary from its course by even an inch.

As they proceeded, Eragon’s anticipation about meeting Ajihad increased. The leader of the Varden was a shadowy figure to the people within the Empire. He had risen to power nearly twenty years

ago and since then had waged a fierce war against King Galbatorix. No one knew where he came from or even what he looked like. It was rumored that he was a master strategist, a brutal fighter. With such a reputation, Eragon worried about how they would be received. Still, knowing that Brom had trusted the Varden enough to serve them helped to allay his fears.

Seeing Orik again had brought forth new questions in his mind. The tunnel was obviously dwarf work—no one else could mine with such skill—but were the dwarves part of the Varden, or were they merely sheltering them? And who was the king that Orik had mentioned? Was it Ajihad? Eragon understood now that the Varden had been able to escape discovery by hiding underground, but what about the elves? Where were they?

For nearly an hour the bald man led them through the tunnel, never straying nor turning. *We've probably already gone a league*, Eragon realized. *Maybe they're taking us all the way through the mountain!* At last a soft white glow became visible ahead of them. He strained his eyes, trying to discern its source, but it was still too far away to make out any details. The glow increased in strength as they neared it.

Now he could see thick marble pillars laced with rubies and amethysts standing in rows along the walls. Scores of lanterns hung between the pillars, suffusing the air with liquid brilliance. Gold tracery gleamed from the pillars' bases like molten thread. Arching over the ceiling were carved raven heads, their beaks open in mid-screech. At the end of the hallway rested two colossal black doors, accented by shimmering silver lines that depicted a seven-pointed crown that spanned both sides.

The bald man stopped and raised a hand. He turned to Eragon. "You will ride upon your dragon now. Do not attempt to fly away. There will be people watching, so remember who and what you are."

Eragon dismounted Snowfire, and then clambered onto Saphira's back. *I think they want to show us off*, she said as he settled into the saddle.

We'll see. I wish I had Zar'roc, he replied, tightening the straps around his legs.

It might be better that you aren't wearing Morzan's sword when the Varden first see you.

True. "I'm ready," Eragon said, squaring his shoulders.

"Good," said the bald man. He and Orik retreated to either side of Saphira, staying far enough back so she was clearly in the lead. "Now walk to the doors, and once they open, follow the path. Go slowly."

Ready? asked Eragon.

Of course. Saphira approached the doors at a measured pace. Her scales sparkled in the light, sending glints of color dancing over the

pillars. Eragon took a deep breath to steady his nerves.

Without warning, the doors swung outward on hidden joints. As the rift widened between them, rays of sunlight streamed into the tunnel, falling on Saphira and Eragon. Temporarily blinded, Eragon blinked and squinted. When his eyes adjusted to the light, he gasped.

They were inside a massive volcanic crater. Its walls narrowed to a small ragged opening so high above that Eragon could not judge the distance—it might have been more than a dozen miles. A soft beam of light fell through the aperture, illuminating the crater's center, though it left the rest of the cavernous expanse in hushed twilight.

The crater's far side, hazy blue in the distance, looked to be nearly ten miles away. Giant icicles hundreds of feet thick and thousands of feet long hung leagues above them like glistening daggers. Eragon knew from his experience in the valley that no one, not even Saphira, could reach those lofty points. Farther down the crater's inner walls, dark mats of moss and lichen covered the rock.

He lowered his gaze and saw a wide cobblestone path extending from the doors' threshold. The path ran straight to the center of the crater, where it ended at the base of a snowy-white mountain that glittered like an uncut gem with thousands of colored lights. It was less than a tenth of the height of the crater that loomed over and around it, but its diminutive appearance was deceiving, for it was slightly higher than a mile.

Long as it was, the tunnel had only taken them through one side of the crater wall. As Eragon stared, he heard Orik say deeply, "Look well, human, for no Rider has set eyes upon this for nigh over a hundred years. The airy peak under which we stand is Farthen Dûr—discovered thousands of years ago by the father of our race, Korgan, while he tunneled for gold. And in the center stands our greatest achievement: Tronjheim, the city-mountain built from the purest marble." The doors grated to a halt.

A city!

Then Eragon saw the crowd. He had been so engrossed by the sights that he had failed to notice a dense sea of people clustered around the tunnel's entrance. They lined the cobblestone pathway—dwarves and humans packed together like trees in a thicket. There were hundreds … thousands of them. Every eye, every face was focused on Eragon. And every one of them was silent.

Eragon gripped the base of one of Saphira's neck spikes. He saw children in dirty smocks, hardy men with scarred knuckles, women in homespun dresses, and stout, weathered dwarves who fingered their beards. All of them bore the same taut expression—that of an injured animal when a predator is nearby and escape is impossible.

A bead of sweat rolled down Eragon's face, but he dared not move

to wipe it away. *What should I do?* he asked frantically.

Smile, raise your hand, anything! replied Saphira sharply.

Eragon tried to force out a smile, but his lips only twitched. Gathering his courage, he pushed a hand into the air, jerking it in a little wave. When nothing happened, he flushed with embarrassment, lowered his arm, and ducked his head.

A single cheer broke the silence. Someone clapped loudly. For a brief second the crowd hesitated, then a wild roar swept through it, and a wave of sound crashed over Eragon.

"Very good," said the bald man from behind him. "Now start walking."

Relieved, Eragon sat straighter and playfully asked Saphira, *Shall we go?* She arched her neck and stepped forward. As they passed the first row of people, she glanced to each side and exhaled a puff of smoke. The crowd quieted and shrank back, then resumed cheering, their enthusiasm only intensified.

Show-off, chided Eragon. Saphira flicked her tail and ignored him. He stared curiously at the jostling crowd as she proceeded along the path. Dwarves greatly outnumbered humans … and many of them glared at him resentfully. Some even turned their backs and walked away with stony faces.

The humans were hard, tough people. All the men had daggers or knives at their waists; many were armed for war. The women carried themselves proudly, but they seemed to conceal a deep-abiding weariness. The few children and babies stared at Eragon with large eyes. He felt certain that these people had experienced much hardship and that they would do whatever was necessary to defend themselves.

The Varden had found the perfect hiding place. Farthen Dûr's walls were too high for a dragon to fly over, and no army could break through the entranceway, even if it managed to find the hidden doors.

The crowd followed close behind them, giving Saphira plenty of room. Gradually the people quieted, though their attention remained on Eragon. He looked back and saw Murtagh riding stiffly, his face pale.

They neared the city-mountain, and Eragon saw that the white marble of Tronjheim was highly polished and shaped into flowing contours, as if it had been poured into place. It was dotted with countless round windows framed by elaborate carvings. A colored lantern hung in each window, casting a soft glow on the surrounding rock. No turrets or smokestacks were visible. Directly ahead, two thirty-foot-high gold griffins guarded a massive timber gate—recessed twenty yards into the base of Tronjheim—which was shadowed by thick trusses that supported an arched vault far overhead.

When they reached Tronjheim's base, Saphira paused to see if the

bald man had any instructions. When none were forthcoming, she continued to the gate. The walls were lined with fluted pillars of blood-red jasper. Between the pillars hulked statues of outlandish creatures, captured forever by the sculptor's chisel.

The heavy gate rumbled open before them as hidden chains slowly raised the mammoth beams. A four-story-high passageway extended straight toward the center of Tronjheim. The top three levels were pierced by rows of archways that revealed gray tunnels curving off into the distance. Clumps of people filled the arches, eagerly watching Eragon and Saphira. On ground level, however, the archways were barred by stout doors. Rich tapestries hung between the different levels, embroidered with heroic figures and tumultuous battle scenes.

A cheer rang in their ears as Saphira stepped into the hall and paraded down it. Eragon raised his hand, eliciting another roar from the throng, though many of the dwarves did not join the welcoming shout.

The mile-long hall ended in an arch flanked by black onyx pillars. Yellow zircons three times the size of a man capped the dark columns, coruscating piercing gold beams along the hall. Saphira stepped through the opening, then stopped and craned back her neck, humming deeply in her chest.

They were in a circular room, perhaps a thousand feet across, that reached up to Tronjheim's peak a mile overhead, narrowing as it rose. The walls were lined with arches—one row for each level of the city-mountain—and the floor was made of polished carnelian, upon which was etched a hammer girdled by twelve silver pentacles, like on Orik's helm.

The room was a nexus for four hallways—including the one they had just exited—that divided Tronjheim into quarters. The halls were identical except for the one opposite Eragon. To the right and left of that hall were tall arches that opened to descending stairs, which mirrored each other as they curved underground.

The ceiling was capped by a dawn-red star sapphire of monstrous size. The jewel was twenty yards across and nearly as thick. Its face had been carved to resemble a rose in full bloom, and so skilled was the craftsmanship, the flower almost seemed to be real. A wide belt of lanterns wrapped around the edge of the sapphire, which cast striated bands of blushing light over everything below. The flashing rays of the star within the gem made it appear as if a giant eye gazed down at them.

Eragon could only gape with wonder. Nothing had prepared him for this. It seemed impossible that Tronjheim had been built by mortal beings. The city-mountain shamed everything he had seen in the Empire. He doubted if even Urû'baen could match the wealth and

grandeur displayed here. Tronjheim was a stunning monument to the dwarves' power and perseverance.

The bald man walked in front of Saphira and said, "You must go on foot from here." There was scattered booing from the crowd as he spoke. A dwarf took Tornac and Snowfire away. Eragon dismounted Saphira but stayed by her side as the bald man led them across the carnelian floor to the right-hand hallway.

They followed it for several hundred feet, then entered a smaller corridor. Their guards remained despite the cramped space. After four sharp turns, they came to a massive cedar door, stained black with age. The bald man pulled it open and conducted everyone but the guards inside.

Eragon entered an elegant, two-story study paneled with rows of cedar bookshelves. A wrought-iron staircase wound up to a small balcony with two chairs and a reading table. White lanterns hung along the walls and ceiling so a book could be read anywhere in the room. The stone floor was covered by an intricate oval rug. At the far end of the room, a man stood behind a large walnut desk.

His skin gleamed the color of oiled ebony. The dome of his head was shaved bare, but a closely trimmed black beard covered his chin and upper lip. Strong features shadowed his face, and grave, intelligent eyes lurked under his brow. His shoulders were broad and powerful, emphasized by a tapered red vest embroidered with gold thread and clasped over a rich purple shirt. He bore himself with great dignity, exuding an intense, commanding air.

When he spoke, his voice was strong, confident: “Welcome to Tronjheim, Eragon and Saphira. I am Ajihad. Please, seat yourselves.”

Eragon slipped into an armchair next to Murtagh, while Saphira settled protectively behind them. Ajihad raised his hand and snapped his fingers. A man stepped out from behind the staircase. He was identical to the bald man beside him. Eragon stared at the two of them with surprise, and Murtagh stiffened. “Your confusion is understandable; they are twin brothers,” said Ajihad with a small smile. “I would tell you their names, but they have none.”

Saphira hissed with distaste. Ajihad watched her for a moment, then sat in a high-backed chair behind the desk. The Twins retreated under the stairs and stood impassively beside each other. Ajihad pressed his fingers together as he stared at Eragon and Murtagh. He studied them for a long time with an unwavering gaze.

Eragon squirmed, uncomfortable. After what seemed like several minutes, Ajihad lowered his hands and beckoned to the Twins. One of them hurried to his side. Ajihad whispered in his ear. The bald man suddenly paled and shook his head vigorously. Ajihad frowned, then nodded as if something had been confirmed.

He looked at Murtagh. “You have placed me in a difficult position by refusing to be examined. You have been allowed into Farthen Dûr because the Twins have assured me that they can control you and because of your actions on behalf of Eragon and Arya. I understand that there may be things you wish to keep hidden in your mind, but as long as you do, we cannot trust you.”

“You wouldn’t trust me anyway,” said Murtagh defiantly.

Ajihad's face darkened as Murtagh spoke, and his eyes flashed dangerously. "Though it's been twenty and three years since it last broke upon my ear … I know that voice." He stood ominously, chest swelling. The Twins looked alarmed and put their heads together, whispering frantically. "It came from another man, one more beast than human. Get up."

Murtagh warily complied, his eyes darting between the Twins and Ajihad. "Remove your shirt," ordered Ajihad. With a shrug, Murtagh pulled off his tunic. "Now turn around." As he pivoted to the side, light fell upon the scar on his back.

"Murtagh," breathed Ajihad. A grunt of surprise came from Orik. Without warning, Ajihad turned on the Twins and thundered, "Did you know of this?"

The Twins bowed their heads. "We discovered his name in Eragon's mind, but we did not suspect that this *boy* was the son of one as powerful as Morzan. It never occurred—"

"And you didn't tell me?" demanded Ajihad. He raised a hand, forestalling their explanation. "We will discuss it later." He faced Murtagh again. "First I must untangle this muddle. Do you still refuse to be probed?"

"Yes," said Murtagh sharply, slipping back into his tunic. "I won't let anyone inside my head."

Ajihad leaned on his desk. "There will be unpleasant consequences if you don't. Unless the Twins can certify that you aren't a threat, we cannot give you credence, despite, and perhaps because of, the assistance you have given Eragon. Without that verification, the people here, dwarf and human alike, will tear you apart if they learn of your presence. I'll be forced to keep you confined at all times—as much for your protection as for ours. It will only get worse once the dwarf king, Hrothgar, demands custody of you. Don't force yourself into that situation when it can easily be avoided."

Murtagh shook his head stubbornly. "No … even if I were to submit, I would still be treated like a leper and an outcast. All I wish is to leave. If you let me do that peacefully, I'll never reveal your location to the Empire."

"What will happen if you are captured and brought before Galbatorix?" demanded Ajihad. "He will extract every secret from your mind, no matter how strong you may be. Even if you could resist him, how can we trust that you won't rejoin him in the future? I cannot take that chance."

"Will you hold me prisoner forever?" demanded Murtagh, straightening.

"No," said Ajihad, "only until you let yourself be examined. If you are found trustworthy, the Twins will remove all knowledge of

Farthen Dûr's location from your mind before you leave. We won't risk someone with those memories falling into Galbatorix's hands. What is it to be, Murtagh? Decide quickly or else the path will be chosen for you."

Just give in, Eragon pleaded silently, concerned for Murtagh's safety. *It's not worth the fight.*

Finally Murtagh spoke, the words slow and distinct. "My mind is the one sanctuary that has not been stolen from me. Men have tried to breach it before, but I've learned to defend it vigorously, for I am only safe with my innermost thoughts. You have asked for the one thing I cannot give, least of all to those two." He gestured at the Twins. "Do with me what you will, but know this: death will take me before I'll expose myself to their probing."

Admiration glinted in Ajihad's eyes. "I'm not surprised by your choice, though I had hoped otherwise.… Guards!" The cedar door slammed open as warriors rushed in, weapons ready. Ajihad pointed at Murtagh and commanded, "Take him to a windowless room and bar the door securely. Post six men by the entrance and allow no one inside until I come to see him. Do not speak to him, either."

The warriors surrounded Murtagh, watching him suspiciously. As they left the study, Eragon caught Murtagh's attention and mouthed, "I'm sorry." Murtagh shrugged, then stared forward resolutely. He vanished into the hallway with the men. The sound of their feet faded into silence.

Ajihad said abruptly, "I want everyone out of this room but Eragon and Saphira. Now!"

Bowing, the Twins departed, but Orik said, "Sir, the king will want to know of Murtagh. And there is still the matter of my insubordination.…"

Ajihad frowned, then waved his hand. "I will tell Hrothgar myself. As for your actions … wait outside until I call for you. And don't let the Twins get away. I'm not done with them, either."

"Very well," said Orik, inclining his head. He closed the door with a solid thump.

After a long silence, Ajihad sat with a tired sigh. He ran a hand over his face and stared at the ceiling. Eragon waited impatiently for him to speak. When nothing was forthcoming, he blurted, "Is Arya all right?"

Ajihad looked down at him and said gravely, "No … but the healers tell me she will recover. They worked on her all through the night. The poison took a dreadful toll on her. She wouldn't have lived if not for you. For that you have the Varden's deepest thanks."

Eragon's shoulders slumped with relief. For the first time he felt that their flight from Gil'ead had been worth the effort. "So, what now?"

he asked.

"I need you to tell me how you found Saphira and everything that's happened since," said Ajihad, forming a steeple with his fingers. "Some of it I know from the message Brom sent us, other parts from the Twins. But I want to hear it from you, especially the details concerning Brom's death."

Eragon was reluctant to share his experiences with a stranger, but Ajihad was patient. *Go on*, urged Saphira gently. Eragon shifted, then began his story. It was awkward at first but grew easier as he proceeded. Saphira helped him to remember things clearly with occasional comments. Ajihad listened intently the entire time.

Eragon talked for hours, often pausing between his words. He told Ajihad of Teirm, though he kept Angela's fortunetelling to himself, and how he and Brom had found the Ra'zac. He even related his dreams of Arya. When he came to Gil'ead and mentioned the Shade, Ajihad's face hardened, and he leaned back with veiled eyes.

When his narrative was complete, Eragon fell silent, brooding on all that had occurred. Ajihad stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and absently studied one of the bookshelves. After a time he returned to the desk.

"Brom's death is a terrible loss. He was a close friend of mine and a powerful ally of the Varden. He saved us from destruction many times through his bravery and intelligence. Even now, when he is gone, he's provided us with the one thing that can ensure our success—you."

"But what can you expect me to accomplish?" asked Eragon.

"I will explain it in full," said Ajihad, "but there are more urgent matters to be dealt with first. The news of the Urgals' alliance with the Empire is extremely serious. If Galbatorix is gathering an Urgal army to destroy us, the Varden will be hard pressed to survive, even though many of us are protected here in Farthen Dûr. That a Rider, even one as evil as Galbatorix, would consider a pact with such monsters is indeed proof of madness. I shudder to think of what he promised them in return for their fickle loyalty. And then there is the Shade. Can you describe him?"

Eragon nodded. "He was tall, thin, and very pale, with red eyes and hair. He was dressed all in black."

"What of his sword—did you see it?" asked Ajihad intensely. "Did it have a long scratch on the blade?"

"Yes," said Eragon, surprised. "How did you know?"

"Because I put it there while trying to cut out his heart," said Ajihad with a grim smile. "His name is Durza—one of the most vicious and cunning fiends to ever stalk this land. He is the perfect servant for Galbatorix and a dangerous enemy for us. You say that you killed him. How was it done?"

Eragon remembered it vividly. “Murtagh shot him twice. The first arrow caught him in the shoulder; the second one struck him between the eyes.”

“I was afraid of that,” said Ajihad, frowning. “You didn’t kill him. Shades can only be destroyed by a thrust through the heart. Anything short of that will cause them to vanish and then reappear elsewhere in spirit form. It’s an unpleasant process, but Durza will survive and return stronger than ever.”

A moody silence settled over them like a foreboding thunder-head. Then Ajihad stated, “You are an enigma, Eragon, a quandary that no one knows how to solve. Everyone knows what the Varden want—or the Urgals, or even Galbatorix—but no one knows what *you* want. And that makes you dangerous, especially to Galbatorix. He fears you because he doesn’t know what you will do next.”

“Do the Varden fear me?” asked Eragon quietly.

“No,” said Ajihad carefully. “We are hopeful. But if that hope proves false, then yes, we will be afraid.” Eragon looked down. “You must understand the unusual nature of your position. There are factions who want you to serve their interests and no one else’s. The moment you entered Farthen Dûr, their influence and power began tugging on you.”

“Including yours?” asked Eragon.

Ajihad chuckled, though his eyes were sharp. “Including mine. There are certain things you should know: first is how Saphira’s egg happened to appear in the Spine. Did Brom ever tell you what was done with her egg after he brought it here?”

“No,” said Eragon, glancing at Saphira. She blinked and flicked her tongue at him.

Ajihad tapped his desk before beginning. “When Brom first brought the egg to the Varden, everyone was deeply interested in its fate. We had thought the dragons were exterminated. The dwarves were solely concerned with making sure that the future Rider would be an ally—though some of them were opposed to having a new Rider at all—while the elves and Varden had a more personal stake in the matter. The reason was simple enough: throughout history all the Riders have been either elven or human, with the majority being elven. There has never been a dwarf Rider.

“Because of Galbatorix’s betrayals, the elves were reluctant to let any of the Varden handle the egg for fear that the dragon inside would hatch for a human with similar instabilities. It was a challenging situation, as both sides wanted the Rider for their own. The dwarves only aggravated the problem by arguing obstinately with both the elves and us whenever they had the chance. Tensions escalated, and before long, threats were made that were later regretted. It was then

that Brom suggested a compromise that allowed all sides to save face.

"He proposed that the egg be ferried between the Varden and the elves every year. At each place children would parade past it, and then the bearers of the egg would wait to see if the dragon would hatch. If it didn't, they would leave and return to the other group. But if the dragon *did* hatch, the new Rider's training would be undertaken immediately. For the first year or so he or she would be instructed here, by Brom. Then the Rider would be taken to the elves, who would finish the education.

"The elves reluctantly accepted this plan … with the stipulation that if Brom were to die before the dragon hatched, they would be free to train the new Rider without interference. The agreement was slanted in their favor—we both knew that the dragon would likely choose an elf—but it provided a desperately needed semblance of equality."

Ajihad paused, his rich eyes somber. Shadows bit into his face under his cheekbones, making them jut out. "It was hoped that this new Rider would bring our two races closer together. We waited for well over a decade, but the egg never hatched. The matter passed from our minds, and we rarely thought about it except to lament the egg's inactivity.

"Then last year we suffered a terrible loss. Arya and the egg disappeared on her return from Tronjheim to the elven city Osilon. The elves were the first to discover she was missing. They found her steed and guards slain in Du Weldenvarden and a group of slaughtered Urgals nearby. But neither Arya nor the egg was there. When this news reached me, I feared that Urgals had both of them and would soon learn the location of Farthen Dûr and the elves' capital, Ellesméra, where their queen, Islanzadí, lives. Now I understand they were working for the Empire, which is far worse.

"We won't know exactly what occurred during that attack until Arya wakes, but I have deduced a few details from what you've said." Ajihad's vest rustled as he leaned his elbows on the desk. "The attack must have been swift and decisive, else Arya would have escaped. Without any warning, and deprived of a place to hide, she could have done only one thing—used magic to transport the egg elsewhere."

"She can use magic?" asked Eragon. Arya had mentioned that she had been given a drug to suppress her power; he wanted to confirm that she meant magic. He wondered if she could teach him more words of the ancient language.

"It was one of the reasons why she was chosen to guard the egg. Anyway, Arya couldn't have returned it to us—she was too far away—and the elves' realm is warded by arcane barriers that prevent anything from entering their borders through magical means. She must have thought of Brom and, in desperation, sent the egg toward

Carvahall. Without time to prepare, I'm not surprised she missed by the margin she did. The Twins tell me it is an imprecise art."

"Why was she closer to Palancar Valley than the Varden?" asked Eragon. "Where do the elves really live? Where is this … Ellesméra?"

Ajihad's keen gaze bored into Eragon as he considered the question. "I don't tell you this lightly, for the elves guard the knowledge jealously. But you should know, and I do this as a display of trust. Their cities lie far to the north, in the deepest reaches of the endless forest Du Weldenvarden. Not since the Riders' time has anyone, dwarf or human, been elf-friend enough to walk in their leafy halls. I do not even know how to find Ellesméra. As for Osilon … based on where Arya disappeared, I suspect it is near Du Weldenvarden's western edge, toward Carvahall. You must have many other questions, but bear with me and keep them until I have finished."

He gathered his memories, then spoke at a quickened pace. "When Arya disappeared, the elves withdrew their support from the Varden. Queen Islanzadí was especially enraged and refused any further contact with us. As a result, even though I received Brom's message, the elves are still ignorant of you and Saphira.… Without their supplies to sustain my troops, we have fared badly these past months in skirmishes with the Empire.

"With Arya's return and your arrival, I expect the queen's hostility will abate. The fact that you rescued Arya will greatly help our case with her. Your training, however, is going to present a problem for both Varden and elves. Brom obviously had a chance to teach you, but we need to know how thorough he was. For that reason, you'll have to be tested to determine the extent of your abilities. Also, the elves will expect you to finish your training with them, though I'm not sure if there's time for that."

"Why not?" asked Eragon.

"For several reasons. Chief among them, the tidings you brought about the Urgals," said Ajihad, his eyes straying to Saphira. "You see, Eragon, the Varden are in an extremely delicate position. On one hand, we have to comply with the elves' wishes if we want to keep them as allies. At the same time, we cannot anger the dwarves if we wish to lodge in Tronjheim."

"Aren't the dwarves part of the Varden?" asked Eragon.

Ajihad hesitated. "In a sense, yes. They allow us to live here and provide assistance in our struggle against the Empire, but they are loyal only to their king. I have no power over them except for what Hrothgar gives me, and even he often has trouble with the dwarf clans. The thirteen clans are subservient to Hrothgar, but each clan chief wields enormous power; they choose the new dwarf king when the old one dies. Hrothgar is sympathetic to our cause, but many of

the chiefs aren't. He can't afford to anger them unnecessarily or he'll lose the support of his people, so his actions on our behalf have been severely circumscribed."

"These clan chiefs," said Eragon, "are they against me as well?"

"Even more so, I'm afraid," said Ajihad wearily. "There has long been enmity between dwarves and dragons—before the elves came and made peace, dragons made a regular habit of eating the dwarves' flocks and stealing their gold—and the dwarves are slow to forget past wrongs. Indeed, they never fully accepted the Riders or allowed them to police their kingdom. Galbatorix's rise to power has only served to convince many of them that it would be better never to deal with Riders or dragons ever again." He directed his last words at Saphira.

Eragon said slowly, "Why doesn't Galbatorix know where Farthen Dûr and Ellesméra are? Surely he was told of them when he was instructed by the Riders."

"Told of them, yes—shown where they are, no. It's one thing to know that Farthen Dûr lies within these mountains, quite another to find it. Galbatorix hadn't been taken to either place before his dragon was killed. After that, of course, the Riders didn't trust him. He tried to force the information out of several Riders during his rebellion, but they chose to die rather than reveal it to him. As for the dwarves, he's never managed to capture one alive, though it's only a matter of time."

"Then why doesn't he just take an army and march through Du Weldenvarden until he finds Ellesméra?" asked Eragon.

"Because the elves still have enough power to resist him," said Ajihad. "He doesn't dare test his strength against theirs, at least not yet. But his cursed sorcery grows stronger each year. With another Rider at his side, he would be unstoppable. He keeps trying to get one of his two eggs to hatch, but so far he's been unsuccessful."

Eragon was puzzled. "How can his power be increasing? The strength of his body limits his abilities—it can't build itself up forever."

"We don't know," said Ajihad, shrugging his broad shoulders, "and neither do the elves. We can only hope that someday he will be destroyed by one of his own spells." He reached inside his vest and somberly pulled out a battered piece of parchment. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, placing it on the desk.

Eragon bent forward and examined it. Lines of black script, written in an alien language, were inked across the page. Large sections of the writing had been destroyed by blots of blood. One edge of the parchment was charred. He shook his head. "No, I don't."

"It was taken from the leader of the Urgal host we destroyed last night. It cost us twelve men to do so—they sacrificed themselves so

that you might escape safely. The writing is the king's invention, a script he uses to communicate with his servants. It took me a while, but I was able to devise its meaning, at least where it's legible. It reads:

> *… gatekeeper at Ithrö Zhâda is to let this bearer and his minions pass. They are to be bunked with the others of their kind and by … but only if the two factions refrain from fighting. Command will be given under Tarok, under Gashz, under Durza, under Ushnark the Mighty.*

"Ushnark is Galbatorix. It means 'father' in the Urgal tongue, an affectation that pleases him.

> *Find what they are suitable for and … The footmen and … are to be kept separate. No weapons are to be distributed until … for marching.*

"Nothing else can be read past there, except for a few vague words," said Ajihad.

"Where's Ithrö Zhâda? I've never heard of it."

"Nor have I," confirmed Ajihad, "which makes me suspect that Galbatorix has renamed an existing place for his own purposes. After deciphering this, I asked myself what hundreds of Urgals were doing by the Beor Mountains where you first saw them and where they were going. The parchment mentions 'others of their kind,' so I assume there are even more Urgals at their destination. There's only one reason for the king to gather such a force—to forge a bastard army of humans and monsters to destroy us.

"For now, there is nothing to do but wait and watch. Without further information we cannot find this Ithrö Zhâda. Still, Farthen Dûr has not yet been discovered, so there is hope. The only Urgals to have seen it died last night."

"How did you know we were coming?" asked Eragon. "One of the Twins was waiting for us, and there was an ambush in place for the Kull." He was aware of Saphira listening intently. Though she kept her own counsel, he knew she would have things to say later.

"We have sentinels placed at the entrance of the valley you traveled through—on either side of the Beartooth River. They sent a dove to warn us," explained Ajihad.

Eragon wondered if it was the same bird Saphira had tried to eat. "When the egg and Arya disappeared, did you tell Brom? He said that he hadn't heard anything from the Varden."

"We tried to alert him," said Ajihad, "but I suspect our men were intercepted and killed by the Empire. Why else would the Ra'zac have gone to Carvahall? After that, Brom was traveling with you, and it was

impossible to get word to him. I was relieved when he contacted me via messenger from Teirm. It didn't surprise me that he went to Jeod; they were old friends. And Jeod could easily send us a message because he smuggles supplies to us through Surda.

"All of this has raised serious questions. How did the Empire know where to ambush Arya and, later, our messengers to Carvahall? How has Galbatorix learned which merchants help the Varden? Jeod's business has been virtually destroyed since you left him, as have those of other merchants who support us. Every time one of their ships sets sail, it disappears. The dwarves cannot give us everything we need, so the Varden are in desperate need of supplies. I'm afraid that we have a traitor, or traitors, in our midst, despite our efforts to examine people's minds for deceit."

Eragon sank deep in thought, pondering what he had learned. Ajihad waited calmly for him to speak, undisturbed by the silence. For the first time since finding Saphira's egg, Eragon felt that he understood what was going on around him. At last he knew where Saphira came from and what might lie in his future. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, what is expected of me in Tronjheim? You and the elves have plans for me, but what if I don't like them?" A hard note crept into his voice. "I'll fight when needed, revel when there's occasion, mourn when there is grief, and die if my time comes … but I won't let anyone use me against my will." He paused to let the words sink in. "The Riders of old were arbiters of justice above and beyond the leaders of their time. I don't claim that position—I doubt people would accept such oversight when they've been free of it all their lives, especially from one as young as me. But I *do* have power, and I will wield it as I see fit. What I want to know is how *you* plan to use me. Then I will decide whether to agree to it."

Ajihad looked at him wryly. "If you were anyone else and were before another leader, you would likely have been killed for that insolent speech. What makes you think I will expose my plans just because you demand it?" Eragon flushed but did not lower his gaze. "Still, you are right. Your position gives you the privilege to say such things. You cannot escape the politics of your situation—you *will* be influenced, one way or another. I don't want to see you become a pawn of any one group or purpose any more than you do. You must retain your freedom, for in it lies your true power: the ability to make choices independent of any leader or king. My own authority over you will be limited, but I believe it's for the best. The difficulty lies in making sure that those with power include you in their deliberations.

"Also, despite your protests, the people here have certain

expectations of you. They are going to bring you their problems, no matter how petty, and demand that you solve them." Ajihad leaned forward, his voice deadly serious. "There will be cases where someone's future will rest in your hands … with a word you can send them careening into happiness or misery. Young women will seek your opinion on whom they should marry—many will pursue you as a husband—and old men will ask which of their children should receive an inheritance. You *must* be kind and wise with them all, for they put their trust in you. Don't speak flippantly or without thought, because your words will have impact far beyond what you intend."

Ajihad leaned back, his eyes hooded. "The burden of leadership is being responsible for the well-being of the people in your charge. I have dealt with it from the day I was chosen to head the Varden, and now you must as well. Be careful. I won't tolerate injustice under my command. Don't worry about your youth and inexperience; they will pass soon enough."

Eragon was uncomfortable with the idea of people asking him for advice. "But you still haven't said what I'm to do here."

"For now, nothing. You covered over a hundred and thirty leagues in eight days, a feat to be proud of. I'm sure that you'll appreciate rest. When you've recovered, we will test your competency in arms and magic. After that—well, I will explain your options, and then you'll have to decide your course."

"And what about Murtagh?" asked Eragon bitingly.

Ajihad's face darkened. He reached beneath his desk and lifted up Zar'roc. The sword's polished sheath gleamed in the light. Ajihad slid his hand over it, lingering on the etched sigil. "He will stay here until he allows the Twins into his mind."

"You can't imprison him," argued Eragon. "He's committed no crime!"

"We can't give him his freedom without being sure that he won't turn against us. Innocent or not, he's potentially as dangerous to us as his father was," said Ajihad with a hint of sadness.

Eragon realized that Ajihad would not be convinced otherwise, and his concern *was* valid. "How were you able to recognize his voice?"

"I met his father once," said Ajihad shortly. He tapped Zar'roc's hilt. "I wish Brom had told me he had taken Morzan's sword. I suggest that you don't carry it within Farthen Dûr. Many here remember Morzan's time with hate, especially the dwarves."

"I'll remember that," promised Eragon.

Ajihad handed Zar'roc to him. "That reminds me, I have Brom's ring, which he sent as confirmation of his identity. I was keeping it for when he returned to Tronjheim. Now that he's dead, I suppose it belongs to you, and I think he would have wanted you to have it." He

opened a desk drawer and took the ring from it.

Eragon accepted it with reverence. The symbol cut into the face of the sapphire was identical to the tattoo on Arya's shoulder. He fit the ring onto his index finger, admiring how it caught the light. "I … I am honored," he said.

Ajihad nodded gravely, then pushed back his chair and stood. He faced Saphira and spoke to her, his voice swelling in power. "Do not think that I have forgotten you, O mighty dragon. I have said these things as much for your benefit as for Eragon's. It is even more important that you know them, for to you falls the task of guarding him in these dangerous times. Do not underestimate your might nor falter at his side, because without you he will surely fail."

Saphira lowered her head until their eyes were level and stared at him through slitted black pupils. They examined each other silently, neither of them blinking. Ajihad was the first to move. He lowered his eyes and said softly, "It is indeed a privilege to meet you."

He'll do, said Saphira respectfully. She swung her head to face Eragon. *Tell him that I am impressed both with Tronjheim and with him. The Empire is right to fear him. Let him know, however, that if he had decided to kill you, I would have destroyed Tronjheim and torn him apart with my teeth.*

Eragon hesitated, surprised by the venom in her voice, then relayed the message. Ajihad looked at her seriously. "I would expect nothing less from one so noble—but I doubt you could have gotten past the Twins."

Saphira snorted with derision. *Bah!*

Knowing what she meant, Eragon said, "Then they must be much stronger than they appear. I think they would be sorely dismayed if they ever faced a dragon's wrath. The two of them might be able to defeat me, but never Saphira. You should know, a Rider's dragon strengthens his magic beyond what a normal magician might have. Brom was always weaker than me because of that. I think that in the absence of Riders, the Twins have overestimated their power."

Ajihad looked troubled. "Brom was considered one of our strongest spell weavers. Only the elves surpassed him. If what you say is true, we will have to reconsider a great many things." He bowed to Saphira. "As it is, I am glad it wasn't necessary to harm either of you." Saphira dipped her head in return.

Ajihad straightened with a lordly air and called, "Orik!" The dwarf hurried into the room and stood before the desk, crossing his arms. Ajihad frowned at him, irritated. "You've caused me a great deal of trouble, Orik. I've had to listen to one of the Twins complain all morning about your insubordination. They won't let it rest until you are punished. Unfortunately they're right. It's a serious matter that

cannot be ignored. An accounting is due."

Orik's eyes flicked toward Eragon, but his face betrayed no emotion. He spoke quickly in rough tones. "The Kull were almost around Kóstha-mérna. They were shooting arrows at the dragon, Eragon, and Murtagh, but the Twins did nothing to stop it. Like … sheilven, they refused to open the gates even though we could see Eragon shouting the opening phrase on the other side of the waterfall. And they refused to take action when Eragon did not rise from the water. Perhaps I did wrong, but I couldn't let a Rider die."

"I wasn't strong enough to get out of the water myself," offered Eragon. "I would have drowned if he hadn't pulled me out."

Ajihad glanced at him, then asked Orik seriously, "And later, why did you oppose them?"

Orik raised his chin defiantly. "It wasn't right for them to force their way into Murtagh's mind. But I wouldn't have stopped them if I'd known who he was."

"No, you did the right thing, though it would be simpler if you hadn't. It isn't our place to force our way into people's minds, no matter who they are." Ajihad fingered his dense beard. "Your actions were honorable, but you did defy a direct order from your commander. The penalty for that has always been death." Orik's back stiffened.

"You can't kill him for that! He was only helping me," cried Eragon.

"It isn't your place to interfere," said Ajihad sternly. "Orik broke the law and must suffer the consequences." Eragon started to argue again, but Ajihad stopped him with a raised hand. "But you are right. The sentence will be mitigated because of the circumstances. As of now, Orik, you are removed from active service and forbidden to engage in any military activities under my command. Do you understand?"

Orik's face darkened, but then he only looked confused. He nodded sharply. "Yes."

"Furthermore, in the absence of your regular duties, I appoint you Eragon and Saphira's guide for the duration of their stay. You are to make sure they receive every comfort and amenity we have to offer. Saphira will stay above Isidar Mithrim. Eragon may have quarters wherever he wants. When he recovers from his trip, take him to the training fields. They're expecting him," said Ajihad, a twinkle of amusement in his eye.

Orik bowed low. "I understand."

"Very well, you all may go. Send in the Twins as you leave."

Eragon bowed and began to leave, then asked, "Where can I find Arya? I would like to see her."

"No one is allowed to visit her. You will have to wait until she comes to you." Ajihad looked down at his desk in a clear dismissal.

Eragon stretched in the hall; he was stiff from sitting so long. Behind him, the Twins entered Ajihad's study and closed the door. Eragon looked at Orik. "I'm sorry that you're in trouble because of me," he apologized.

"Don't bother yourself," grunted Orik, tugging on his beard. "Ajihad gave me what I wanted."

Even Saphira was startled by the statement. "What do you mean?" said Eragon. "You can't train or fight, and you're stuck guarding me. How can that be what you wanted?"

The dwarf eyed him quietly. "Ajihad is a good leader. He understands how to keep the law yet remain just. I have been punished by his command, but I'm also one of Hrothgar's subjects. Under his rule, I'm still free to do what I wish."

Eragon realized it would be unwise to forget Orik's dual loyalty and the split nature of power within Tronjheim. "Ajihad just placed you in a powerful position, didn't he?"

Orik chuckled deeply. "That he did, and in such a way the Twins can't complain about it. This'll irritate them for sure. Ajihad's a tricky one, he is. Come, lad, I'm sure you're hungry. And we have to get your dragon settled in."

Saphira hissed. Eragon said, "Her name is Saphira."

Orik made a small bow to her. "My apologies, I'll be sure to remember that." He took an orange lamp from the wall and led them down the hallway.

"Can others in Farthen Dûr use magic?" asked Eragon, struggling to keep up with the dwarf's brisk pace. He cradled Zar'roc carefully, concealing the symbol on the sheath with his arm.

"Few enough," said Orik with a swift shrug under his mail. "And the ones we have can't do much more than heal bruises. They've all had to tend to Arya because of the strength needed to heal her."

"Except for the Twins."

"Oeí," grumbled Orik. "She wouldn't want their help anyway; their arts are not for healing. Their talents lie in scheming and plotting for power—to everyone else's detriment. Deynor, Ajihad's predecessor, allowed them to join the Varden because he needed their support … you can't oppose the Empire without spellcasters who can hold their own on the field of battle. They're a nasty pair, but they do have their uses."

They entered one of the four main tunnels that divided Tronjheim.

Clusters of dwarves and humans strolled through it, voices echoing loudly off the polished floor. The conversations stopped abruptly as they saw Saphira; scores of eyes fixed on her. Orik ignored the spectators and turned left, heading toward one of Tronjheim's distant gates. "Where are we going?" asked Eragon.

"Out of these halls so Saphira can fly to the dragonhold above Isidar Mithrim, the Star Rose. The dragonhold doesn't have a roof—Tronjheim's peak is open to the sky, like that of Farthen Dûr—so she, that is, you, Saphira, will be able to glide straight down into the hold. It is where the Riders used to stay when they visited Tronjheim."

"Won't it be cold and damp without a roof?" asked Eragon.

"Nay." Orik shook his head. "Farthen Dûr protects us from the elements. Neither rain nor snow intrude here. Besides, the hold's walls are lined with marble caves for dragons. They provide all the shelter necessary. All you need fear are the icicles; when they fall they've been known to cleave a horse in two."

I will be fine, assured Saphira. *A marble cave is safer than any of the other places we've stayed.*

Perhaps … Do you think Murtagh will be all right?

Ajihad strikes me as an honorable man. Unless Murtagh tries to escape, I doubt he will be harmed.

Eragon crossed his arms, unwilling to talk further. He was dazed by the change in circumstances from the day before. Their mad race from Gil'ead was finally over, but his body expected to continue running and riding. "Where are our horses?"

"In the stables by the gate. We can visit them before leaving Tronjheim."

They exited Tronjheim through the same gate they had entered. The gold griffins gleamed with colored highlights garnered from scores of lanterns. The sun had moved during Eragon's talk with Ajihad—light no longer entered Farthen Dûr through the crater opening. Without those moted rays, the inside of the hollow mountain was velvety black. The only illumination came from Tronjheim, which sparkled brilliantly in the gloom. The city-mountain's radiance was enough to brighten the ground hundreds of feet away.

Orik pointed at Tronjheim's white pinnacle. "Fresh meat and pure mountain water await you up there," he told Saphira. "You may stay in any of the caves. Once you make your choice, bedding will be laid down in it and then no one will disturb you."

"I thought we were going to go together. I don't want to be separated," protested Eragon.

Orik turned to him. "Rider Eragon, I will do everything to accommodate you, but it would be best if Saphira waits in the

dragonhold while you eat. The tunnels to the banquet halls aren't large enough for her to accompany us."

"Why can't you just bring me food in the hold?"

"Because," said Orik with a guarded expression, "the food is prepared down here, and it is a long way to the top. If you wish, a servant could be sent up to the hold with a meal for you. It will take some time, but you could eat with Saphira then."

He actually means it, Eragon thought, astonished that they would do so much for him. But the way Orik said it made him wonder if the dwarf was testing him somehow.

I'm weary, said Saphira. *And this dragonhold sounds to my liking. Go, have your meal, then come to me. It will be soothing to rest together without fear of wild animals or soldiers. We have suffered the hardships of the trail too long.*

Eragon looked at her thoughtfully, then said to Orik, "I'll eat down here." The dwarf smiled, seeming satisfied. Eragon unstrapped Saphira's saddle so she could lie down without discomfort. *Would you take Zar'roc with you?*

Yes, she said, gathering up the sword and saddle with her claws. *But keep your bow. We must trust these people, though not to the point of foolishness.*

I know, he said, disquieted.

With an explosive leap Saphira swept off the ground and into the still air. The steady whoosh of her wings was the only sound in the darkness. As she disappeared over the rim of Tronjheim's peak, Orik let out a long breath. "Ah boy, you have been blessed indeed. I find a sudden longing in my heart for open skies and soaring cliffs and the thrill of hunting like a hawk. Still, my feet are better on the ground—preferably under it."

He clapped his hands loudly. "I neglect my duties as host. I know you've not dined since that pitiful dinner the Twins saw fit to give you, so come, let's find the cooks and beg meat and bread from them!"

Eragon followed the dwarf back into Tronjheim and through a labyrinth of corridors until they came to a long room filled with rows of stone tables only high enough for dwarves. Fires blazed in soapstone ovens behind a long counter.

Orik spoke words in an unfamiliar language to a stout ruddy-faced dwarf, who promptly handed them stone platters piled with steaming mushrooms and fish. Then Orik took Eragon up several flights of stairs and into a small alcove carved out of Tronjheim's outer wall, where they sat cross-legged. Eragon wordlessly reached for his food.

When their platters were empty, Orik sighed with contentment and pulled out a long-stemmed pipe. He lit it, saying, "A worthy repast, though it needed a good draught of mead to wash it down properly."

Eragon surveyed the ground below. “Do you farm in Farthen Dûr?”

“No, there’s only enough sunlight for moss, mushrooms, and mold. Tronjheim cannot survive without supplies from the surrounding valleys, which is one reason why many of us choose to live elsewhere in the Beor Mountains.”

“Then there are other dwarf cities?”

“Not as many as we would like. And Tronjheim is the greatest of them.” Leaning on an elbow, Orik took a deep pull on his pipe. “You have only seen the lower levels, so it hasn’t been apparent, but most of Tronjheim is deserted. The farther up you go, the emptier it gets. Entire floors have remained untouched for centuries. Most dwarves prefer to dwell under Tronjheim and Farthen Dûr in the caverns and passageways that riddle the rock. Through the centuries we have tunneled extensively under the Beor Mountains. It is possible to walk from one end of the mountain range to the other without ever setting foot on the surface.”

“It seems like a waste to have all that unused space in Tronjheim,” commented Eragon.

Orik nodded. “Some have argued for abandoning this place because of its drain on our resources, but Tronjheim does perform one invaluable task.”

“What’s that?”

“In times of misfortune it can house our entire nation. There have been only three instances in our history when we have been forced to that extreme, but each time it has saved us from certain and utter destruction. That is why we always keep it garrisoned, ready for use.”

“I’ve never seen anything as magnificent,” admitted Eragon.

Orik smiled around his pipe. “I’m glad you find it so. It took generations to build Tronjheim—and our lives are much longer than those of men. Unfortunately, because of the cursed Empire, few outsiders are allowed to see its glory.”

“How many Varden are here?”

“Dwarves or humans?”

“Humans—I want to know how many have fled the Empire.”

Orik exhaled a long puff of smoke that coiled lazily around his head. “There are about four thousand of your kin here. But that’s a poor indicator of what you want to know. Only people who wish to fight come here. The rest of them are under King Orrin’s protection in Surda.”

So few? thought Eragon with a sinking feeling. The royal army alone numbered nearly sixteen thousand when it was fully marshaled, not counting the Urgals. “Why doesn’t Orrin fight the Empire himself?” he asked.

“If he were to show open hostility,” said Orik, “Galbatorix would

crush him. As it is, Galbatorix withholds that destruction because he considers Surda a minor threat, which is a mistake. It's through Orrin's assistance that the Varden have most of their weapons and supplies. Without him, there would be no resisting the Empire.

"Don't despair over the number of humans in Tronjheim. There are many dwarves here—many more than you have seen—and all will fight when the time comes. Orrin has also promised us troops for when we battle Galbatorix. The elves pledged their help as well."

Eragon absently touched Saphira's mind and found her busy eating a bloody haunch with gusto. He noticed once more the hammer and stars engraved on Orik's helm. "What does that mean? I saw it on the floor in Tronjheim."

Orik lifted the iron-bound cap off his head and brushed a rough finger over the engraving. "It is the symbol of my clan. We are the Ingeitum, metalworkers and master smiths. The hammer and stars are inlaid into Tronjheim's floor because it was the personal crest of Korgan, our founder. One clan to rule, with twelve surrounding. King Hrothgar is Dûrgrimst Ingeitum as well and has brought my house much glory, much honor."

When they returned the platters to the cook, they passed a dwarf in the hall. He stopped before Eragon, bowed, and said respectfully, "Argetlam."

The dwarf left Eragon fumbling for an answer, flushed with unease, yet also strangely pleased with the gesture. No one had bowed to him before. "What did he say?" he asked, leaning closer to Orik.

Orik shrugged, embarrassed. "It's an elven word that was used to refer to the Riders. It means 'silver hand.' " Eragon glanced at his gloved hand, thinking of the gedwëy ignasia that whitened his palm. "Do you wish to return to Saphira?"

"Is there somewhere I could bathe first? I haven't been able to wash off the grime of the road for a long time. Also, my shirt is bloodstained and torn, and it stinks. I'd like to replace it, but I don't have any money to buy a new one. Is there a way I could work for one?"

"Do you seek to insult Hrothgar's hospitality, Eragon?" demanded Orik. "As long as you are in Tronjheim, you won't have to buy a thing. You'll pay for it in other ways—Ajihad and Hrothgar will see to that. Come. I'll show you where to wash, then fetch you a shirt."

He took Eragon down a long staircase until they were well below Tronjheim. The corridors were tunnels now—which cramped Eragon because they were only five feet high—and all the lanterns were red. "So the light doesn't blind you when you leave or enter a dark cavern," explained Orik.

They entered a bare room with a small door on the far side. Orik

pointed. “The pools are through there, along with brushes and soap. Leave your clothes here. I’ll have new ones waiting when you get out.”

Eragon thanked him and started to undress. It felt oppressive being alone underground, especially with the low rock ceiling. He stripped quickly and, cold, hurried through the door, into total darkness. He inched forward until his foot touched warm water, then eased himself into it.

The pool was mildly salty, but soothing and calm. For a moment he was afraid of drifting away from the door, into deeper water, but as he waded forward, he discovered the water reached only to his waist. He groped over a slippery wall until he found the soap and brushes, then scrubbed himself. Afterward he floated with his eyes closed, enjoying the warmth.

When he emerged, dripping, into the lighted room, he found a towel, a fine linen shirt, and a pair of breeches. The clothes fit him reasonably well. Satisfied, he went out into the tunnel.

Orik was waiting for him, pipe in hand. They climbed the stairs back up into Tronjheim, then exited the city-mountain. Eragon gazed at Tronjheim’s peak and called Saphira with his mind. As she flew down from the dragonhold, he asked, “How do you communicate with people at the top of Tronjheim?”

Orik chuckled. “That’s a problem we solved long ago. You didn’t notice, but behind the open arches that line each level is a single, unbroken staircase that spirals around the wall of Tronjheim’s central chamber. The stairs climb all the way to the dragonhold above Isidar Mithrim. We call it Vol Turin, The Endless Staircase. Running up or down it isn’t swift enough for an emergency, nor convenient enough for casual use. Instead, we use flashing lanterns to convey messages. There is another way too, though it is seldom used. When Vol Turin was constructed, a polished trough was cut next to it. The trough acts as a giant slide as high as a mountain.”

Eragon’s lips twitched with a smile. “Is it dangerous?”

“Do not think of trying it. The slide was built for dwarves and is too narrow for a man. If you slipped out of it, you could be thrown onto the stairs and against the arches, perhaps even into empty space.”

Saphira landed a spear’s throw away, her scales rustling dryly. As she greeted Eragon, humans and dwarves trickled out of Tronjheim, gathering around her with murmurs of interest. Eragon regarded the growing crowd uneasily. “You’d better go,” said Orik, pushing him forward. “Meet me by this gate tomorrow morning. I’ll be waiting.”

Eragon balked. “How will I know when it’s morning?”

“I’ll have someone wake you. Now go!” Without further protest, Eragon slipped through the jostling group that surrounded Saphira

and jumped onto her back.

Before she could take off, an old woman stepped forward and grasped Eragon's foot with a fierce grip. He tried to pull away, but her hand was like an iron talon around his ankle—he could not break her tenacious hold. The burning gray eyes she fixed on him were surrounded by a lifetime's worth of wrinkles—the skin was folded in long creases down her sunken cheeks. A tattered bundle rested in the crook of her left arm.

Frightened, Eragon asked, "What do you want?"

The woman tilted her arm, and a cloth fell from the bundle, revealing a baby's face. Hoarse and desperate, she said, "The child has no parents—there is no one to care for her but me, and I am weak. Bless her with your power, Argetlam. Bless her for luck!"

Eragon looked to Orik for help, but the dwarf only watched with a guarded expression. The small crowd fell silent, waiting for his response. The woman's eyes were still fastened on him. "Bless her, Argetlam, bless her," she insisted.

Eragon had never blessed anyone. It was not something done lightly in Alagaësia, as a blessing could easily go awry and prove to be more curse than boon—especially if it was spoken with ill intent or lack of conviction. *Do I dare take that responsibility?* he wondered.

"Bless her, Argetlam, bless her."

Suddenly decided, he searched for a phrase or expression to use. Nothing came to mind until, inspired, he thought of the ancient language. This would be a true blessing, spoken with words of power, by one of power.

He bent down and tugged the glove off his right hand. Laying his palm on the babe's brow, he intoned, "Atra guliä un ilian tauthr ono un atra ono waíse skölir fra rauthr." The words left him unexpectedly weak, as if he had used magic. He slowly pulled the glove back on and said to the woman, "That is all I can do for her. If any words have the power to forestall tragedy, it will be those."

"Thank you, Argetlam," she whispered, bowing slightly. She started to cover the baby again, but Saphira snorted and twisted until her head loomed over the child. The woman grew rigid; her breath caught in her chest. Saphira lowered her snout and brushed the baby between the eyes with the tip of her nose, then smoothly lifted away.

A gasp ran through the crowd, for on the child's forehead, where Saphira had touched her, was a star-shaped patch of skin as white and silvery as Eragon's gedwëy ignasia. The woman stared at Saphira with a feverish gaze, wordless thanks in her eyes.

Immediately Saphira took flight, battering the awestruck spectators with the wind from her powerful wing strokes. As the ground dwindled away, Eragon took a deep breath and hugged her neck

tightly. *What did you do?* he asked softly.

I gave her hope. And you gave her a future.

Loneliness suddenly flowered within Eragon, despite Saphira's presence. Their surroundings were so foreign—it struck him for the first time exactly how far he was from home. A destroyed home, but still where his heart lay. *What have I become, Saphira?* he asked. *I'm only in the first year of manhood, yet I've consulted with the leader of the Varden, am pursued by Galbatorix, and have traveled with Morzan's son—and now blessings are sought from me! What wisdom can I give people that they haven't already learned? What feats can I achieve that an army couldn't do better? It's insanity! I should be back in Carvahall with Roran*.

Saphira took a long time to answer, but her words were gentle when they came. *A hatchling, that is what you are. A hatchling struggling into the world. I may be younger than you in years, but I am ancient in my thoughts. Do not worry about these things. Find peace in where and what you are. People often know what must be done. All you need do is show them the way—that is wisdom. As for feats, no army could have given the blessing you did*.

But it was nothing, he protested. *A trifle*.

Nay, it wasn't. What you saw was the beginning of another story, another legend. Do you think that child will ever be content to be a tavern keeper or a farmer when her brow is dragon-marked and your words hang over her? You underestimate our power and that of fate.

Eragon bowed his head. *It's overwhelming. I feel as if I am living in an illusion, a dream where all things are possible. Amazing things do happen, I know, but always to someone else, always in some far-off place and time. But I found your egg, was tutored by a Rider, and dueled a Shade—those can't be the actions of the farm boy I am, or was. Something is changing me*.

It is your wyrd that shapes you, said Saphira. *Every age needs an icon—perhaps that lot has fallen to you. Farm boys are not named for the first Rider without cause. Your namesake was the beginning, and now you are the continuation. Or the end*.

Ach, said Eragon, shaking his head. *It's like speaking in riddles.… But if all is foreordained, do our choices mean anything? Or must we just learn to accept our fate?*

Saphira said firmly, *Eragon, I chose you from within my egg. You have been given a chance most would die for. Are you unhappy with that? Clear your mind of such thoughts. They cannot be answered and will make you no happier*.

True, he said glumly. *All the same, they continue to bounce around within my skull*.

Things have been … unsettled … ever since Brom died. It has made me uneasy, acknowledged Saphira, which surprised him because she

rarely seemed perturbed. They were above Tronjheim now. Eragon looked down through the opening in its peak and saw the floor of the dragonhold: Isidar Mithrim, the great star sapphire. He knew that beneath it was nothing but Tronjheim's great central chamber. Saphira descended to the dragonhold on silent wings. She slipped over its rim and dropped to Isidar Mithrim, landing with the sharp clack of claws.

Won't you scratch it? asked Eragon.

I think not. It's no ordinary gem. Eragon slid off her back and slowly turned in a circle, absorbing the unusual sight. They were in a round roofless room sixty feet high and sixty feet across. The walls were lined with the dark openings of caves, which differed in size from grottoes no larger than a man to a gaping cavern larger than a house. Shiny rungs were set into the marble walls so that people could reach the highest caves. An enormous archway led out of the dragonhold.

Eragon examined the great gem under his feet and impulsively lay down on it. He pressed his cheek against the cool sapphire, trying to see through it. Distorted lines and wavering spots of color glimmered through the stone, but its thickness made it impossible to discern anything clearly on the floor of the chamber a mile below them.

Will I have to sleep apart from you?

Saphira shook her enormous head. *No, there is a bed for you in my cave. Come see*. She turned and, without opening her wings, jumped twenty feet into the air, landing in a medium-sized cave. He clambered up after her.

The cave was dark brown on the inside and deeper than he had expected. The roughly chiseled walls gave the impression of a natural formation. Near the far wall was a thick cushion large enough for Saphira to curl up on. Beside it was a bed built into the side of the wall. The cave was lit by a single red lantern equipped with a shutter so its glow could be muted.

I like this, said Eragon. *It feels safe*.

Yes. Saphira curled up on the cushion, watching him. With a sigh he sank onto the mattress, weariness seeping through him.

Saphira, you haven't said much while we've been here. What do you think of Tronjheim and Ajihad?

We shall see.… It seems, Eragon, that we are embroiled in a new type of warfare here. Swords and claws are useless, but words and alliances may have the same effect. The Twins dislike us—we should be on our guard for any duplicities they might attempt. Not many of the dwarves trust us. The elves didn't want a human Rider, so there will be opposition from them as well. The best thing we can do is identify those in power and befriend them. And quickly, too.

Do you think it's possible to remain independent of the different leaders?

She shuffled her wings into a more comfortable position. *Ajihad*

supports our freedom, but we may be unable to survive without pledging our loyalty to one group or another. We'll soon know either way.

The blankets were bunched underneath Eragon when he woke, but he was still warm. Saphira was asleep on her cushion, her breath coming in steady gusts.

For the first time since entering Farthen Dûr, Eragon felt secure and hopeful. He was warm and fed and had been able to sleep as long as he liked. Tension unknotted inside him—tension that had been accumulating since Brom's death and, even before, since leaving Palancar Valley.

I don't have to be afraid anymore. But what about Murtagh? No matter the Varden's hospitality, Eragon could not accept it in good conscience, knowing that—intentionally or not—he had led Murtagh to his imprisonment. Somehow the situation had to be resolved.

His gaze roamed the cave's rough ceiling as he thought of Arya. Chiding himself for daydreaming, he tilted his head and looked out at the dragonhold. A large cat sat on the edge of the cave, licking a paw. It glanced at him, and he saw a flash of slanted red eyes.

Solembum? he asked incredulously.

Obviously. The werecat shook his rough mane and yawned languorously, displaying his long fangs. He stretched, then jumped out of the cave, landing with a solid thump on Isidar Mithrim, twenty feet below. *Coming?*

Eragon looked at Saphira. She was awake now, watching him motionlessly. *Go. I will be fine*, she murmured. Solembum was waiting for him under the arch that led to the rest of Tronjheim.

The moment Eragon's feet touched Isidar Mithrim, the werecat turned with a flick of his paws and disappeared through the arch. Eragon chased after him, rubbing the sleep from his face. He stepped through the archway and found himself standing at the top of Vol Turin, The Endless Staircase. There was nowhere else to go, so he descended to the next level.

He stood in an open arcade that curved gently to the left and encircled Tronjheim's central chamber. Between the slender columns supporting the arches, Eragon could see Isidar Mithrim sparkling brilliantly above him, as well as the city-mountain's distant base. The circumference of the central chamber increased with each successive level. The staircase cut through the arcade's floor to an identical level below and descended through scores of arcades until it disappeared in the distance. The sliding trough ran along the outside curve of the stairs. At the top of Vol Turin was a pile of leather squares to slide on.

To Eragon's right, a dusty corridor led to that level's rooms and apartments. Solembum padded down the hall, flipping his tail.

Wait, said Eragon.

He tried to catch up with Solembum, but glimpsed him only fleetingly in the abandoned passageways. Then, as Eragon rounded a corner, he saw the werecat stop before a door and yowl. Seemingly of its own accord, the door slid inward. Solembum slipped inside, then the door shut. Eragon halted in front of it, perplexed. He raised his hand to knock, but before he did, the door opened once more, and warm light spilled out. After a moment's indecision he stepped inside.

He entered an earthy two-room suite, lavishly decorated with carved wood and clinging plants. The air was warm, fresh, and humid. Bright lanterns hung on the walls and from the low ceiling. Piles of intriguing items cluttered the floor, obscuring the corners. A large four-poster bed, curtained by even more plants, was in the far room.

In the center of the main room, on a plush leather chair, sat the fortuneteller and witch, Angela. She smiled brightly.

"What are you doing here?" blurted Eragon.

Angela folded her hands in her lap. "Well, why don't you sit on the floor and I'll tell you? I'd offer you a chair, but I'm sitting on the only one." Questions buzzed through Eragon's mind as he settled between two flasks of acrid bubbling green potions.

"So!" exclaimed Angela, leaning forward. "You *are* a Rider. I suspected as much, but I didn't know for certain until yesterday. I'm sure Solembum knew, but he never told me. I should have figured it out the moment you mentioned Brom. Saphira … I like the name—fitting for a dragon."

"Brom's dead," said Eragon abruptly. "The Ra'zac killed him."

Angela was taken aback. She twirled a lock of her dense curls. "I'm sorry. I truly am," she said softly.

Eragon smiled bitterly. "But not surprised, are you? You foretold his death, after all."

"I didn't know whose death it would be," she said, shaking her head. "But no … I'm not surprised. I met Brom once or twice. He didn't care for my 'frivolous' attitude toward magic. It irritated him."

Eragon frowned. "In Teirm you laughed at his fate and said that it was something of a joke. Why?"

Angela's face tightened momentarily. "In retrospect, it was in rather bad taste, but I didn't know what would befall him. How do I put this? … Brom was cursed in a way. It was his wyrd to fail at all of his tasks except one, although through no fault of his own. He was chosen as a Rider, but his dragon was killed. He loved a woman, but it was his affection that was her undoing. And he was chosen, I assume, to guard and train you, but in the end he failed at that as well. The only

thing he succeeded at was killing Morzan, and a better deed he couldn't have done."

"Brom never mentioned a woman to me," retorted Eragon.

Angela shrugged carelessly. "I heard it from one who couldn't have lied. But enough of this talk! Life goes on, and we should not trouble the dead with our worries." She scooped a pile of reeds from the floor and deftly started plaiting them together, closing the subject to discussion.

Eragon hesitated, then gave in. "All right. So why are you in Tronjheim instead of Teirm?"

"Ah, at last an interesting question," said Angela. "After hearing Brom's name again during your visit, I sensed a return of the past in Alagaësia. People were whispering that the Empire was hunting a Rider. I knew then that the Varden's dragon egg must have hatched, so I closed my shop and set out to learn more."

"You knew about the egg?"

"Of course I did. I'm not an idiot. I've been around much longer than you would believe. Very little happens that I don't know about." She paused and concentrated on her weaving. "Anyway, I knew I had to get to the Varden as fast as possible. I've been here for nearly a month now, though I really don't care for this place—it's far too musty for my taste. And everyone in Farthen Dûr is *so* serious and noble. They're probably all doomed to tragic deaths anyway." She gave a long sigh, a mocking expression on her face. "And the dwarves are just a superstitious bunch of ninnies content to hammer rocks all their lives. The only redeeming aspect of this place is all the mushrooms and fungi that grow inside Farthen Dûr."

"Then why stay?" asked Eragon, smiling.

"Because I like to be wherever important events are occurring," said Angela, cocking her head. "Besides, if I had stayed in Teirm, Solembum would have left without me, and I enjoy his company. But tell me, what adventures have befallen you since last we talked?"

For the next hour, Eragon summarized his experiences of the last two and a half months. Angela listened quietly, but when he mentioned Murtagh's name she sputtered, "Murtagh!"

Eragon nodded. "He told me who he is. But let me finish my story before you make any judgments." He continued with his tale. When it was complete, Angela leaned back in her chair thoughtfully, her reeds forgotten. Without warning, Solembum jumped out of a hiding place and landed in her lap. He curled up, eyeing Eragon haughtily.

Angela petted the werecat. "Fascinating. Galbatorix allied with the Urgals, and Murtagh finally out in the open.… I'd warn you to be careful with Murtagh, but you're obviously aware of the danger."

"Murtagh has been a steadfast friend and an unwavering ally," said

Eragon firmly.

"All the same, be careful." Angela paused, then said distastefully, "And then there's the matter of this Shade, Durza. I think he's the greatest threat to the Varden right now, aside from Galbatorix. I *loathe* Shades—they practice the most unholy magic, after necromancy. I'd like to dig his heart out with a dull hairpin and feed it to a pig!"

Eragon was startled by her sudden vehemence. "I don't understand. Brom told me that Shades were sorcerers who used spirits to accomplish their will, but why does that make them so evil?"

Angela shook her head. "It doesn't. Ordinary sorcerers are just that, ordinary—neither better nor worse than the rest of us. They use their magical strength to control spirits and the spirits' powers. Shades, however, relinquish that control in their search for greater power and allow their bodies to be controlled *by* spirits. Unfortunately, only the evilest spirits seek to possess humans, and once ensconced they never leave. Such possession can happen by accident if a sorcerer summons a spirit stronger than himself. The problem is, once a Shade is created, it's terribly difficult to kill. As I'm sure you know, only two people, Laetrí the Elf and Irnstad the Rider, ever survived that feat."

"I've heard the stories." Eragon gestured at the room. "Why are you living so high up in Tronjheim? Isn't it inconvenient being this isolated? And how did you get all this stuff up here?"

Angela threw back her head and laughed wryly. "Truthfully? I'm in hiding. When I first came to Tronjheim, I had a few days of peace—until one of the guards who let me into Farthen Dûr blabbed about who I was. Then all the magic users here, though they *barely* rate the term, pestered me to join their secret group. Especially those drajl Twins who control it. Finally, I threatened to turn the lot of them into toads, excuse me, frogs, but when that didn't deter them, I sneaked up here in the middle of the night. It was less work than you might imagine, especially for one with my skills."

"Did you have to let the Twins into your mind before you were allowed into Farthen Dûr?" asked Eragon. "I was forced to let them sift through my memories."

A cold gleam leapt into Angela's eye. "The Twins wouldn't dare probe me, for fear of what I might do to them. Oh, they'd love to, but they know the effort would leave them broken and gibbering nonsense. I've been coming here long before the Varden began examining people's minds … and they're not about to start on me now."

She peered into the other room and said, "Well! This has been an enlightening talk, but I'm afraid you have to go now. My brew of mandrake root and newt's tongue is about to boil, and it needs attending. Do come back again when you have the time. And *please*

don't tell anyone that I'm here. I'd hate to have to move again. It would make me very … *irritated*. And you don't want to see me irritated!"

"I'll keep your secret," assured Eragon, getting up.

Solembum jumped off Angela's lap as she stood. "Good!" she exclaimed.

Eragon said farewell and left the room. Solembum guided him back to the dragonhold, then dismissed him with a twitch of his tail before sauntering away.

A dwarf was waiting for Eragon in the dragonhold. After bowing and muttering, "Argetlam," the dwarf said with a thick accent, "Good. Awake. Knurla Orik waits for you." He bowed again and scurried away. Saphira jumped out of her cave, landing next to Eragon. Zar'roc was in her claws.

What's that for? he asked, frowning.

She tilted her head. *Wear it. You are a Rider and should bear a Rider's sword. Zar'roc may have a bloody history, but that should not shape your actions. Forge a new history for it, and carry it with pride.*

Are you sure? Remember Ajihad's counsel.

Saphira snorted, and a puff of smoke rose from her nostrils. *Wear it, Eragon. If you wish to remain above the forces here, do not let anyone's disapproval dictate your actions.*

As you wish, he said reluctantly, buckling on the sword. He clambered onto her back, and Saphira flew out of Tronjheim. There was enough light in Farthen Dûr now that the hazy mass of the crater walls—five miles away in each direction—was visible. While they spiraled down to the city-mountain's base, Eragon told Saphira about his meeting with Angela.

As soon as they landed by one of Tronjheim's gates, Orik ran to Saphira's side. "My king, Hrothgar, wishes to see both of you. Dismount quickly. We must hurry."

Eragon trotted after the dwarf into Tronjheim. Saphira easily kept pace beside them. Ignoring stares from people within the soaring corridor, Eragon asked, "Where will we meet Hrothgar?"

Without slowing, Orik said, "In the throne room beneath the city. It will be a private audience as an act of otho—of 'faith.' You do not have to address him in any special manner, but speak to him respectfully. Hrothgar is quick to anger, but he is wise and sees keenly into the minds of men, so think carefully before you speak."

Once they entered Tronjheim's central chamber, Orik led the way to one of the two descending stairways that flanked the opposite hall. They started down the right-hand staircase, which gently curved inward until it faced the direction they had come from. The other stairway merged with theirs to form a broad cascade of dimly lit steps that ended, after a hundred feet, before two granite doors. A seven-pointed crown was carved across both doors.

Seven dwarves stood guard on each side of the portal. They held burnished mattocks and wore gem-encrusted belts. As Eragon, Orik,

and Saphira approached, the dwarves pounded the floor with the mattocks' hafts. A deep boom rolled back up the stairs. The doors swung inward.

A dark hall lay before them, a good bowshot long. The throne room was a natural cave; the walls were lined with stalagmites and stalactites, each thicker than a man. Sparsely hung lanterns cast a moody light. The brown floor was smooth and polished. At the far end of the hall was a black throne with a motionless figure upon it.

Orik bowed. "The king awaits you." Eragon put his hand on Saphira's side, and the two of them continued forward. The doors closed behind them, leaving them alone in the dim throne room with the king.

Their footsteps echoed through the hall as they advanced toward the throne. In the recesses between the stalagmites and stalactites rested large statues. Each sculpture depicted a dwarf king or queen crowned and sitting on a throne; their sightless eyes gazed sternly into the distance, their lined faces set in fierce expressions. A name was chiseled in runes beneath each set of feet.

Eragon and Saphira strode solemnly between the two rows of long-dead monarchs. They passed more than forty statues, then only dark and empty alcoves awaiting future rulers. They stopped before Hrothgar at the end of the hall.

The dwarf king himself sat like a statue upon a raised throne carved from a single piece of black marble. It was blocky, unadorned, and cut with unyielding precision. Strength emanated from the throne, strength that harked back to ancient times when dwarves had ruled in Alagaësia without opposition from elves or humans. A gold helm lined with rubies and diamonds rested on Hrothgar's head in place of a crown. His visage was grim, weathered, and hewn of many years' experience. Beneath a craggy brow glinted deep-set eyes, flinty and piercing. Over his powerful chest rippled a shirt of mail. His white beard was tucked under his belt, and in his lap he held a mighty war hammer with the symbol of Orik's clan embossed on its head.

Eragon bowed awkwardly and knelt. Saphira remained upright. The king stirred, as if awakening from a long sleep, and rumbled, "Rise, Rider, you need not pay tribute to me."

Straightening, Eragon met Hrothgar's impenetrable eyes. The king inspected him with a hard gaze, then said gutturally, "Âz knurl demn lanok. 'Beware, the rock changes'—an old dictum of ours.… And nowadays the rock changes very fast indeed." He fingered the war hammer. "I could not meet with you earlier, as Ajihad did, because I was forced to deal with my enemies within the clans. They demanded that I deny you sanctuary and expel you from Farthen Dûr. It has taken much work on my part to convince them otherwise."

“Thank you,” said Eragon. “I didn’t anticipate how much strife my arrival would cause.”

The king accepted his thanks, then lifted a gnarled hand and pointed. “See there, Rider Eragon, where my predecessors sit upon their graven thrones. One and forty there are, with I the forty-second. When I pass from this world into the care of the gods, my hírna will be added to their ranks. The first statue is the likeness of my ancestor Korgan, who forged this mace, Volund. For eight millennia—since the dawn of our race—dwarves have ruled under Farthen Dûr. We are the bones of the land, older than both the fair elves and the savage dragons.” Saphira shifted slightly.

Hrothgar leaned forward, his voice gravelly and deep. “I am old, human—even by our reckoning—old enough to have seen the Riders in all their fleeting glory, old enough to have spoken with their last leader, Vrael, who paid tribute to me within these very walls. Few are still alive who can claim that much. I remember the Riders and how they meddled in our affairs. I also remember the peace they kept that made it possible to walk unharmed from Tronjheim to Narda.

“And now you stand before me—a lost tradition revived. Tell me, and speak truly in this, why have you come to Farthen Dûr? I know of the events that made you flee the Empire, but what is your intent now?”

“For now, Saphira and I merely want to recuperate in Tronjheim,” Eragon replied. “We are not here to cause trouble, only to find sanctuary from the dangers we’ve faced for many months. Ajihad may send us to the elves, but until he does, we have no wish to leave.”

“Then was it only the desire for safety that drove you?” asked Hrothgar. “Do you just seek to live here and forget your troubles with the Empire?”

Eragon shook his head, his pride rejecting that statement. “If Ajihad told you of my past, you should know that I have grievances enough to fight the Empire until it is nothing but scattered ashes. More than that, though … I want to aid those who cannot escape Galbatorix, including my cousin. I have the strength to help, so I must.”

The king seemed satisfied by his answer. He turned to Saphira and asked, “Dragon, what think you in this matter? For what reason have you come?”

Saphira lifted the edge of her lip to growl. *Tell him that I thirst for the blood of our enemies and eagerly await the day when we ride to battle against Galbatorix. I’ve no love or mercy for traitors and egg breakers like that false king. He held me for over a century and, even now, still has two of my brethren, whom I would free if possible. And tell Hrothgar I think you ready for this task*.

Eragon grimaced at her words, but dutifully relayed them. The

corner of Hrothgar's mouth lifted in a hint of grim amusement, deepening his wrinkles. "I see that dragons have not changed with the centuries." He rapped the throne with a knuckle. "Do you know why this seat was quarried so flat and angular? So that no one would sit comfortably on it. I have not, and will relinquish it without regret when my time comes. What is there to remind you of your obligations, Eragon? If the Empire falls, will you take Galbatorix's place and claim his kingship?"

"I don't seek to wear the crown or rule," said Eragon, troubled. "Being a Rider is responsibility enough. No, I would not take the throne in Urû'baen … not unless there was no one else willing or competent enough to take it."

Hrothgar warned gravely, "Certainly you would be a kinder king than Galbatorix, but no race should have a leader who does not age or leave the throne. The time of the Riders has passed, Eragon. They will never rise again—not even if Galbatorix's other eggs were to hatch."

A shadow crossed his face as he gazed at Eragon's side. "I see that you carry an enemy's sword; I was told of this, and that you travel with a son of the Forsworn. It does not please me to see this weapon." He extended a hand. "I would like to examine it."

Eragon drew Zar'roc and presented it to the king, hilt first. Hrothgar grasped the sword and ran a practiced eye over the red blade. The edge caught the lantern light, reflecting it sharply. The dwarf king tested the point with his palm, then said, "A masterfully forged blade. Elves rarely choose to make swords—they prefer bows and spears—but when they do, the results are unmatched. This is an ill-fated blade; I am not glad to see it within my realm. But carry it if you will; perhaps its luck has changed." He returned Zar'roc, and Eragon sheathed it. "Has my nephew proved helpful during your time here?"

"Who?"

Hrothgar raised a tangled eyebrow. "Orik, my youngest sister's son. He's been serving under Ajihad to show my support for the Varden. It seems that he has been returned to my command, however. I was gratified to hear that you defended him with your words."

Eragon understood that this was another sign of otho, of "faith," on Hrothgar's part. "I couldn't ask for a better guide."

"That is good," said the king, clearly pleased. "Unfortunately, I cannot speak with you much longer. My advisors wait for me, as there are matters I must deal with. I will say this, though: If you wish the support of the dwarves within my realm, you must first prove yourself to them. We have long memories and do not rush to hasty decisions. Words will decide nothing, only deeds."

"I will keep that in mind," said Eragon, bowing again.

Hrothgar nodded regally. "You may go, then."

Eragon turned with Saphira, and they proceeded out of the hall of the mountain king. Orik was waiting for them on the other side of the stone doors, an anxious expression on his face. He fell in with them as they climbed back up to Tronjheim's main chamber. "Did all go well? Were you received favorably?"

"I think so. But your king is cautious," said Eragon.

"That is how he has survived this long."

I would not want Hrothgar angry at us, observed Saphira.

Eragon glanced at her. *No, I wouldn't either. I'm not sure what he thought of you—he seems to disapprove of dragons, though he didn't say it outright.*

That seemed to amuse Saphira. *In that he is wise, especially since he's barely knee-high to me.*

In Tronjheim's center, under the sparkling Isidar Mithrim, Orik said, "Your blessing yesterday has stirred up the Varden like an overturned beehive. The child Saphira touched has been hailed as a future hero. She and her guardian have been quartered in the finest rooms. Everyone is talking about your 'miracle.' All the human mothers seem intent on finding you and getting the same for their children."

Alarmed, Eragon furtively looked around. "What should we do?"

"Aside from taking back your actions?" asked Orik dryly. "Stay out of sight as much as possible. Everyone will be kept out of the dragonhold, so you won't be disturbed there."

Eragon did not want to return to the dragonhold yet. It was early in the day, and he wanted to explore Tronjheim with Saphira. Now that they were out of the Empire, there was no reason for them to be apart. But he wanted to avoid attention, which would be impossible with her at his side. *Saphira, what do you want to do?*

She nosed him, scales brushing his arm. *I'll return to the dragonhold. There's someone there I want to meet. Wander around as long as you like.*

All right, he said, *but who do you want to meet?* Saphira only winked a large eye at him before padding down one of Tronjheim's four main tunnels.

Eragon explained to Orik where she was going, then said, "I'd like some breakfast. And then I'd like to see more of Tronjheim; it's such an incredible place. I don't want to go to the training grounds until tomorrow, as I'm still not fully recovered."

Orik nodded, his beard bobbing on his chest. "In that case, would you like to visit Tronjheim's library? It's quite old and contains many scrolls of great value. You might find it interesting to read a history of Alagaësia that hasn't been tainted by Galbatorix's hand."

With a pang, Eragon remembered how Brom had taught him to read. He wondered if he still had the skill. A long time had passed since he had seen any written words. "Yes, let's do that."

"Very well."

After they ate, Orik guided Eragon through myriad corridors to their destination. When they reached the library's carved arch, Eragon stepped through it reverently.

The room reminded him of a forest. Rows of graceful colonnades branched up to the dark, ribbed ceiling five stories above. Between the pillars, black-marble bookcases stood back to back. Racks of scrolls covered the walls, interspersed with narrow walkways reached by three twisting staircases. Placed at regular intervals around the walls were pairs of facing stone benches. Between them were small tables whose bases flowed seamlessly into the floor.

Countless books and scrolls were stored in the room. "This is the true legacy of our race," said Orik. "Here reside the writings of our greatest kings and scholars, from antiquity to the present. Also recorded are the songs and stories composed by our artisans. This library may be our most precious possession. It isn't all our work, though—there are human writings here as well. Yours is a short-lived—but prolific—race. We have little or nothing of the elves'. They guard their secrets jealously."

"How long may I stay?" asked Eragon, moving toward the shelves.

"As long as you want. Come to me if you have any questions."

Eragon browsed through the volumes with delight, reaching eagerly for those with interesting titles or covers. Surprisingly, dwarves used the same runes to write as humans. He was somewhat disheartened by how hard reading was after months of neglect. He skipped from book to book, slowly working his way deep into the vast library. Eventually he became immersed in a translation of poems by Dóndar, the tenth dwarf king.

As he scanned the graceful lines, unfamiliar footsteps approached from behind the bookcase. The sound startled him, but he berated himself for being silly—he could not be the only person in the library. Even so, he quietly replaced the book and slipped away, senses alert for danger. He had been ambushed too many times to ignore such feelings. He heard the footsteps again; only now there were two sets of them. Apprehensive, he darted across an opening, trying to remember exactly where Orik was sitting. He sidestepped around a corner and started as he found himself face to face with the Twins.

The Twins stood together, their shoulders meeting, a blank expression on their smooth faces. Their black snake eyes bored into him. Their hands, hidden within the folds of their purple robes, twitched slightly. They both bowed, but the movement was insolent and derisive.

"We have been searching for you," one said. His voice was uncomfortably like the Ra'zac's.

Eragon suppressed a shiver. “What for?” He reached out with his mind and contacted Saphira. She immediately joined thoughts with him.

“Ever since you met with Ajihad, we have wanted to … apologize for our actions.” The words were mocking, but not in a way Eragon could challenge. “We have come to pay homage to you.” Eragon flushed angrily as they bowed again.

Careful! warned Saphira.

He pushed back his rising temper. He could not afford to be riled by this confrontation. An idea came to him, and he said with a small smile, “Nay, it is I who pay homage to you. Without your approval I never could have gained entrance to Farthen Dûr.” He bowed to them in turn, making the movement as insulting as he could.

There was a flicker of irritation in the Twins’ eyes, but they smiled and said, “We are honored that one so … important … as yourself thinks so highly of us. We are in your debt for your kind words.”

Now it was Eragon’s turn to be irritated. “I will remember that when I’m in need.”

Saphira intruded sharply in his thoughts. *You’re overdoing it. Don’t say anything you’ll regret. They will remember every word they can use against you.*

This is difficult enough without you making comments! he snapped. She subsided with an exasperated grumble.

The Twins moved closer, the hems of their robes brushing softly over the floor. Their voices became more pleasant. “We have searched for you for another reason as well, Rider. The few magic users who live in Tronjheim have formed a group. We call ourselves Du Vrangr Gata, or the—”

“The Wandering Path, I know,” interrupted Eragon, remembering what Angela had said about it.

“Your knowledge of the ancient language is impressive,” said a Twin smoothly. “As we were saying, Du Vrangr Gata has heard of your mighty feats, and we have come to extend an invitation of membership. We would be honored to have one of your stature as a member. And I suspect that we might be able to assist you as well.”

“How?”

The other Twin said, “The two of us have garnered much experience in magical matters. We could guide you … show you spells we’ve discovered and teach you words of power. Nothing would gladden us more than if we could assist, in some small way, your path to glory. No repayment would be necessary, though if you saw fit to share some scraps of your own knowledge, we would be satisfied.”

Eragon’s face hardened as he realized what they were asking for. “Do you think I’m a half-wit?” he demanded harshly. “I won’t

apprentice myself to you so you can learn the words Brom taught me! It must have angered you when you couldn't steal them from my mind."

The Twins abruptly dropped their facade of smiles. "We are not to be trifled with, boy! We are the ones who will test your abilities with magic. And that could be *most* unpleasant. Remember, it only takes one misconceived spell to kill someone. You may be a Rider, but the two of us are still stronger than you."

Eragon kept his face expressionless, even as his stomach knotted painfully. "I will consider your offer, but it may—"

"Then we will expect your answer tomorrow. Make sure that it is the right one." They smiled coldly and stalked deeper into the library.

Eragon scowled. *I'm not going to join Du Vrangr Gata, no matter what they do*.

You should talk to Angela, said Saphira. *She's dealt with the Twins before. Perhaps she could be there when they test you. That might prevent them from harming you*.

That's a good idea. Eragon wound through the bookcases until he found Orik sitting on a bench, busily polishing his war ax. "I'd like to return to the dragonhold."

The dwarf slid the haft of the ax through a leather loop at his belt, then escorted Eragon to the gate where Saphira waited. People had already gathered around her. Ignoring them, Eragon scrambled onto Saphira's back, and they escaped to the sky.

This problem must be resolved quickly. You cannot let the Twins intimidate you, Saphira said as she landed on Isidar Mithrim.

I know. But I hope we can avoid angering them. They could be dangerous enemies. He dismounted quickly, keeping a hand on Zar'roc.

So can you. Do you want them as allies?

He shook his head. *Not really … I'll tell them tomorrow that I won't join Du Vrangr Gata*.

Eragon left Saphira in her cave and wandered out of the dragonhold. He wanted to see Angela, but he didn't remember how to find her hiding place, and Solembum was not there to guide him. He roamed the deserted corridors, hoping to meet Angela by chance.

When he grew tired of staring at empty rooms and endless gray walls, he retraced his footsteps to the hold. As he neared it, he heard someone speaking within the room. He halted and listened, but the clear voice fell silent. *Saphira? Who's in there?*

A female … She has an air of command. I'll distract her while you come in. Eragon loosened Zar'roc in its sheath. *Orik said that intruders would be kept out of the dragonhold, so who could this be?* He steadied his nerves, then stepped into the hold, his hand on the sword.

A young woman stood in the center of the room, looking curiously

at Saphira, who had stuck her head out of the cave. The woman appeared to be about seventeen years old. The star sapphire cast a rosy light on her, accentuating skin the same deep shade as Ajihad's. Her velvet dress was wine red and elegantly cut. A jeweled dagger, worn with use, hung from her waist in a tooled leather sheath.

Eragon crossed his arms, waiting for the woman to notice him. She continued to look at Saphira, then curtsied and asked sweetly, "Please, could you tell me where Rider Eragon is?" Saphira's eyes sparkled with amusement.

With a small smile, Eragon said, "I am here."

The woman whirled to face him, hand flying to her dagger. Her face was striking, with almond-shaped eyes, wide lips, and round cheekbones. She relaxed and curtsied again. "I am Nasuada," she said.

Eragon inclined his head. "You obviously know who I am, but what do you want?"

Nasuada smiled charmingly. "My father, Ajihad, sent me here with a message. Would you like to hear it?"

The Varden's leader had not struck Eragon as one inclined to marriage and fatherhood. He wondered who Nasuada's mother was—she must have been an uncommon woman to have attracted Ajihad's eye. "Yes, I would."

Nasuada tossed her hair back and recited: "He is pleased that you are doing well, but he cautions you against actions like your benediction yesterday. They create more problems than they solve. Also, he urges you to proceed with the testing as soon as possible—he needs to know how capable you are before he communicates with the elves."

"Did you climb all the way up here just to tell me that?" Eragon asked, thinking of Vol Turin's length.

Nasuada shook her head. "I used the pulley system that transports goods to the upper levels. We could have sent the message with signals, but I decided to bring it myself and meet you in person."

"Would you like to sit down?" asked Eragon. He motioned toward Saphira's cave.

Nasuada laughed lightly. "No, I am expected elsewhere. You should also know, my father decreed that you may visit Murtagh, if you wish." A somber expression disturbed her previously smooth features. "I met Murtagh earlier.… He's anxious to speak with you. He seemed lonely; you should visit him." She gave Eragon directions to Murtagh's cell.

Eragon thanked her for the news, then asked, "What about Arya? Is she better? Can I see her? Orik wasn't able to tell me much."

She smiled mischievously. "Arya is recovering swiftly, as all elves do. No one is allowed to see her except my father, Hrothgar, and the

healers. They have spent much time with her, learning all that occurred during her imprisonment." She swept her eyes over Saphira. "I must go now. Is there anything you would have me convey to Ajihad on your behalf?"

"No, except a desire to visit Arya. And give him my thanks for the hospitality he's shown us."

"I will take your words directly to him. Farewell, Rider Eragon. I hope we shall soon meet again." She curtsied and exited the dragonhold, head held high.

If she really came all the way up Tronjheim just to meet me—pulleys or no pulleys—there was more to this meeting than idle chatter, remarked Eragon.

Aye, said Saphira, withdrawing her head into the cave. Eragon climbed up to her and was surprised to see Solembum curled up in the hollow at the base of her neck. The werecat was purring deeply, his black-tipped tail flicking back and forth. The two of them looked at Eragon impudently, as if to ask, "What?"

Eragon shook his head, laughing helplessly. *Saphira, is Solembum who you wanted to meet?*

They both blinked at him and answered, *Yes*.

Just wondering, he said, mirth still bubbling inside him. It made sense that they would befriend each other—their personalities were similar, and they were both creatures of magic. He sighed, releasing some of the day's tension as he unbuckled Zar'roc. *Solembum, do you know where Angela is? I couldn't find her, and I need her advice*.

Solembum kneaded his paws against Saphira's scaled back. *She is somewhere in Tronjheim*.

When will she return?

Soon.

How soon? he asked impatiently. *I need to talk to her today*.

Not that soon.

The werecat refused to say more, despite Eragon's persistent questions. He gave up and nestled against Saphira. Solembum's purring was a low thrum above his head. *I have to visit Murtagh tomorrow*, he thought, fingering Brom's ring.

On the morning of their third day in Tronjheim, Eragon rolled out of bed refreshed and energized. He belted Zar'roc to his waist and slung his bow and half-full quiver across his back. After a leisurely flight inside Farthen Dûr with Saphira, he met Orik by one of Tronjheim's four main gates. Eragon asked him about Nasuada.

"An unusual girl," answered Orik, glancing disapprovingly at Zar'roc. "She's totally devoted to her father and spends all her time helping him. I think she does more for Ajihad than he knows—there have been times when she's maneuvered his enemies without ever revealing her part in it."

"Who is her mother?"

"That I don't know. Ajihad was alone when he brought Nasuada to Farthen Dûr as a newborn child. He's never said where he and Nasuada came from."

So she too grew up without knowing her mother. He shook off the thought. "I'm restless. It'll be good to use my muscles. Where should I go for this 'testing' of Ajihad's?"

Orik pointed out into Farthen Dûr. "The training field is half a mile from Tronjheim, though you can't see it from here because it's behind the city-mountain. It's a large area where both dwarves and humans practice."

I'm coming as well, stated Saphira.

Eragon told Orik, and the dwarf tugged on his beard. "That might not be a good idea. There are many people at the training field; you will be sure to attract attention."

Saphira growled loudly. *I will come!* And that settled the matter.

The unruly clatter of fighting reached them from the field: the loud clang of steel clashing on steel, the solid thump of arrows striking padded targets, the rattle and crack of wooden staves, and the shouts of men in mock battle. The noise was confusing, yet each group had a unique rhythm and pattern.

The bulk of the training ground was occupied by a crooked block of foot soldiers struggling with shields and poleaxes nearly as tall as themselves. They drilled as a group in formations. Practicing beside them were hundreds of individual warriors outfitted with swords, maces, spears, staves, flails, shields of all shapes and sizes, and even, Eragon saw, someone with a pitchfork. Nearly all the fighters wore armor, usually chain mail and a helmet; plate armor was not as

common. There were as many dwarves as humans, though the two kept mainly to themselves. Behind the sparring warriors, a broad line of archers fired steadily at gray sackcloth dummies.

Before Eragon had time to wonder what he was supposed to do, a bearded man, his head and blocky shoulders covered by a mail coif, strode over to them. The rest of him was protected by a rough oxhide suit that still had hair on it. A huge sword—almost as long as Eragon—hung across his broad back. He ran a quick eye over Saphira and Eragon, as if evaluating how dangerous they were, then said gruffly, "Knurla Orik. You've been gone too long. There's nobody left for me to spar with."

Orik smiled. "Oeí, that's because you bruise everyone from head to toe with your monster sword."

"Everyone except you," he corrected.

"That's because I'm faster than a giant like you."

The man looked at Eragon again. "I'm Fredric. I've been told to find out what you can do. How strong are you?"

"Strong enough," answered Eragon. "I have to be in order to fight with magic."

Fredric shook his head; the coif clinked like a bag of coins. "Magic has no place in what we do here. Unless you've served in an army, I doubt any fights you've been in lasted more than a few minutes. What we're concerned about is how you'll be able to hold up in a battle that may drag on for hours, or even weeks if it's a siege. Do you know how to use any weapons besides that sword and bow?"

Eragon thought about it. "Only my fists."

"Good answer!" laughed Fredric. "Well, we'll start you off with the bow and see how you do. Then once some space has cleared up on the field, we'll try—" He broke off suddenly and stared past Eragon, scowling angrily.

The Twins stalked toward them, their bald heads pale against their purple robes. Orik muttered something in his own language as he slipped his war ax out of his belt. "I told you two to stay away from the training area," said Fredric, stepping forward threateningly. The Twins seemed frail before his bulk.

They looked at him arrogantly. "We were ordered by Ajihad to test Eragon's proficiency with magic—*before* you exhaust him banging on pieces of metal."

Fredric glowered. "Why can't someone else test him?"

"No one else is powerful enough," sniffed the Twins. Saphira rumbled deeply and glared at them. A line of smoke trickled from her nostrils, but they ignored her. "Come with us," they ordered, and strode to an empty corner of the field.

Shrugging, Eragon followed with Saphira. Behind him he heard

Fredric say to Orik, “We have to stop them from going too far.”

“I know,” answered Orik in a low voice, “but I can’t interfere again. Hrothgar made it clear he won’t be able to protect me the next time it happens.”

Eragon forced back his growing apprehension. The Twins might know more techniques and words.… Still, he remembered what Brom had told him: Riders were stronger in magic than ordinary men. But would that be enough to resist the combined power of the Twins?

Don’t worry so much; I will help you, said Saphira. *There are two of us as well.*

He touched her gently on the leg, relieved by her words. The Twins looked at Eragon and asked, “And how do you answer us, Eragon?”

Overlooking the puzzled expressions of his companions, he said flatly, “No.”

Sharp lines appeared at the corners of the Twins’ mouths. They turned so they faced Eragon obliquely and, bending at the waists, drew a large pentagram on the ground. They stepped in the middle of it, then said harshly, “We begin now. You will attempt to complete the tasks we assign you … that is all.”

One of the Twins reached into his robe, produced a polished rock the size of Eragon’s fist, and set it on the ground. “Lift it to eye level.”

That’s easy enough, commented Eragon to Saphira. “Stenr reisa!” The rock wobbled, then smoothly rose from the ground. Before it went more than a foot, an unexpected resistance halted it in midair. A smile touched the Twins’ lips. Eragon stared at them, enraged—they were trying to make him fail! If he became exhausted now, it would be impossible to complete the harder tasks. Obviously they were confident that their combined strength could easily wear him down.

But I’m not alone either, snarled Eragon to himself. *Saphira, now!* Her mind melded with his, and the rock jerked through the air to stop, quivering, at eye level. The Twins’ eyes narrowed cruelly.

“Very … good,” they hissed. Fredric looked unnerved by the display of magic. “Now move the stone in a circle.” Again Eragon struggled against their efforts to stop him, and again—to their obvious anger—he prevailed. The exercises quickly increased in complexity and difficulty until Eragon was forced to think carefully about which words to use. And each time, the Twins fought him bitterly, though the strain never showed on their faces.

It was only with Saphira’s support that Eragon was able to hold his ground. In a break between two of the tasks, he asked her, *Why do they continue this testing? Our abilities were clear enough from what they saw in my mind.* She cocked her head thoughtfully. *You know what?* he said grimly as comprehension came to him. *They’re using this as an opportunity to figure out what ancient words I know and perhaps learn*

new ones themselves.

Speak softly then, so that they cannot hear you, and use the simplest words possible.

From then on, Eragon used only a handful of basic words to complete the tasks. But finding ways to make them perform in the same manner as a long sentence or phrase stretched his ingenuity to the limit. He was rewarded by the frustration that contorted the Twins' faces as he foiled them again and again. No matter what they tried, they could not get him to use any more words in the ancient language.

More than an hour passed, but the Twins showed no sign of stopping. Eragon was hot and thirsty, but refrained from asking for a reprieve—he would continue as long as they did. There were many tests: manipulating water, casting fire, scrying, juggling rocks, hardening leather, freezing items, controlling the flight of an arrow, and healing scratches. He wondered how long it would take for the Twins to run out of ideas.

Finally the Twins raised their hands and said, "There is only one thing left to do. It is simple enough—any *competent* user of magic should find this easy." One of them removed a silver ring from his finger and smugly handed it to Eragon. "Summon the essence of silver."

Eragon stared at the ring in confusion. What was he supposed to do? The essence of silver, what was that? And how was it to be summoned? Saphira had no idea, and the Twins were not going to help. He had never learned silver's name in the ancient language, though he knew it had to be part of *argetlam*. In desperation he combined the only word that might work, *ethgrí*, or "invoke," with *arget*.

Drawing himself upright, he gathered together what power he had left and parted his lips to deliver the invocation. Suddenly a clear, vibrant voice split the air.

"Stop!"

The word rushed over Eragon like cool water—the voice was strangely familiar, like a half-remembered melody. The back of his neck tingled. He slowly turned toward its source.

A lone figure stood behind them: Arya. A leather strip encircled her brow, restraining her voluminous black hair, which tumbled behind her shoulders in a lustrous cascade. Her slender sword was at her hip, her bow on her back. Plain black leather clothed her shapely frame, poor raiment for one so fair. She was taller than most men, and her stance was perfectly balanced and relaxed. An unmarked face reflected none of the horrific abuse she had endured.

Arya's blazing emerald eyes were fixed on the Twins, who had

turned pale with fright. She approached on silent footsteps and said in soft, menacing tones, “Shame! Shame to ask of him what only a master can do. Shame that you should use such methods. Shame that you told Ajihad you didn’t know Eragon’s abilities. He is competent. Now leave!” Arya frowned dangerously, her slanted eyebrows meeting like lightning bolts in a sharp V, and pointed at the ring in Eragon’s hand. “Arget!” she exclaimed thunderously.

The silver shimmered, and a ghostly image of the ring materialized next to it. The two were identical except that the apparition seemed purer and glowed white-hot. At the sight of it, the Twins spun on their heels and fled, robes flapping wildly. The insubstantial ring vanished from Eragon’s hand, leaving the circlet of silver behind. Orik and Fredric were on their feet, eyeing Arya warily. Saphira crouched, ready for action.

The elf surveyed them all. Her angled eyes paused on Eragon. Then she turned and strode toward the heart of the training field. The warriors ceased their sparring and looked at her with wonder. Within a few moments the entire field fell silent in awe of her presence.

Eragon was inexorably dragged forward by his own fascination. Saphira spoke, but he was oblivious to her comments. A large circle formed around Arya. Looking only at Eragon, she proclaimed, “I claim the right of trial by arms. Draw your sword.”

She means to duel me!

But not, I think, to harm you, replied Saphira slowly. She nudged him with her nose. *Go and acquit yourself well. I will watch.*

Eragon reluctantly stepped forward. He did not want to do this when he was exhausted from magic use and when there were so many people watching. Besides, Arya could be in no shape for sparring. It had only been two days since she had received Tunivor’s Nectar. *I will soften my blows so I don’t hurt her*, he decided.

They faced each other across the circle of warriors. Arya drew her sword with her left hand. The weapon was thinner than Eragon’s, but just as long and sharp. He slid Zar’roc out of its polished sheath and held the red blade point-down by his side. For a long moment they stood motionless, elf and human watching each other. It flashed through Eragon’s mind that this was how many of his fights with Brom had started.

He moved forward cautiously. With a blur of motion Arya jumped at him, slashing at his ribs. Eragon reflexively parried the attack, and their swords met in a shower of sparks. Zar’roc was batted aside as if it were no more than a fly. The elf did not take advantage of the opening, however, but spun to her right, hair whipping through the air, and struck at his other side. He barely stopped the blow and backpedaled frantically, stunned by her ferocity and speed.

Belatedly, Eragon remembered Brom's warning that even the weakest elf could easily overpower a human. He had about as much chance of defeating Arya as he did Durza. She attacked again, swinging at his head. He ducked under the razor-sharp edge. But then why was she … *toying* with him? For a few long seconds he was too busy warding her off to think about it, then he realized, *She wants to know how proficient I am*.

Understanding that, he began the most complicated series of attacks he knew. He flowed from one pose to another, recklessly combining and modifying them in every possible way. But no matter how inventive he was, Arya's sword always stopped his. She matched his actions with effortless grace.

Engaged in a fiery dance, their bodies were linked and separated by the flashing blades. At times they nearly touched, taut skin only a hair's breadth away, but then momentum would whirl them apart, and they would withdraw for a second, only to join again. Their sinuous forms wove together like twisting ropes of windblown smoke.

Eragon could never remember how long they fought. It was timeless, filled with nothing but action and reaction. Zar'roc grew leaden in his hand; his arm burned ferociously with each stroke. At last, as he lunged forward, Arya nimbly sidestepped, sweeping the point of her sword up to his jawbone with supernatural speed.

Eragon froze as the icy metal touched his skin. His muscles trembled from the exertion. Dimly he heard Saphira bugle and the warriors cheering raucously around them. Arya lowered her sword and sheathed it. "You have passed," she said quietly amid the noise.

Dazed, he slowly straightened. Fredric was beside him now, thumping his back enthusiastically. "That was incredible swordsmanship! I even learned some new moves from watching the two of you. And the elf—stunning!"

But I lost, he protested silently. Orik praised his performance with a broad smile, but all Eragon noticed was Arya, standing alone and silent. She motioned slightly with a finger, no more than a twitch, toward a knoll about a mile from the practice field, then turned and walked away. The crowd melted before her. A hush fell over the men and dwarves as she passed.

Eragon turned to Orik. "I have to go. I'll return to the dragon-hold soon." With a swift jab, Eragon sheathed Zar'roc and pulled himself onto Saphira. She took off over the training field, which turned into a sea of faces as everyone looked at her.

As they soared toward the knoll, Eragon saw Arya running below them with clean, easy strides. Saphira commented, *You find her form pleasing, do you not?*

Yes, he admitted, blushing.

Her face does have more character than that of most humans, she sniffed. *But it's long, like a horse's, and overall she's rather shapeless*.

Eragon looked at Saphira with amazement. *You're jealous, aren't you!*

Impossible. I never get jealous, she said, offended.

You are now, admit it! he laughed.

She snapped her jaws together loudly. *I am not!* He smiled and shook his head, but let her denial stand. She landed heavily on the knoll, jostling him roughly. He jumped down without remarking on it.

Arya was close behind them. Her fleet stride carried her faster than any runner Eragon had seen. When she reached the top of the knoll, her breathing was smooth and regular. Suddenly tongue-tied, Eragon dropped his gaze. She strode past him and said to Saphira, "Skulblaka, eka celöbra ono un mulabra ono un onr Shur'tugal né haina. Atra nosu waíse fricaya."

Eragon did not recognize most of the words, but Saphira obviously understood the message. She shuffled her wings and surveyed Arya curiously. Then she nodded, humming deeply. Arya smiled. "I am glad that you recovered," Eragon said. "We didn't know if you would live or not."

"That is why I came here today," said Arya, facing him. Her rich voice was accented and exotic. She spoke clearly, with a hint of trill, as if she were about to sing. "I owe you a debt that must be repaid. You saved my life. That can never be forgotten."

"It—it was nothing," said Eragon, fumbling with the words and knowing they were not true, even as he spoke them. Embarrassed, he changed the subject. "How did you come to be in Gil'ead?"

Pain shadowed Arya's face. She looked away into the distance. "Let us walk." They descended from the knoll and meandered toward Farthen Dûr. Eragon respected Arya's silence as they walked. Saphira padded quietly beside them. Finally Arya lifted her head and said with the grace of her kind, "Ajihad told me you were present when Saphira's egg appeared."

"Yes." For the first time, Eragon thought about the energy it must have taken to transport the egg over the dozens of leagues that separated Du Weldenvarden from the Spine. To even attempt such a feat was courting disaster, if not death.

Her next words were heavy. "Then know this: at the moment you first beheld it, I was captured by Durza." Her voice filled with bitterness and grief. "It was he who led the Urgals that ambushed and slew my companions, Fäolin and Glenwing. Somehow he knew where to wait for us—we had no warning. I was drugged and transported to Gil'ead. There, Durza was charged by Galbatorix to learn where I had sent the egg and all I knew of Ellesméra."

She stared ahead icily, jaw clenched. “He tried for months without success. His methods were … harsh. When torture failed, he ordered his soldiers to use me as they would. Fortunately, I still had the strength to nudge their minds and make them incapable. At last Galbatorix ordered that I was to be brought to Urû’baen. Dread filled me when I learned this, as I was weary in both mind and body and had no strength to resist him. If it were not for you, I would have stood before Galbatorix in a week’s time.”

Eragon shuddered inwardly. It was amazing what she had survived. The memory of her injuries was still vivid in his mind. Softly, he asked, “Why do you tell me all this?”

“So that you know what I was saved from. Do not presume I can ignore your deed.”

Humbled, he bowed his head. “What will you do now—return to Ellesméra?”

“No, not yet. There is much that must be done here. I cannot abandon the Varden—Ajihad needs my help. I’ve seen you tested in both arms and magic today. Brom taught you well. You are ready to proceed in your training.”

“You mean for me to go to Ellesméra?”

“Yes.”

Eragon felt a flash of irritation. Did he and Saphira have no say in the matter? “When?”

“That is yet to be decided, but not for some weeks.”

At least they gave us that much time, thought Eragon. Saphira mentioned something to him, and he in turn asked Arya, “What did the Twins want me to do?”

Arya’s sculpted lip curled with disgust. “Something not even they can accomplish. It is possible to speak the name of an object in the ancient language and summon its true form. It takes years of work and great discipline, but the reward is complete control over the object. That is why one’s true name is always kept hidden, for if it were known by any with evil in their hearts, they could dominate you utterly.”

“It’s strange,” said Eragon after a moment, “but before I was captured at Gil’ead, I had visions of you in my dreams. It was like scrying—and I was able to scry you later—but it was always during my sleep.”

Arya pursed her lips pensively. “There were times I felt as if another presence was watching me, but I was often confused and feverish. I’ve never heard of anyone, either in lore or legend, being able to scry in their sleep.”

“I don’t understand it myself,” said Eragon, looking at his hands. He twirled Brom’s ring around his finger. “What does the tattoo on your

shoulder mean? I didn't mean to see it, but when I was healing your wounds … it couldn't be helped. It's just like the symbol on this ring."

"You have a ring with the yawë on it?" she asked sharply.

"Yes. It was Brom's. See?"

He held out the ring. Arya examined the sapphire, then said, "This is a token given only to the most valued elf-friends—so valued, in fact, it has not been used in centuries. Or so I thought. I never knew that Queen Islanzadí thought so highly of Brom."

"I shouldn't wear it, then," said Eragon, afraid that he had been presumptuous.

"No, keep it. It will give you protection if you meet my people by chance, and it may help you gain favor with the queen. Tell no one of my tattoo. It should not be revealed."

"Very well."

He enjoyed talking with Arya and wished their conversation could have lasted longer. When they parted, he wandered through Farthen Dûr, conversing with Saphira. Despite his prodding, she refused to tell him what Arya had said to her. Eventually his thoughts turned to Murtagh and then to Nasuada's advice. *I'll get something to eat, then go see him*, he decided. *Will you wait for me so I can return to the dragonhold with you?*

I will wait—go, said Saphira.

With a grateful smile, Eragon dashed to Tronjheim, ate in an obscure corner of a kitchen, then followed Nasuada's instructions until he reached a small gray door guarded by a man and a dwarf. When he requested entrance, the dwarf banged on the door three times, then unbolted it. "Just holler when you want to leave," said the man with a friendly smile.

The cell was warm and well lit, with a washbasin in one corner and a writing desk—equipped with quills and ink—in another. The ceiling was extensively carved with lacquered figures; the floor was covered with a plush rug. Murtagh lay on a stout bed, reading a scroll. He looked up in surprise and exclaimed cheerily, "Eragon! I'd hoped you would come!"

"How did … I mean I thought—"

"You thought I was stuck in some rat hole chewing on hardtack," said Murtagh, rolling upright with a grin. "Actually, I expected the same thing, but Ajihad lets me have all this as long as I don't cause trouble. And they bring me huge meals, as well as anything I want from the library. If I'm not careful, I'll turn into a fat scholar."

Eragon laughed, and with a wondering smile seated himself next to Murtagh. "But aren't you angry? You're still a prisoner."

"Oh, I was at first," said Murtagh with a shrug. "But the more I

thought about it, the more I came to realize that this is really the best place for me. Even if Ajihad gave me my freedom, I would stay in my room most of the time anyway."

"But why?"

"You know well enough. No one would be at ease around me, knowing my true identity, and there would always be people who wouldn't limit themselves to harsh looks or words. But enough of that, I'm eager to know what's new. Come, tell me."

Eragon recounted the events of the past two days, including his encounter with the Twins in the library. When he finished, Murtagh leaned back reflectively. "I suspect," he said, "that Arya is more important than either of us thought. Consider what you've learned: she is a master of the sword, powerful in magic, and, most significantly, was chosen to guard Saphira's egg. She cannot be ordinary, even among the elves."

Eragon agreed.

Murtagh stared at the ceiling. "You know, I find this imprisonment oddly peaceful. For once in my life I don't have to be afraid. I know I ought to be … yet something about this place puts me at ease. A good night's sleep helps, too."

"I know what you mean," said Eragon wryly. He moved to a softer place on the bed. "Nasuada said that she visited you. Did she say anything interesting?"

Murtagh's gaze shifted into the distance, and he shook his head. "No, she only wanted to meet me. Doesn't she look like a princess? And the way she carries herself! When she first entered through that doorway, I thought she was one of the great ladies of Galbatorix's court. I've seen earls and counts who had wives that, compared to her, were more fitted for life as a hog than of nobility."

Eragon listened to his praise with growing apprehension. *It may mean nothing,* he reminded himself. *You're leaping to conclusions*. Yet the foreboding would not leave him. Trying to shake off the feeling, he asked, "How long are you going to remain imprisoned, Murtagh? You can't hide forever."

Murtagh shrugged carelessly, but there was weight behind his words. "For now I'm content to stay and rest. There's no reason for me to seek shelter elsewhere nor submit myself to the Twins' examination. No doubt I'll tire of this eventually, but for now … I am content."

Saphira woke Eragon with a sharp rap of her snout, bruising him with her hard jaw. “Ouch!” he exclaimed, sitting upright. The cave was dark except for a faint glow emanating from the shuttered lantern. Outside in the dragonhold, Isidar Mithrim glittered with a thousand different colors, illuminated by its girdle of lanterns.

An agitated dwarf stood in the entrance to the cave, wringing his hands. “You must come, Argetlam! Great trouble—Ajihad summons you. There is no time!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Eragon.

The dwarf only shook his head, beard wagging. “Go, you must! Carkna brâgha! Now!”

Eragon belted on Zar’roc, grabbed his bow and arrows, then strapped the saddle onto Saphira. *So much for a good night’s sleep*, she groused, crouching low to the floor so he could clamber onto her back. He yawned loudly as Saphira launched herself from the cave.

Orik was waiting for them with a grim expression when they landed at Tronjheim’s gates. “Come, the others are waiting.” He led them through Tronjheim to Ajihad’s study. On the way, Eragon plied him with questions, but Orik would only say, “I don’t know enough myself—wait until you hear Ajihad.”

The large study door was opened by a pair of burly guards. Ajihad stood behind his desk, bleakly inspecting a map. Arya and a man with wiry arms were there as well. Ajihad looked up. “Good, you’re here, Eragon. Meet Jörmundur, my second in command.”

They acknowledged each other, then turned their attention to Ajihad. “I roused the five of you because we are all in grave danger. About half an hour ago a dwarf ran out of an abandoned tunnel under Tronjheim. He was bleeding and nearly incoherent, but he had enough sense left to tell the dwarves what was pursuing him: an army of Urgals, maybe a day’s march from here.”

Shocked silence filled the study. Then Jörmundur swore explosively and began asking questions at the same time Orik did. Arya remained silent. Ajihad raised his hands. “Quiet! There is more. The Urgals aren’t approaching *over* land, but *under* it. They’re in the tunnels … we’re going to be attacked from below.”

Eragon raised his voice in the din that followed. “Why didn’t the dwarves know about this sooner? How did the Urgals find the tunnels?”

“We’re lucky to know about it this early!” bellowed Orik. Everyone

stopped talking to hear him. “There are hundreds of tunnels throughout the Beor Mountains, uninhabited since the day they were mined. The only dwarves who go in them are eccentrics who don’t want contact with anyone. We could have just as easily received no warning at all.”

Ajihad pointed at the map, and Eragon moved closer. The map depicted the southern half of Alagaësia, but unlike Eragon’s, it showed the entire Beor Mountain range in detail. Ajihad’s finger was on the section of the Beor Mountains that touched Surda’s eastern border. “This,” he said, “is where the dwarf claimed to have come from.”

“Orthíad!” exclaimed Orik. At Jörmundur’s puzzled inquiry, he explained, “It’s an ancient dwelling of ours that was deserted when Tronjheim was completed. During its time it was the greatest of our cities. But no one’s lived there for centuries.”

“And it’s old enough for some of the tunnels to have collapsed,” said Ajihad. “That’s how we surmise it was discovered from the surface. I suspect that Orthíad is now being called Ithrö Zhâda. That’s where the Urgal column that was chasing Eragon and Saphira was supposed to go, and I’m sure it’s where the Urgals have been migrating all year. From Ithrö Zhâda they can travel anywhere they want in the Beor Mountains. They have the power to destroy both the Varden and the dwarves.”

Jörmundur bent over the map, eyeing it carefully. “Do you know how many Urgals there are? Are Galbatorix’s troops with them? We can’t plan a defense without knowing how large their army is.”

Ajihad replied unhappily, “We’re unsure about both those things, yet our survival rests on that last question. If Galbatorix has augmented the Urgals’ ranks with his own men, we don’t stand a chance. But if he hasn’t—because he still doesn’t want his alliance with the Urgals revealed, or for some other reason—it’s possible we can win. Neither Orrin nor the elves can help us at this late hour. Even so, I sent runners to both of them with news of our plight. At the very least they won’t be caught by surprise if we fall.”

He drew a hand across his coal-black brow. “I’ve already talked with Hrothgar, and we’ve decided on a course of action. Our only hope is to contain the Urgals in three of the larger tunnels and channel them into Farthen Dûr so they don’t swarm inside Tronjheim like locusts.

“I need you, Eragon and Arya, to help the dwarves collapse extraneous tunnels. The job is too big for normal means. Two groups of dwarves are already working on it: one outside Tronjheim, the other beneath it. Eragon, you’re to work with the group outside. Arya, you’ll be with the one underground; Orik will guide you to them.”

“Why not collapse all the tunnels instead of leaving the large ones

untouched?" asked Eragon.

"Because," said Orik, "that would force the Urgals to clear away the rubble, and they might decide to go in a direction we don't want them to. Plus, if we cut ourselves off, they could attack other dwarf cities—which we wouldn't be able to assist in time."

"There's also another reason," said Ajihad. "Hrothgar warned me that Tronjheim sits on such a dense network of tunnels that if too many are weakened, sections of the city will sink into the ground under their own weight. We can't risk that."

Jörmundur listened intently, then asked, "So there won't be any fighting inside Tronjheim? You said the Urgals would be channeled outside the city, into Farthen Dûr."

Ajihad responded quickly, "That's right. We can't defend Tronjheim's entire perimeter—it's too big for our forces—so we're going to seal all the passageways and gates leading into it. That will force the Urgals out onto the flats surrounding Tronjheim, where there's plenty of maneuvering room for our armies. Since the Urgals have access to the tunnels, we cannot risk an extended battle. As long as they are here, we will be in constant danger of them quarrying up through Tronjheim's floor. If that happens, we'll be trapped, attacked from both the outside and inside. We have to prevent the Urgals from taking Tronjheim. If they secure it, it's doubtful we will have the strength to roust them."

"And what of our families?" asked Jörmundur. "I won't see my wife and son murdered by Urgals."

The lines deepened on Ajihad's face. "All the women and children are being evacuated into the surrounding valleys. If we are defeated, they have guides who will take them to Surda. That's all I can do, under the circumstances."

Jörmundur struggled to hide his relief. "Sir, is Nasuada going as well?"

"She is not pleased, but yes." All eyes were on Ajihad as he squared his shoulders and announced, "The Urgals will arrive in a matter of hours. We know their numbers are great, but we *must* hold Farthen Dûr. Failure will mean the dwarves' downfall, death to the Varden—and eventual defeat for Surda and the elves. This is one battle we cannot lose. Now go and complete your tasks! Jörmundur, ready the men to fight."

They left the study and scattered: Jörmundur to the barracks, Orik and Arya to the stairs leading underground, and Eragon and Saphira down one of Tronjheim's four main halls. Despite the early hour, the city-mountain swarmed like an anthill. People were running, shouting

messages, and carrying bundles of belongings.

Eragon had fought and killed before, but the battle that awaited them sent stabs of fear into his chest. He had never had a chance to anticipate a fight. Now that he did, it filled him with dread. He was confident when facing only a few opponents—he knew he could easily defeat three or four Urgals with Zar'roc and magic—but in a large conflict, anything could happen.

They exited Tronjheim and looked for the dwarves they were supposed to help. Without the sun or moon, the inside of Farthen Dûr was dark as lampblack, punctuated by glittering lanterns bobbing jerkily in the crater. *Perhaps they're on the far side of Tronjheim*, suggested Saphira. Eragon agreed and swung onto her back.

They glided around Tronjheim until a clump of lanterns came into sight. Saphira angled toward them, then with no more than a whisper landed beside a group of startled dwarves who were busy digging with pickaxes. Eragon quickly explained why he was there. A sharp-nosed dwarf told him, "There's a tunnel about four yards directly underneath us. Any help you could give us would be appreciated."

"If you clear the area over the tunnel, I'll see what I can do." The sharp-nosed dwarf looked doubtful, but ordered the diggers off the site.

Breathing slowly, Eragon prepared to use magic. It might be possible to actually move all the dirt off the tunnel, but he needed to conserve his strength for later. Instead, he would try to collapse the tunnel by applying force to weak sections of its ceiling.

"Thrysta deloi," he whispered and sent tentacles of power into the soil. Almost immediately they encountered rock. He ignored it and reached farther down until he felt the hollow emptiness of the tunnel. Then he began searching for flaws in the rock. Every time he found one, he pushed on it, elongating and widening it. It was strenuous work, but no more than it would have been to split the stone by hand. He made no visible progress—a fact that was not lost on the impatient dwarves.

Eragon persevered. Before long he was rewarded by a resounding crack that could be heard clearly on the surface. There was a persistent screech, then the ground slid inward like water draining from a tub, leaving a gaping hole seven yards across.

As the delighted dwarves walled off the tunnel with rubble, the sharp-nosed dwarf led Eragon to the next tunnel. This one was much more difficult to collapse, but he managed to duplicate the feat. Over the next few hours, he collapsed over a half-dozen tunnels throughout Farthen Dûr, with Saphira's help.

Light crept into the small patch of sky above them as he worked. It was not enough to see by, but it bolstered Eragon's confidence. He

turned away from the crumpled ruins of the latest tunnel and surveyed the land with interest.

A mass exodus of women and children, along with the Varden's elders, streamed out of Tronjheim. Everyone carried loads of provisions, clothes, and belongings. A small group of warriors, predominantly boys and old men, accompanied them.

Most of the activity, however, was at the base of Tronjheim, where the Varden and dwarves were assembling their army, which was divided into three battalions. Each section bore the Varden's standard: a white dragon holding a rose above a sword pointing downward on a purple field.

The men were silent, ironfisted. Their hair flowed loosely from under their helmets. Many warriors had only a sword and a shield, but there were several ranks of spear- and pikemen. In the rear of the battalions, archers tested their bowstrings.

The dwarves were garbed in heavy battle gear. Burnished steel hauberks hung to their knees, and thick roundshields, stamped with the crests of their clan, rested on their left arms. Short swords were sheathed at their waists, while in their right hands they carried mattocks or war axes. Their legs were covered with extra-fine mail. They wore iron caps and brass-studded boots.

A small figure detached itself from the far battalion and hurried toward Eragon and Saphira. It was Orik, clad like the other dwarves. "Ajihad wants you to join the army," he said. "There are no more tunnels to cave in. Food is waiting for both of you."

Eragon and Saphira accompanied Orik to a tent, where they found bread and water for Eragon and a pile of dried meat for Saphira. They ate it without complaint; it was better than going hungry.

When they finished, Orik told them to wait and disappeared into the battalion's ranks. He returned, leading a line of dwarves burdened with tall piles of plate armor. Orik lifted a section of it and handed it to Eragon.

"What is this?" asked Eragon, fingering the polished metal. The armor was intricately wrought with engraving and gold filigree. It was an inch thick in places and very heavy. No man could fight under that much weight. And there were far too many pieces for one person.

"A gift from Hrothgar," said Orik, looking pleased with himself. "It has lain so long among our other treasures that it was almost forgotten. It was forged in another age, before the fall of the Riders."

"But what's it for?" asked Eragon.

"Why, it's dragon armor, of course! You don't think that dragons went into battle unprotected? Complete sets are rare because they took so long to make and because dragons were always growing. Still, Saphira isn't too big yet, so this should fit her reasonably well."

Dragon armor! As Saphira nosed one of the pieces, Eragon asked, *What do you think?*

Let's try it on, she said, a fierce gleam in her eye.

After a good deal of struggling, Eragon and Orik stepped back to admire the result. Saphira's entire neck—except for the spikes along its ridge—was covered with triangular scales of overlapping armor. Her belly and chest were protected by the heaviest plates, while the lightest ones were on her tail. Her legs and back were completely encased. Her wings were left bare. A single molded plate lay on top of her head, leaving her lower jaw free to bite and snap.

Saphira arched her neck experimentally, and the armor flexed smoothly with her. *This will slow me down, but it'll help stop the arrows. How do I look?*

Very intimidating, replied Eragon truthfully. That pleased her.

Orik picked up the remaining items from the ground. "I brought you armor as well, though it took much searching to find your size. We rarely forge arms for men or elves. I don't know who this was made for, but it has never been used and should serve you well."

Over Eragon's head went a stiff shirt of leather-backed mail that fell to his knees like a skirt. It rested heavily on his shoulders and clinked when he moved. He belted Zar'roc over it, which helped keep the mail from swinging. On his head went a leather cap, then a mail coif, and finally a gold-and-silver helm. Bracers were strapped to his forearms, and greaves to his lower legs. For his hands there were mail-backed gloves. Last, Orik handed him a broad shield emblazoned with an oak tree.

Knowing that what he and Saphira had been given was worth several fortunes, Eragon bowed and said, "Thank you for these gifts. Hrothgar's presents are greatly appreciated."

"Don't give thanks now," said Orik with a chuckle. "Wait until the armor saves your life."

The warriors around them began marching away. The three battalions were repositioning themselves in different parts of Farthen Dûr. Unsure of what they should do, Eragon looked at Orik, who shrugged and said, "I suppose we should accompany them." They trailed behind a battalion as it headed toward the crater wall. Eragon asked about the Urgals, but Orik only knew that scouts had been posted underground in the tunnels and that nothing had been seen or heard yet.

The battalion halted at one of the collapsed tunnels. The dwarves had piled the rubble so that anyone inside the tunnel could easily climb out. *This must be one of the places they're going to force the Urgals to surface*, Saphira pointed out.

Hundreds of lanterns were fixed atop poles and stuck into the

ground. They provided a great pool of light that glowed like an evening sun. Fires blazed along the rim of the tunnel's roof, huge cauldrons of pitch heating over them. Eragon looked away, fighting back revulsion. It was a terrible way to kill anyone, even an Urgal.

Rows of sharpened saplings were being pounded into the ground to provide a thorny barrier between the battalion and the tunnel. Eragon saw an opportunity to help and joined a group of men digging trenches between the saplings. Saphira assisted as well, scooping out the dirt with her giant claws. While they labored, Orik left to supervise the construction of a barricade to shield the archers. Eragon drank gratefully from the wineskin whenever it was passed around. After the trenches were finished and filled with pointed stakes, Saphira and Eragon rested.

Orik returned to find them seated together. He wiped his brow. "All the men and dwarves are on the battlefield. Tronjheim has been sealed off. Hrothgar has taken charge of the battalion to our left. Ajihad leads the one ahead of us."

"Who commands this one?"

"Jörmundur." Orik sat with a grunt and placed his war ax on the ground.

Saphira nudged Eragon. *Look*. His hand tightened on Zar'roc as he saw Murtagh, helmed, carrying a dwarven shield and his hand-and-a-half sword, approaching with Tornac.

Orik cursed and leapt to his feet, but Murtagh said quickly, "It's all right; Ajihad released me."

"Why would he do that?" demanded Orik.

Murtagh smiled wryly. "He said this was an opportunity to prove my good intentions. Apparently, he doesn't think I would be able to do much damage even if I did turn on the Varden."

Eragon nodded in welcome, relaxing his grip. Murtagh was an excellent and merciless fighter—exactly whom Eragon wanted by his side during battle.

"How do we know you're not lying?" asked Orik.

"Because I say so," announced a firm voice. Ajihad strode into their midst, armed for battle with a breastplate and an ivory-handled sword. He put a strong hand on Eragon's shoulder and drew him away where the others could not hear. He cast an eye over Eragon's armor. "Good, Orik outfitted you."

"Yes … has anything been seen in the tunnels?"

"Nothing." Ajihad leaned on his sword. "One of the Twins is staying in Tronjheim. He's going to watch the battle from the dragonhold and relay information through his brother to me. I know you can speak with your mind. I need you to tell the Twins anything, *anything*, unusual that you see while fighting. Also, I'll relay orders to you

through them. Do you understand?"

The thought of being linked to the Twins filled Eragon with loathing, but he knew it was necessary. "I do."

Ajihad paused. "You're not a foot soldier or horseman, nor any other type of warrior I'm used to commanding. Battle may prove differently, but I think you and Saphira will be safer on the ground. In the air, you'll be a choice target for Urgal archers. Will you fight from Saphira's back?"

Eragon had never been in combat on horseback, much less on Saphira. "I'm not sure what we'll do. When I'm on Saphira, I'm up too high to fight all but a Kull."

"There will be plenty of Kull, I'm afraid," said Ajihad. He straightened, pulling his sword out of the ground. "The only advice I can give you is to avoid unnecessary risks. The Varden cannot afford to lose you." With that, he turned and left.

Eragon returned to Orik and Murtagh and hunkered next to Saphira, leaning his shield against his knees. The four of them waited in silence like the hundreds of warriors around them. Light from Farthen Dûr's opening waned as the sun crept below the crater rim.

Eragon turned to scan the encampment and froze, heart jolting. About thirty feet away sat Arya with her bow in her lap. Though he knew it was unreasonable, he had hoped she might accompany the other women out of Farthen Dûr. Concerned, he hastened to her. "You will fight?"

"I do what I must," Arya said calmly.

"But it's too dangerous!"

Her face darkened. "Do not pamper me, human. Elves train both their men and women to fight. I am not one of your helpless females to run away whenever there is danger. I was given the task of protecting Saphira's egg … which I failed. My breoal is dishonored and would be further shamed if I did not guard you and Saphira on this field. You forget that I am stronger with magic than any here, including you. If the Shade comes, who can defeat him but me? And who else has the right?"

Eragon stared at her helplessly, knowing she was right and hating the fact. "Then stay safe." Out of desperation, he added in the ancient language, "Wiol pömnuria ilian." For my happiness.

Arya turned her gaze away uneasily, the fringe of her hair obscuring her face. She ran a hand along her polished bow, then murmured, "It is my wyrd to be here. The debt must be paid."

He abruptly retreated to Saphira. Murtagh looked at him curiously. "What did she say?"

"Nothing."

Wrapped in their own thoughts, the defenders sank into a brooding

silence as the hours crawled by. Farthen Dûr's crater again grew black, except for the sanguine lantern glow and the fires heating the pitch. Eragon alternated between myopically examining the links of his mail and spying on Arya. Orik repeatedly ran a whetstone over the blade of his ax, periodically eyeing the edge between strokes; the rasp of metal on stone was irritating. Murtagh just stared into the distance.

Occasionally, messengers ran through the encampment, causing the warriors to surge to their feet. But it always proved to be a false alarm. The men and dwarves became strained; angry voices were often heard. The worst part about Farthen Dûr was the lack of wind—the air was dead, motionless. Even when it grew warm and stifling and filled with smoke, there was no reprieve.

As the night dragged on, the battlefield stilled, silent as death. Muscles stiffened from the waiting. Eragon stared blankly into the darkness with heavy eyelids. He shook himself to alertness and tried to focus through his stupor.

Finally Orik said, "It's late. We should sleep. If anything happens, the others will wake us." Murtagh grumbled, but Eragon was too tired to complain. He curled up against Saphira, using his shield as a pillow. As his eyes closed, he saw that Arya was still awake, watching over them.

His dreams were confused and disturbing, full of horned beasts and unseen menaces. Over and over he heard a deep voice ask, "Are you ready?" But he never had an answer. Plagued by such visions, his sleep was shallow and uneasy until something touched his arm. He woke with a start.

"It has begun," Arya said with a sorrowful expression. The troops in the encampment stood alertly with their weapons drawn. Orik swung his ax to make sure he had enough room. Arya nocked an arrow and held it ready to shoot.

"A scout ran out of a tunnel a few minutes ago," said Murtagh to Eragon. "The Urgals are coming."

Together they watched the dark mouth of the tunnel through the ranks of men and sharpened stakes. A minute dragged by, then another … and another. Without taking his eyes from the tunnel, Eragon hoisted himself into Saphira's saddle, Zar'roc in his hand, a comfortable weight. Murtagh mounted Tornac beside him. Then a man cried, "I hear them!"

The warriors stiffened; grips tightened on weapons. No one moved … no one breathed. Somewhere a horse nickered.

Harsh Urgal shouts shattered the air as dark shapes boiled upward in the tunnel's opening. At a command, the cauldrons of pitch were tilted on their sides, pouring the scalding liquid into the tunnel's hungry throat. The monsters howled in pain, arms flailing. A torch was thrown onto the bubbling pitch, and an orange pillar of greasy flames roared up in the opening, engulfing the Urgals in an inferno. Sickened, Eragon looked across Farthen Dûr at the other two battalions and saw similar fires by each. He sheathed Zar'roc and strung his bow.

More Urgals soon tamped the pitch down and clambered out of the tunnels over their burned brethren. They clumped together, presenting a solid wall to the men and dwarves. Behind the palisade Orik had helped build, the first row of archers pulled on their bows and fired. Eragon and Arya added their arrows to the deadly swarm and watched the shafts eat through the Urgals' ranks.

The Urgal line wavered, threatening to break, but they covered themselves with their shields and weathered the attack. Again the archers fired, but the Urgals continued to stream onto the surface at a ferocious rate.

Eragon was dismayed by their numbers. They were supposed to kill every single one? It seemed a madman's task. His only encouragement was that he saw none of Galbatorix's troops with the Urgals. Not yet, at least.

The opposing army formed a solid mass of bodies that seemed to stretch endlessly. Tattered and sullen standards were raised in the

monsters' midst. Baleful notes echoed through Farthen Dûr as war horns sounded. The entire group of Urgals charged with savage war cries.

They dashed against the rows of stakes, covering them with slick blood and limp corpses as the ranks at the vanguard were crushed against the posts. A cloud of black arrows flew over the barrier at the crouched defenders. Eragon ducked behind his shield, and Saphira covered her head. Arrows rattled harmlessly against her armor.

Momentarily foiled by the pickets, the Urgal horde milled with confusion. The Varden bunched together, waiting for the next attack. After a pause, the war cries were raised again as the Urgals surged forward. The assault was bitter. Its momentum carried the Urgals through the stakes, where a line of pikemen jabbed frantically at their ranks, trying to repel them. The pikemen held briefly, but the ominous tide of Urgals could not be halted, and they were overwhelmed.

The first lines of defense breached, the main bodies of the two forces collided for the first time. A deafening roar burst from the men and dwarves as they rushed into the conflict. Saphira bellowed and leapt toward the fight, diving into a whirlwind of noise and blurred action.

With her jaws and talons, Saphira tore through an Urgal. Her teeth were as lethal as any sword, her tail a giant mace. From her back, Eragon parried a hammer blow from an Urgal chief, protecting her vulnerable wings. Zar'roc's crimson blade seemed to gleam with delight as blood spurted along its length.

From the corner of his eye, Eragon saw Orik hewing Urgal necks with mighty blows of his ax. Beside the dwarf was Murtagh on Tornac, his face disfigured by a vicious snarl as he swung his sword angrily, cutting through every defense. Then Saphira spun around, and Eragon saw Arya leap past the lifeless body of an opponent.

An Urgal bowled over a wounded dwarf and hacked at Saphira's front right leg. His sword skated off her armor with a burst of sparks. Eragon smote him on the head, but Zar'roc stuck in the monster's horns and was yanked from his grasp. With a curse he dived off Saphira and tackled the Urgal, smashing his face with the shield. He jerked Zar'roc out of the horns, then dodged as another Urgal charged him.

Saphira, I need you! he shouted, but the battle's tide had separated them. Suddenly a Kull jumped at him, club raised for a blow. Unable to lift his shield in time, Eragon uttered, "Jierda!" The Kull's head snapped back with a sharp report as his neck broke. Four more Urgals succumbed to Zar'roc's thirsty bite, then Murtagh rode up beside Eragon, driving the press of Urgals backward.

"Come on!" he shouted, and reached down from Tornac, pulling

Eragon onto the horse. They rushed toward Saphira, who was embroiled in a mass of enemies. Twelve spear-wielding Urgals encircled her, needling her with their lances. They had already managed to prick both of her wings. Her blood splattered the ground. Every time she rushed at one of the Urgals, they bunched together and jabbed at her eyes, forcing her to retreat. She tried to sweep the spears away with her talons, but the Urgals jumped back and evaded her.

The sight of Saphira's blood enraged Eragon. He swung off Tornac with a wild cry and stabbed the nearest Urgal through the chest, withholding nothing in his frenzied attempt to help Saphira. His attack provided the distraction she needed to break free. With a kick, she sent an Urgal flying, then barreled to him. Eragon grabbed one of her neck spikes and pulled himself back into her saddle. Murtagh raised his hand, then charged into another knot of Urgals.

By unspoken consent, Saphira took flight and rose above the struggling armies, seeking a respite from the madness. Eragon's breath trembled. His muscles were clenched, ready to ward off the next attack. Every fiber of his being thrilled with energy, making him feel more alive than ever before.

Saphira circled long enough for them to recover their strength, then descended toward the Urgals, skimming the ground to avoid detection. She approached the monsters from behind, where their archers were gathered.

Before the Urgals realized what was happening, Eragon lopped off the heads of two archers, and Saphira disemboweled three others. She took off again as alarms sounded, quickly soaring out of bow range.

They repeated the tactic on a different flank of the army. Saphira's stealth and speed, combined with the dim lighting, made it nearly impossible for the Urgals to predict where she would strike next. Eragon used his bow whenever Saphira was in the air, but he quickly ran out of arrows. Soon the only thing left in his quiver was magic, which he wanted to keep in reserve until it was desperately needed.

Saphira's flights over the combatants gave Eragon a unique understanding of how the battle was progressing. There were three separate fights raging in Farthen Dûr, one by each open tunnel. The Urgals were disadvantaged by the dispersal of their forces and their inability to get all of their army out of the tunnels at once. Even so, the Varden and dwarves could not keep the monsters from advancing and were slowly being driven back toward Tronjheim. The defenders seemed insignificant against the mass of Urgals, whose numbers continued to increase as they poured out of the tunnels.

The Urgals had organized themselves around several standards, each representing a clan, but it was unclear who commanded them overall. The clans paid no attention to each other, as if they were

receiving orders from elsewhere. Eragon wished he knew who was in charge so he and Saphira could kill him.

Remembering Ajihad's orders, he began relaying information to the Twins. They were interested by what he had to say about the Urgals' apparent lack of a leader and questioned him closely. The exchange was smooth, if brief. The Twins told him, *You're ordered to assist Hrothgar; the fight goes badly for him*.

Understood, Eragon responded.

Saphira swiftly flew to the besieged dwarves, swooping low over Hrothgar. Arrayed in golden armor, the dwarf king stood at the fore of a small knot of his kin, wielding Volund, the hammer of his ancestors. His white beard caught the lantern light as he looked up at Saphira. Admiration glinted in his eyes.

Saphira landed beside the dwarves and faced the oncoming Urgals. Even the bravest Kull quailed before her ferocity, allowing the dwarves to surge forward. Eragon tried to keep Saphira safe. Her left flank was protected by the dwarves, but to her front and right raged a sea of enemies. He showed no mercy on those and took every advantage he could, using magic whenever Zar'roc could not serve him. A spear bounced off his shield, denting it and leaving him with a bruised shoulder. Shaking off the pain, he cleaved open an Urgal's skull, mixing brains with metal and bone.

He was in awe of Hrothgar—who, though he was ancient by both the standards of men and dwarves, was still undiminished on the battlefield. No Urgal, Kull or not, could stand before the dwarf king and his guards and live. Every time Volund struck, it sounded the gong of death for another enemy. After a spear downed one of his warriors, Hrothgar grabbed the spear himself and, with astounding strength, hurled it completely through its owner twenty yards away. Such heroism emboldened Eragon to ever greater risks, seeking to hold his own with the mighty king.

Eragon lunged at a giant Kull nearly out of reach and almost fell from Saphira's saddle. Before he could recover, the Kull darted past Saphira's defenses and swung his sword. The brunt of the blow caught Eragon on the side of his helm, throwing him backward and making his vision flicker and his ears ring thunderously.

Stunned, he tried to pull himself upright, but the Kull had already prepared for another blow. As the Kull's arm descended, a slim steel blade suddenly sprouted from his chest. Howling, the monster toppled to the side. In his place stood Angela.

The witch wore a long red cape over outlandish flanged armor enameled black and green. She bore a strange two-handed weapon—a long wooden shaft with a sword blade attached to each end. Angela winked at Eragon mischievously, then dashed away, spinning her

staff-sword like a dervish. Close behind her was Solembum in the form of a young shaggy-haired boy. He held a small black dagger, sharp teeth bared in a feral snarl.

Still dazed from his battering, Eragon managed to straighten himself in the saddle. Saphira jumped into the air and wheeled high above, letting him recuperate. He scanned Farthen Dûr's plains and saw, to his dismay, that all three battles were going badly. Neither Ajihad, Jörmundur, nor Hrothgar could stop the Urgals. There were simply too many.

Eragon wondered how many Urgals he could kill at once with magic. He knew his limits fairly well. If he were to kill enough to make a difference … it would probably be suicide. That might be what it took to win.

The fighting continued for one endless hour after another. The Varden and dwarves were exhausted, but the Urgals remained fresh with reinforcements.

It was a nightmare for Eragon. Though he and Saphira fought their hardest, there was always another Urgal to take the place of the one just killed. His whole body hurt—especially his head. Every time he used magic he lost a little more energy. Saphira was in better condition, though her wings were punctured with small wounds.

As he parried a blow, the Twins contacted him urgently. *There are loud noises under Tronjheim. It sounds like Urgals are trying to dig into the city! We need you and Arya to collapse any tunnels they're excavating*.

Eragon dispatched his opponent with a sword thrust. *We'll be right there*. He looked for Arya and saw her engaged with a knot of struggling Urgals. Saphira quickly forged a path to the elf, leaving a pile of crumpled bodies in her wake. Eragon extended his hand and said, "Get on!"

Arya jumped onto Saphira's back without hesitation. She wrapped her right arm around Eragon's waist, wielding her bloodstained sword with the other. As Saphira crouched to take off, an Urgal ran at her, howling, then lifted an ax and smashed her in the chest.

Saphira roared with pain and lurched forward, feet leaving the ground. Her wings snapped open, straining to keep them from crashing as she veered wildly to one side, right wingtip scraping the ground. Below them, the Urgal pulled back his arm to throw the ax. But Arya raised her palm, shouting, and an emerald ball of energy shot from her hand, killing the Urgal. With a colossal heave of her shoulders, Saphira righted herself, barely making it over the heads of the warriors. She pulled away from the battlefield with powerful wing strokes and rasping breath.

Are you all right? asked Eragon, concerned. He could not see where she had been struck.

I'll live, she said grimly, *but the front of my armor has been crushed together. It hurts my chest, and I'm having trouble moving*.

Can you get us to the dragonhold?

… We'll see.

Eragon explained Saphira's condition to Arya. "I'll stay and help Saphira when we land," she offered. "Once she is free of the armor, I will join you."

"Thank you," he said. The flight was laborious for Saphira; she glided whenever she could. When they reached the dragonhold, she dropped heavily to Isidar Mithrim, where the Twins were supposed to be watching the battle, but it was empty. Eragon jumped to the floor and winced as he saw the damage the Urgal had done. Four of the metal plates on Saphira's chest had been hammered together, restricting her ability to bend and breathe. "Stay well," he said, putting a hand on her side, then ran out the archway.

He stopped and swore. He was at the top of Vol Turin, The Endless Staircase. Because of his worry for Saphira, he had not considered how he would get to Tronjheim's base—where the Urgals were breaking in. There was no time to climb down. He looked at the narrow trough to the right of the stairs, then grabbed one of the leather pads and threw himself down on it.

The stone slide was smooth as lacquered wood. With the leather underneath him, he accelerated almost instantly to a frightening speed, the walls blurring and the curve of the slide pressing him high against the wall. Eragon lay completely flat so he would go faster. The air rushed past his helm, making it vibrate like a weather vane in a gale. The trough was too confined for him, and he was perilously close to flying out, but as long as he kept his arms and legs still, he was safe.

It was a swift descent, but it still took him nearly ten minutes to reach the bottom. The slide leveled out at the end and sent him skidding halfway across the huge carnelian floor.

When he finally came to a stop, he was too dizzy to walk. His first attempt to stand made him nauseated, so he curled up, head in his hands, and waited for things to stop spinning. When he felt better, he stood and warily looked around.

The great chamber was completely deserted, the silence unsettling. Rosy light filtered down from Isidar Mithrim. He faltered—Where was he supposed to go?—and cast out his mind for the Twins. Nothing. He froze as loud knocking echoed through Tronjheim.

An explosion split the air. A long slab of the chamber floor buckled and blew thirty feet up. Needles of rocks flew outward as it crashed down. Eragon stumbled back, stunned, groping for Zar'roc. The twisted shapes of Urgals clambered out of the hole in the floor.

Eragon hesitated. Should he flee? Or should he stay and try to close the tunnel? Even if he managed to seal it before the Urgals attacked him, what if Tronjheim was already breached elsewhere? He could not find all the places in time to prevent the city-mountain from being captured. *But if I run to one of Tronjheim's gates and blast it open, the Varden could retake Tronjheim without having to siege it*. Before he could decide, a tall man garbed entirely in black armor emerged from the tunnel and looked directly at him.

It was Durza.

The Shade carried his pale blade marked with the scratch from Ajihad. A black roundshield with a crimson ensign rested on his arm. His dark helmet was richly decorated, like a general's, and a long snakeskin cloak billowed around him. Madness burned in his maroon eyes, the madness of one who enjoys power and finds himself in the position to use it.

Eragon knew he was neither fast enough nor strong enough to escape the fiend before him. He immediately warned Saphira, though he knew it was impossible for her to rescue him. He dropped into a crouch and quickly reviewed what Brom had told him about fighting another magic user. It was not encouraging. And Ajihad had said that Shades could only be destroyed by a thrust through the heart.

Durza gazed at him contemptuously and said, "Kaz jtierl trazhid! Otrag bagh." The Urgals eyed Eragon suspiciously and formed a circle around the perimeter of the room. Durza slowly approached Eragon with a triumphant expression. "So, my young Rider, we meet again. You were foolish to escape from me in Gil'ead. It will only make things worse for you in the end."

"You'll never capture me alive," growled Eragon.

"Is that so?" asked the Shade, raising an eyebrow. The light from the star sapphire gave his skin a ghastly tint. "I don't see your 'friend' Murtagh around to help you. You can't stop me now. No one can!"

Fear touched Eragon. *How does he know about Murtagh?* Putting all the derision he could into his voice, he jeered, "How did you like being shot?"

Durza's face tightened momentarily. "I will be repaid in blood for that. Now tell me where your dragon is hiding."

"Never."

The Shade's countenance darkened. "Then I will force it from you!" His sword whistled through the air. The moment Eragon caught the blade on his shield, a mental probe spiked deep into his thoughts. Fighting to protect his consciousness, he shoved Durza back and attacked with his own mind.

Eragon battered with all his strength against the iron-hard defenses surrounding Durza's mind, but to no avail. He swung Zar'roc, trying to

catch Durza off guard. The Shade knocked the blow aside effortlessly, then stabbed in return with lightning speed.

The point of the sword caught Eragon in the ribs, piercing his mail and driving out his breath. The mail slipped, though, and the blade missed his side by the width of a wire. The distraction was all Durza needed to break into Eragon's mind and begin taking control.

"No!" cried Eragon, throwing himself at the Shade. His face contorted as he grappled with Durza, yanking on his sword arm. Durza tried to cut Eragon's hand, but it was protected by the mail-backed glove, which sent the blade glancing downward. As Eragon kicked his leg, Durza snarled and swept his black shield around, knocking him to the floor. Eragon tasted blood in his mouth; his neck throbbed. Ignoring his injuries, he rolled over and hurled his shield at Durza. Despite the Shade's superior speed, the heavy shield clipped him on the hip. As Durza stumbled, Eragon caught him on the upper arm with Zar'roc. A line of blood traced down the Shade's arm.

Eragon thrust at the Shade with his mind and drove through Durza's weakened defenses. A flood of images suddenly engulfed him, rushing through his consciousness—

Durza as a young boy living as a nomad with his parents on the empty plains. The tribe abandoned them and called his father "oathbreaker." Only it was not Durza then, but Carsaib—the name his mother crooned while combing his hair.…

The Shade reeled wildly, face twisted in pain. Eragon tried to control the torrent of memories, but the force of them was overwhelming.

Standing on a hill over the graves of his parents, weeping that the men had not killed him as well. Then turning and stumbling blindly away, into the desert.…

Durza faced Eragon. Terrible hatred flowed from his maroon eyes. Eragon was on one knee—almost standing—struggling to seal his mind.

How the old man looked when he first saw Carsaib lying near death on a sand dune. The days it had taken Carsaib to recover and the fear he felt upon discovering that his rescuer was a sorcerer. How he had pleaded to be taught the control of spirits. How Haeg had finally agreed. Called him "Desert Rat."…

Eragon was standing now. Durza charged … sword raised … shield ignored in his fury.

The days spent training under the scorching sun, always alert for the lizards they caught for food. How his power slowly grew, giving him pride and confidence. The weeks spent nursing his sick master after a failed spell. His joy when Haeg recovered…

There was not enough time to react … not enough time.…

The bandits who attacked during the night, killing Haeg. The rage Carsaib had felt and the spirits he had summoned for vengeance. But the spirits were stronger than he expected. They turned on him, possessing mind and body. He had screamed. He was—I AM DURZA!

The sword smote heavily across Eragon's back, cutting through both mail and skin. He screamed as pain blasted through him, forcing him to his knees. Agony bowed his body in half and obliterated all thought. He swayed, barely conscious, hot blood running down the small of his back. Durza said something he could not hear.

In anguish, Eragon raised his eyes to the heavens, tears streaming down his cheeks. Everything had failed. The Varden and dwarves were destroyed. He was defeated. Saphira would give herself up for his sake —she had done it before—and Arya would be recaptured or killed. Why had it ended like this? What justice could this be? All was for nothing.

As he looked at Isidar Mithrim far above his tortured frame, a flash of light erupted in his eyes, blinding him. A second later, the chamber rang with a deafening report. Then his eyes cleared, and he gaped with disbelief.

The star sapphire had shattered. An expanding torus of huge dagger-like pieces plummeted toward the distant floor—the shimmering shards near the walls. In the center of the chamber, hurtling downward headfirst, was Saphira. Her jaws were open and from between them erupted a great tongue of flame, bright yellow and tinged with blue. On her back was Arya: hair billowing wildly, arm uplifted, palm glowing with a nimbus of green magic.

Time seemed to slow as Eragon saw Durza tilt his head toward the ceiling. First shock, then anger contorted the Shade's face. Sneering defiantly, he raised his hand and pointed at Saphira, a word forming on his lips.

A hidden reserve of strength suddenly welled up inside Eragon, dredged from the deepest part of his being. His fingers curled around the hilt of his sword. He plunged through the barrier in his mind and took hold of the magic. All his pain and rage focused on one word:

"Brisingr!"

Zar'roc blazed with bloody light, heatless flames running along it …

He lunged forward …

And stabbed Durza in the heart.

Durza looked down with shock at the blade protruding from his breast. His mouth was open, but instead of words, an unearthly howl burst from him. His sword dropped from nerveless fingers. He grasped Zar'roc as if to pull it out, but it was lodged firmly in him.

Then Durza's skin turned transparent. Under it was neither flesh nor bone, but swirling patterns of darkness. He shrieked even louder as the darkness pulsated, splitting his skin. With one last cry, Durza was rent from head to toe, releasing the darkness, which separated into three entities who flew through Tronjheim's walls and out of Farthen Dûr. The Shade was gone.

Bereft of strength, Eragon fell back with arms outstretched. Above him, Saphira and Arya had nearly reached the floor—it looked as if they were going to smash into it with the deadly remains of Isidar Mithrim. As his sight faded, Saphira, Arya, the myriad fragments—all seemed to stop falling and hang motionless in the air.

Snatches of the Shade's memories continued to flash through Eragon. A whirlwind of dark events and emotions overwhelmed him, making it impossible to think. Submerged in the maelstrom, he knew neither who nor where he was. He was too weak to cleanse himself of the alien presence that clouded his mind. Violent, cruel images from the Shade's past exploded behind his eyes until his spirit cried out in anguish at the bloody sights.

A pile of bodies rose before him … innocents slaughtered by the Shade's orders. He saw still more corpses—whole villages of them—taken from life by the sorcerer's hand or word. There was no escape from the carnage that surrounded him. He wavered like a candle flame, unable to withstand the tide of evil. He prayed for someone to lift him out of the nightmare, but there was no one to guide him. If only he could remember what he was supposed to be: boy or man, villain or hero, Shade or Rider; all was jumbled together in a meaningless frenzy. He was lost, completely and utterly, in the roiling mass.

Suddenly a cluster of his own memories burst through the dismal cloud left by the Shade's malevolent mind. All the events since he had found Saphira's egg came to him in the cold light of revelation. His accomplishments and failures were displayed equally. He had lost much that was dear to him, yet fate had given him rare and great gifts; for the first time, he was proud of simply who he was. As if in response to his brief self-confidence, the Shade's smothering blackness assaulted him anew. His identity trailed into the void as uncertainty and fear consumed his perceptions. Who was he to think he could challenge the powers of Alagaësia and live?

He fought against the Shade's sinister thoughts, weakly at first, then more strongly. He whispered words of the ancient language and found they gave him enough strength to withstand the shadow blurring his mind. Though his defenses faltered dangerously, he slowly began to draw his shattered consciousness into a small bright shell around his core. Outside his mind he was aware of a pain so great it threatened to blot out his very life, but something—or someone—seemed to keep it at bay.

He was still too weak to clear his mind completely, but he was lucid enough to examine his experiences since Carvahall. Where would he go now … and who would show him the way? Without Brom, there was no one to guide or teach him.

Come to me.

He recoiled at the touch of another consciousness—one so vast and

powerful it was like a mountain looming over him. This was who was blocking the pain, he realized. Like Arya's mind, music ran through this one: deep amber-gold chords that throbbed with magisterial melancholy.

Finally, he dared ask, Who … who are you?

One who would help. *With a flicker of an unspoken thought, the Shade's influence was brushed aside like an unwanted cobweb. Freed from the oppressive weight, Eragon let his mind expand until he touched a barrier beyond which he could not pass*. I have protected you as best I can, but you are so far away I can do no more than shield your sanity from the pain.

Again: Who are you to do this?

There was a low rumble. I am Osthato Chetowä, the Mourning Sage. And Togira Ikonoka, the Cripple Who Is Whole. Come to me, Eragon, for I have answers to all you ask. You will not be safe until you find me.

But how can I find you if I don't know where you are? *he asked, despairing.*

Trust Arya and go with her to Ellesméra—I will be there. I have waited many seasons, so do not delay or it may soon be too late.… You are greater than you know, Eragon. Think of what you have done and rejoice, for you have rid the land of a great evil. You have wrought a deed no one else could. Many are in your debt.

The stranger was right; what he had accomplished was worthy of honor, of recognition. No matter what his trials might be in the future, he was no longer just a pawn in the game of power. He had transcended that and was something else, something more. He had become what Ajihad wanted: an authority independent of any king or leader.

He sensed approval as he reached that conclusion. You are learning, *said the Mourning Sage, drawing nearer. A vision passed from him to Eragon: a burst of color blossomed in his mind, resolving into a stooped figure dressed in white, standing on a sun-drenched stone cliff*. It is time for you to rest, Eragon. When you wake, do not speak of me to anyone, *said the figure kindly, face obscured by a silver nimbus*. Remember, you must go to the elves. Now, sleep.… *He raised a hand, as if in benediction, and peace crept through Eragon*.

His last thought was that Brom would have been proud of him.

"Wake," commanded the voice. "Awake, Eragon, for you have slept far too long." He stirred unwillingly, loath to listen. The warmth that surrounded him was too comfortable to leave. The voice sounded again. "Rise, Argetlam! You are needed!"

He reluctantly forced his eyes open and found himself on a long bed, swathed in soft blankets. Angela sat in a chair beside him, staring at his face intently. "How do you feel?" she asked.

Disoriented and confused, he let his eyes roam over the small room. "I … I don't know," he said, his mouth dry and sore.

"Then don't move. You should conserve your strength," said Angela, running a hand through her curly hair. Eragon saw that she still wore her flanged armor. Why was that? A fit of coughing made him dizzy, lightheaded, and ache all over. His feverish limbs felt heavy. Angela lifted a gilt horn from the floor and held it to his lips. "Here, drink."

Cool mead ran down his throat, refreshing him. Warmth bloomed in his stomach and rose to his cheeks. He coughed again, which worsened his throbbing head. *How did I get here? There was a battle … we were losing … then Durza and …* "Saphira!" he exclaimed, sitting upright. He sagged back as his head swam and clenched his eyes, feeling sick. "What about Saphira? Is she all right? The Urgals were winning … she was falling. And Arya!"

"They lived," assured Angela, "and have been waiting for you to wake. Do you wish to see them?" He nodded feebly. Angela got up and threw open the door. Arya and Murtagh filed inside. Saphira snaked her head into the room after them, her body too big to fit through the doorway. Her chest vibrated as she hummed deeply, eyes sparkling.

Smiling, Eragon touched her thoughts with relief and gratitude. *It is good to see you well, little one*, she said tenderly.

And you too, but how—?

The others want to explain it, so I will let them.

You breathed fire! I saw you!

Yes, she said with pride.

He smiled weakly, still confused, then looked at Arya and Murtagh. Both of them were bandaged: Arya on her arm, Murtagh around his head. Murtagh grinned widely. "About time you were up. We've been sitting in the hall for hours."

"What … what happened?" asked Eragon.

Arya looked sad. But Murtagh crowed, "We won! It was incredible! When the Shade's spirits—if that's what they were—flew across Farthen Dûr, the Urgals ceased fighting to watch them go. It was as though they were released from a spell then, because their clans suddenly turned and attacked each other. Their entire army disintegrated within minutes. We routed them after that!"

"They're all dead?" asked Eragon.

Murtagh shook his head. "No, many of them escaped into the tunnels. The Varden and dwarves are busy ferreting them out right now, but it's going to take a while. I was helping until an Urgal banged me on the head and I was sent back here."

"They aren't going to lock you up again?"

His face grew sober. "No one really cares about that right now. A lot

of Varden and dwarves were killed; the survivors are busy trying to recover from the battle. But at least you have cause to be happy. You're a hero! Everyone's talking about how you killed Durza. If it hadn't been for you, we would have lost."

Eragon was troubled by his words but pushed them away for later consideration. "Where were the Twins? They weren't where they were supposed to be—I couldn't contact them. I needed their help."

Murtagh shrugged. "I was told they bravely fought off a group of Urgals that broke into Tronjheim somewhere else. They were probably too busy to talk with you."

That seemed wrong for some reason, but Eragon could not decide why. He turned to Arya. Her large bright eyes had been fixed upon him the entire time. "How come you didn't crash? You and Saphira were …" His voice trailed off.

She said slowly, "When you warned Saphira of Durza, I was still trying to remove her damaged armor. By the time it was off, it was too late to slide down Vol Turin—you would have been captured before I reached the bottom. Besides, Durza would have killed you before letting me rescue you." Regret entered her voice, "So I did the one thing I could to distract him: I broke the star sapphire."

And I carried her down, added Saphira.

Eragon struggled to understand as another bout of lightheadedness made him close his eyes. "But why didn't any of the pieces hit you or me?"

"I didn't allow them to. When we were almost to the floor, I held them motionless in the air, then slowly lowered them to the floor—else they would have shattered into a thousand pieces and killed you," stated Arya simply. Her words betrayed the power within her.

Angela added sourly, "Yes, and it almost killed you as well. It's taken all of my skill to keep the two of you alive."

A twinge of unease shot through Eragon, matching the intensity of his throbbing head. *My back* … But he felt no bandages there. "How long have I been here?" he asked with trepidation.

"Only a day and a half," answered Angela. "You're lucky I was around, otherwise it would've taken you weeks to heal—if you had even lived." Alarmed, Eragon pushed the blankets off his torso and twisted around to feel his back. Angela caught his wrist with her small hand, worry reflected in her eyes. "Eragon … you have to understand, my power is not like yours or Arya's. It depends on the use of herbs and potions. There are limits to what I can do, especially with such a large—"

He yanked his hand out of her grip and reached back, fingers groping. The skin on his back was smooth and warm, flawless. Hard muscles flexed under his fingertips as he moved. He slid his hand

toward the base of his neck and unexpectedly felt a hard bump about a half-inch wide. He followed it down his back with growing horror. Durza's blow had left him with a huge, ropy scar, stretching from his right shoulder to the opposite hip.

Pity showed on Arya's face as she murmured, "You have paid a terrible price for your deed, Eragon Shadeslayer."

Murtagh laughed harshly. "Yes. Now you're just like me."

Dismay filled Eragon, and he closed his eyes. He was disfigured. Then he remembered something from when he was unconscious … a figure in white who had helped him. A cripple who was whole—Togira Ikonoka. He had said, *Think of what you have done and rejoice, for you have rid the land of a great evil. You have wrought a deed no one else could. Many are in your debt.…*

Come to me Eragon, for I have answers to all you ask.

A measure of peace and satisfaction consoled Eragon.

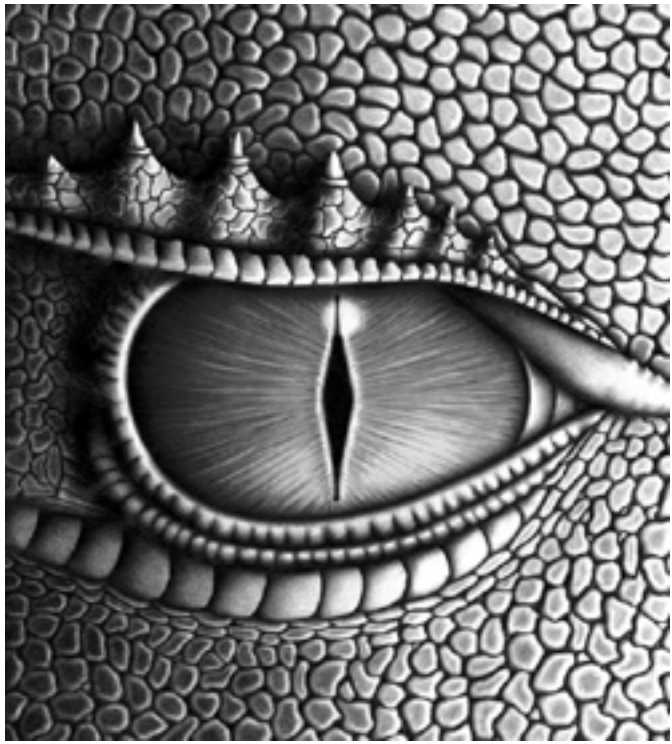
I will come.

End

of

Book

One



Pronunciation

Ajihad—AH-zhi-hod

Alagaësia—al-uh-GAY-zee-uh

Arya—AR-ee-uh

Carvahall—CAR-vuh-hall

Dras-Leona—DRAHS-lee-OH-nuh

Du Weldenvarden—doo WELL-den-VAR-den

Eragon—EHR-uh-gahn

Farthen Dûr—FAR-then DURE (*dure* rhymes with *lure*)

Galbatorix—gal-buh-TOR-icks

Gil'ead—GILL-ee-id

Jeod—JODE (rhymes with *load*)

Murtagh—MUR-tag (mur rhymes with *purr*)

Ra'zac—RAA-zack

Saphira—suh-FEAR-uh

Shruikan—SHREW-kin

Teirm—TEERM

Tronjheim—TRONJ-heem

Vrael—VRAIL

Yazuac—YA-zoo-ack

Zar'roc—ZAR-rock

The Ancient Language

Note: As Eragon is not yet a master of the ancient language, his words and remarks were *not* translated literally, so as to save readers from his atrocious grammar. Quotations from other characters, however, have been left untouched.

Aí varden abr du Shur'tugalar gata vanta.—A warden of the Riders lacks passage.

Aiedail—the morning star

arget—silver

Argetlam—Silver Hand

Atra guliä un ilian tauthr ono un atra ono waíse skölir fra rauthr.—Let luck and happiness follow you and may you be shielded from misfortune.

breoal—family; house

brisingr—fire

Deloi moi!—Earth, change!

delois—a green-leafed plant with purple flowers

Domia abr Wyrda—Dominance of Fate (book)

dras—city

draumr kópa—dream stare

Du grind huildr!—Hold the gate!

"Du Silbena Datia"—"The Sighing Mists" (a poem song)

Du Sundavar Freohr—Death of the Shadows

Du Vrangr Gata—The Wandering Path

Du Weldenvarden—The Guarding Forest

Edoc'sil—Unconquerable

eitha—go; leave

Eka aí fricai un Shur'tugal!—I am a Rider and friend!

ethgrí—invoke

Fethrblaka, eka weohnata néiat haina ono. Blaka eom iet lam.—Bird, I will not harm you. Flap to my hand.

garjzla—light

Gath un reisa du rakr!—Unite and raise the mist!

gedwëy ignasia—shining palm

Gëuloth du knífr!—Dull the knife!

Helgrind—The Gates of Death

iet—my (informal)

Istalrí boetk!—Broad fire!

jierda—break; hit

Jierda theirra kalfis!—Break their calves!

Manin! Wyrda! Hugin!—Memory! Fate! Thought!

Moi stenr!—Stone, change!

Nagz reisa!—Blanket, rise!

Osthato Chetowä—the Mourning Sage

pömnuria—my (formal)

Ristvak'baen—Place of Sorrow (*baen*—used here and in Urû'baen, the capital of the Empire—is always pronounced *bane* and is an expression of great sadness/grief)

seithr—witch

Shur'tugal—Dragon Rider

Skulblaka, eka celöbra ono un mulabra ono un onr Shur'tugal né haina. Atra nosu waíse fricai.—Dragon, I honor you and mean you and your Rider no harm. Let us be friends.

slytha—sleep

Stenr reisa!—Raise stone!

thrysta—thrust; compress

Thrysta deloi.—Compress the earth.

Thverr stenr un atra eka hórna!—Traverse stone and let me hear!

Togira Ikonoka—the Cripple Who Is Whole

tuatha du orothrim—tempering the fool's wisdom (level in Riders' training)

Varden—the Warders

vöndr—a thin, straight stick

Waíse heill!—Be healed!

Wiol pömnuria ilian.—For my happiness.

wyrda—fate

yawë—a bond of trust

The Dwarf Language

Akh Guntéraz dorzâda!—For Guntéra's adoration!

Âz knurl deimi lanok.—Beware, the rock changes.

barzûl—a curse (ill fate)

Carkna bragha!—Great danger!

dûrgrimst—clan (literally, our hall/home)

Egraz Carn—Bald One
Farthen Dûr—Our Father
hírna—likeness; statue
Ilf carnz orodûm.—It is one's obligation/fate.
Ingietum—metalworkers; smiths
Isidar Mithrim—Star Sapphire
knurl—stone; rock
knurla—dwarf (literally, one of stone)
Kóstha-mérna—Foot Pool (a lake)
oeí—yes; affirmative
otho—faith
sheilven—cowards
Tronjheim—Helm of Giants
Vol Turin—The Endless Staircase

The Urgal Language

drajl—spawn of maggots
Ithrö Zhâda (Orthíad)—Rebel Doom
Kaz jtierl trazhid! Otrag bagh.—Do not attack! Circle him.
ushnark—father

Acknowledgments

I created *Eragon*, but its success is the result of the enthusiastic efforts of friends, family, fans, librarians, teachers, students, school administrators, distributors, booksellers, and many more. I wish I could mention by name all the people who have helped, but the list is very, very long. You know who you are, and I thank you!

Eragon was first published in early 2002 by my parents' publishing company, Paolini International LLC. They had already released three books, so it was only natural to do the same with *Eragon*. We knew *Eragon* would appeal to a wide range of readers; our challenge was to spread the word about it.

During 2002 and the beginning of 2003, I traveled throughout the United States doing over 130 book signings and presentations in schools, bookstores, and libraries. My mother and I arranged all the events. At first I had only one or two appearances per month, but as we became more efficient at scheduling, our homemade book tour expanded to the point where I was on the road almost continuously.

I met thousands of wonderful people, many of whom became loyal fans and friends. One of those fans is Michelle Frey, now my editor at Knopf Books for Young Readers, who approached me with an offer to acquire *Eragon*. Needless to say, I was delighted that Knopf was interested in my book.

Thus, there are two groups of people who deserve thanks. The first assisted with the production of the Paolini International LLC edition of *Eragon*, while the second is responsible for the Knopf edition.

Here are the brave souls who helped bring *Eragon* into existence:

The original gang: my mother for her thoughtful red pen and wonderful help with commas, colons, semicolons, and other assorted beasties; my father for his smashing editing job, all the time he spent hammering my vague, wayward thoughts into line, formatting the book and designing the cover, and listening to so many presentations; Grandma Shirley for helping me create a satisfactory beginning and ending; my sister for her plot advice, her good humor at being portrayed as an herbalist in *Eragon*, and her long hours Photoshopping Saphira's eye on the cover; Kathy Tyers for giving me the means to do a brutal—and much-needed—rewrite of the first three chapters; John Taliaferro for his advice and wonderful review; a fan named Tornado—Eugene Walker—who caught a number of copyediting errors; and Donna Overall for her love of the story, editing and formatting advice,

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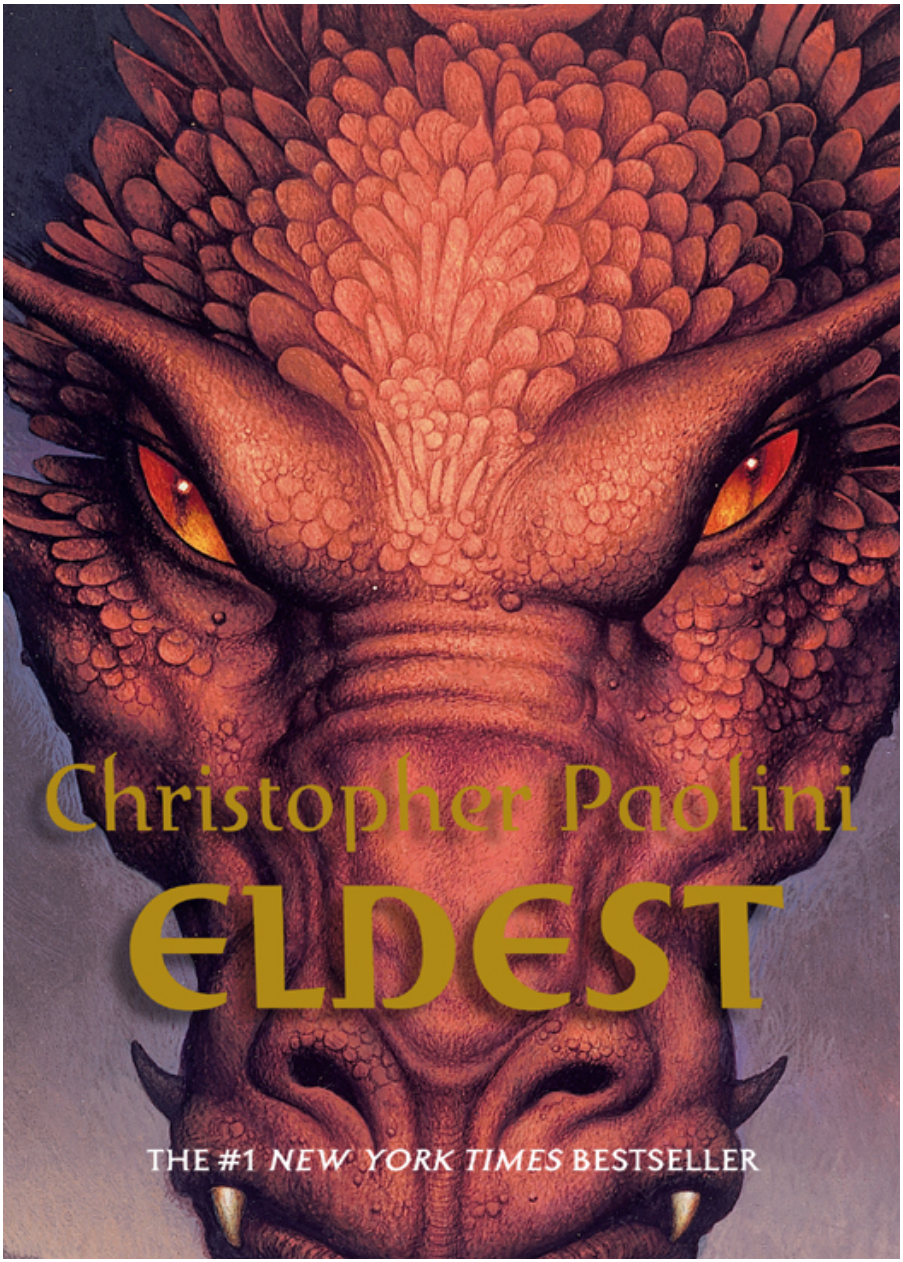
Lastly, a very special thanks to my characters, who bravely face the dangers I force them to confront, and without whom I wouldn't have a story.

May your swords stay sharp!

Christopher Paolini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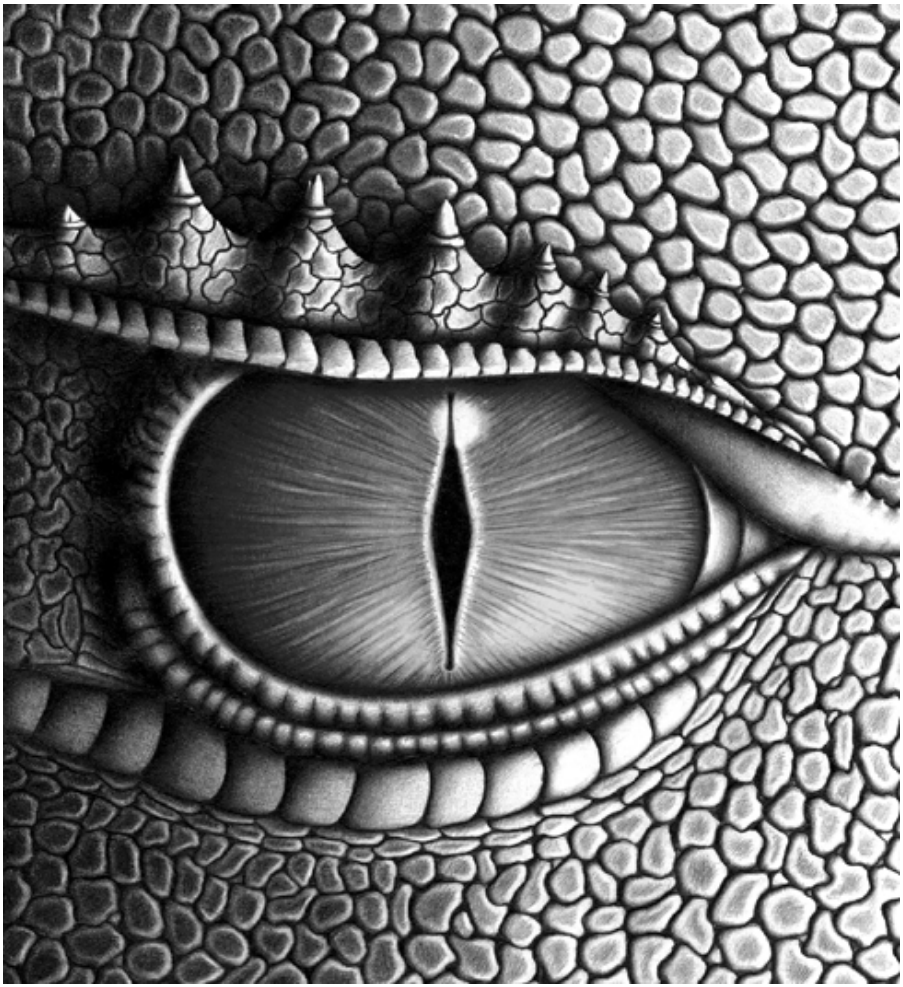

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BOOK II IN THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

Christopher Paolini

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As always, this book is for my family.

And also to my incredible fans. You made this adventure possible.

Sé onr sverdar sitja hvass!

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Extra Scene from *Eldest*

Synopsis of *Eragon*, Book One of Inheritance

Eragon—a fifteen-year-old farmboy—is shocked when a polished blue stone appears before him in the range of mountains known as the Spine. Eragon takes the stone to the farm where he lives with his uncle, Garrow, and his cousin, Roran. Garrow and his late wife, Marian, have raised Eragon. Nothing is known of his father; his mother, Selena, was Garrow's sister and has not been seen since Eragon's birth.

Later, the stone cracks open and a baby dragon emerges. When Eragon touches her, a silvery mark appears on his palm, and an irrevocable bond is forged between their minds, making Eragon one of the legendary Dragon Riders.

The Dragon Riders were created thousands of years earlier in the aftermath of the elves' great war with the dragons, in order to ensure that hostilities would never again afflict their two races. The Riders became peacekeepers, educators, healers, natural philosophers, and the greatest of spellweavers—since being joined with a dragon makes one a magician. Under their guidance and protection, the land enjoyed a golden age.

When humans arrived in Alagaësia, they too were added to this elite order. After many years of peace, the monstrous and warlike Urgals killed the dragon of a young human Rider named Galbatorix. Driven mad by the loss and by his elders' refusal to provide him with another dragon, Galbatorix set out to topple the Riders.

He stole another dragon—whom he named Shruikan and forced to serve him through certain black spells—and gathered around himself a group of thirteen traitors: the Forsworn. With the help of those cruel disciples, Galbatorix threw down the Riders; killed their leader, Vrael; and declared himself king over Alagaësia. In this, Galbatorix was only partly successful, for the elves and dwarves remain autonomous in their secret haunts, and some humans have established an independent country, Surda, in the south of Alagaësia. A stalemate has existed between these factions for twenty years, preceded by eighty years of open conflict brought about by the destruction of the Riders.

It is into this fragile political situation, then, that Eragon is thrust. He fears he is in mortal danger—it is common knowledge that Galbatorix killed every Rider who would not swear loyalty to him—

and so Eragon hides the dragon from his family as he raises her. During this time, Eragon names the creature Saphira, after a dragon mentioned by the village storyteller, Brom. Soon Roran leaves the farm for a job that will allow him to earn enough money to marry Katrina, the butcher's daughter.

When Saphira stands taller than Eragon, two menacing, beetle-like strangers called the Ra'zac arrive in Carvahall, searching for the stone that was her egg. Frightened, Saphira kidnaps Eragon and flies into the Spine. Eragon manages to convince her to turn back, but by then his home has been obliterated by the Ra'zac. Eragon finds Garrow in the wreckage, tortured and badly wounded.

Garrow dies soon afterward, and Eragon vows to track down and kill the Ra'zac. Eragon is accosted by Brom, who knows of Saphira's existence and asks to accompany Eragon for reasons of his own. After Eragon agrees, Brom gives him the sword Zar'roc, which was once a Rider's blade, though he refuses to say how he acquired it.

Eragon learns much from Brom during their travels, including how to fight with swords and use magic. Eventually, they lose the Ra'zac's trail and visit the city of Teirm, where Brom believes his old friend Jeod can help locate their lair.

In Teirm, the eccentric herbalist Angela tells Eragon's fortune, predicting mighty powers struggling to control his destiny; an epic romance with one of noble birth; the fact that he will one day leave Alagaësia, never to return; and a betrayal from within his family. Her companion, the werecat Solembum, also gives him some words of advice. Then Eragon, Brom, and Saphira depart for Dras-Leona, where they hope to find the Ra'zac.

Brom finally reveals that he is an agent of the Varden—a rebel group dedicated to overthrowing Galbatorix—and that he had been hiding in Eragon's village, waiting for a new Dragon Rider to appear. Brom also explains that twenty years ago, he and Jeod stole Saphira's egg from Galbatorix. In the process, Brom killed Morzan, first and last of the Forsworn. Only two other dragon eggs still exist, both of which remain in Galbatorix's possession.

Near Dras-Leona, the Ra'zac waylay Eragon and his companions, and Brom is mortally wounded while protecting Eragon. The Ra'zac are driven away by a mysterious young man named Murtagh, who says he's been tracking the Ra'zac. Brom dies the following night. With his last breath, he confesses that he was once a Rider and his slain dragon was also named Saphira. Eragon buries Brom in a tomb of sandstone, which Saphira transmutes into pure diamond.

Without Brom, Eragon and Saphira decide to join the Varden. By ill chance, Eragon is captured at the city of Gil'ead and brought to the Shade Durza, Galbatorix's right-hand man. With Murtagh's help,

Eragon escapes from prison, bringing along with him the unconscious elf Arya, another captive. By this point, Eragon and Murtagh have become great friends.

With her mind, Arya tells Eragon that she has been ferrying Saphira's egg between the elves and the Varden, in the hopes that it might hatch for one of their children. However, during her last trip, she was ambushed by Durza and forced to send the egg elsewhere with magic, which is how it came to Eragon. Now Arya is seriously wounded and requires the Varden's medical help. Using mental images, she shows Eragon how to find the rebels. An epic chase ensues. Eragon and his friends traverse almost four hundred miles in eight days. They are pursued by a contingent of Urgals, who trap them in the towering Beor Mountains. Murtagh, who had not wanted to go to the Varden, is forced to tell Eragon that he is the son of Morzan.

Murtagh, however, has denounced his father's deeds and fled Galbatorix's patronage to seek his own destiny. He shows Eragon a great scar across his back, inflicted when Morzan threw his sword, Zar'roc, at him when he was just a child. Thus, Eragon learns his sword once belonged to Murtagh's father, he who betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix and slaughtered many of his former comrades.

Just before they are overwhelmed by the Urgals, Eragon and his friends are rescued by the Varden, who seem to appear out of the very stone. It turns out that the rebels are based in Farthen Dûr, a hollow mountain ten miles high and ten miles across. It is also home to the dwarves' capital, Tronjheim. Once inside, Eragon is taken to Ajihad, leader of the Varden, while Murtagh is imprisoned because of his parentage. Ajihad explains many things to Eragon, including that the Varden, elves, and dwarves had agreed that when a new Rider appeared, he or she would initially be trained by Brom and then sent to the elves to complete the instruction. Eragon must now decide whether to follow this course.

Eragon meets with the dwarf king, Hrothgar, and Ajihad's daughter, Nasuada; is tested by the Twins, two bald and rather nasty magicians who serve Ajihad; spars with Arya once she has recovered; and again encounters Angela and Solembum, who have joined the Varden. Eragon and Saphira also bless one of the Varden's orphan babies.

Eragon's stay is disrupted by news of an Urgal army approaching through the dwarves' tunnels. In the battle that follows, Eragon is separated from Saphira and forced to fight Durza alone. Far stronger than any human, Durza easily defeats Eragon, slashing open his back from shoulder to hip. At that moment, Saphira and Arya break the roof of the chamber—a sixty-foot-wide star sapphire—distracting Durza long enough for Eragon to stab him through the heart. Freed from Durza's spells, the Urgals are driven back into the tunnels.

While Eragon lies unconscious after the battle, he is telepathically contacted by a being who identifies himself as Togira Ikonoka—the Cripple Who Is Whole. He offers answers to all of Eragon's questions and urges Eragon to seek him in Ellesméra, where the elves live.

When Eragon wakes, he finds that, despite Angela's best efforts, he has been left with a huge scar similar to Murtagh's. Dismayed, he also realizes that he only slew Durza through sheer luck and that he desperately needs more training.

And at the end of Book One, Eragon decides that, yes, he will find this Togira Ikonoka and learn from him. For gray-eyed Destiny now weaves apace, the first resounding note of war echoes across the land, and the time fast approaches when Eragon shall have to step forth and confront his one, true enemy: King Galbatorix.

A Twin Disaster

The songs of the dead are the lamentations of the living.

So thought Eragon as he stepped over a twisted and hacked Urgal, listening to the keening of women who removed loved ones from the blood-muddied ground of Farthen Dûr. Behind him Saphira delicately skirted the corpse, her glittering blue scales the only color in the gloom that filled the hollow mountain.

It was three days since the Varden and dwarves had fought the Urgals for possession of Tronjheim, the mile-high, conical city nestled in the center of Farthen Dûr, but the battlefield was still strewn with carnage. The sheer number of bodies had stymied their attempts to bury the dead. In the distance, a mountainous fire glowed sullenly by Farthen Dûr's wall where the Urgals were being burned. No burial or honored resting place for them.

Since waking to find his wound healed by Angela, Eragon had tried three times to assist in the recovery effort. On each occasion he had been racked by terrible pains that seemed to explode from his spine. The healers gave him various potions to drink. Arya and Angela said that he was perfectly sound. Nevertheless, he hurt. Nor could Saphira help, only share his pain as it rebounded across their mental link.

Eragon ran a hand over his face and looked up at the stars showing through Farthen Dûr's distant top, which were smudged with sooty smoke from the pyre. *Three days*. Three days since he had killed Durza; three days since people began calling him Shadeslayer; three days since the remnants of the sorcerer's consciousness had ravaged his mind and he had been saved by the mysterious Togira Ikonoka, the Cripple Who Is Whole. He had told no one about that vision but Saphira. Fighting Durza and the dark spirits that controlled him had transformed Eragon; although for better or for worse he was still unsure. He felt fragile, as if a sudden shock would shatter his reconstructed body and consciousness.

And now he had come to the site of the combat, driven by a morbid desire to see its aftermath. Upon arriving, he found nothing but the uncomfortable presence of death and decay, not the glory that heroic songs had led him to expect.

Before his uncle, Garrow, was slain by the Ra'zac months earlier, the brutality that Eragon had witnessed between the humans, dwarves, and Urgals would have destroyed him. Now it numbed him.

He had realized, with Saphira's help, that the only way to stay rational amid such pain was to *do* things. Beyond that, he no longer believed that life possessed inherent meaning—not after seeing men torn apart by the Kull, a race of giant Urgals, and the ground a bed of thrashing limbs and the dirt so wet with blood it soaked through the soles of his boots. If any honor existed in war, he concluded, it was in fighting to protect others from harm.

He bent and plucked a tooth, a molar, from the dirt. Bouncing it on his palm, he and Saphira slowly made a circuit through the trampled plain. They stopped at its edge when they noticed Jörmundur—Ajihad's second in command in the Varden—hurrying toward them from Tronjheim. When he came near, Jörmundur bowed, a gesture Eragon knew he would never have made just days before.

"I'm glad I found you in time, Eragon." He clutched a parchment note in one hand. "Ajihad is returning, and he wants you to be there when he arrives. The others are already waiting for him by Tronjheim's west gate. We'll have to hurry to get there in time."

Eragon nodded and headed toward the gate, keeping a hand on Saphira. Ajihad had been gone most of the three days, hunting down Urgals who had managed to escape into the dwarf tunnels that honeycombed the stone beneath the Beor Mountains. The one time Eragon had seen him between expeditions, Ajihad was in a rage over discovering that his daughter, Nasuada, had disobeyed his orders to leave with the other women and children before the battle. Instead, she had secretly fought among the Varden's archers.

Murtagh and the Twins had accompanied Ajihad: the Twins because it was dangerous work and the Varden's leader needed the protection of their magical skills, and Murtagh because he was eager to continue proving that he bore the Varden no ill will. It surprised Eragon how much people's attitudes toward Murtagh had changed, considering that Murtagh's father was the Dragon Rider Morzan, who had betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix. Even though Murtagh despised his father and was loyal to Eragon, the Varden had not trusted him. But now, no one was willing to waste energy on a petty hate when so much work remained. Eragon missed talking with Murtagh and looked forward to discussing all that had happened, once he returned.

As Eragon and Saphira rounded Tronjheim, a small group became visible in the pool of lantern light before the timber gate. Among them were Orik—the dwarf shifting impatiently on his stout legs—and Arya. The white bandage around her upper arm gleamed in the darkness, reflecting a faint highlight onto the bottom of her hair. Eragon felt a strange thrill, as he always did when he saw the elf. She looked at him and Saphira, green eyes flashing, then continued watching for Ajihad.

By breaking Isidar Mithrim—the great star sapphire that was sixty feet across and carved in the shape of a rose—Arya had allowed Eragon to kill Durza and so win the battle. Still, the dwarves were furious with her for destroying their most prized treasure. They refused to move the sapphire's remains, leaving them in a massive circle inside Tronjheim's central chamber. Eragon had walked through the splintered wreckage and shared the dwarves' sorrow for all the lost beauty.

He and Saphira stopped by Orik and looked out at the empty land that surrounded Tronjheim, extending to Farthen Dûr's base five miles away in each direction. "Where will Ajihad come from?" asked Eragon.

Orik pointed at a cluster of lanterns staked around a large tunnel opening a couple of miles away. "He should be here soon."

Eragon waited patiently with the others, answering comments directed at him but preferring to speak with Saphira in the peace of his mind. The quiet that filled Farthen Dûr suited him.

Half an hour passed before motion flickered in the distant tunnel. A group of ten men climbed out onto the ground, then turned and helped up as many dwarves. One of the men—Eragon assumed it was Ajihad—raised a hand, and the warriors assembled behind him in two straight lines. At a signal, the formation marched proudly toward Tronjheim.

Before they went more than five yards, the tunnel behind them swarmed with a flurry of activity as more figures jumped out. Eragon squinted, unable to see clearly from so far away.

Those are Urgals! exclaimed Saphira, her body tensing like a drawn bowstring.

Eragon did not question her. "Urgals!" he cried, and leaped onto Saphira, berating himself for leaving his sword, Zar'roc, in his room. No one had expected an attack now that the Urgal army had been driven away.

His wound twinged as Saphira lifted her azure wings, then drove them down and jumped forward, gaining speed and altitude each second. Below them, Arya ran toward the tunnel, nearly keeping apace with Saphira. Orik trailed her with several men, while Jörmundur sprinted back toward the barracks.

Eragon was forced to watch helplessly as the Urgals fell on the rear of Ajihad's warriors; he could not work magic over such a distance. The monsters had the advantage of surprise and quickly cut down four men, forcing the rest of the warriors, men and dwarves alike, to cluster around Ajihad in an attempt to protect him. Swords and axes clashed as the groups pressed together. Light flashed from one of the Twins, and an Urgal fell, clutching the stump of his severed arm.

For a minute, it seemed the defenders would be able to resist the Urgals, but then a swirl of motion disturbed the air, like a faint band of mist wrapping itself around the combatants. When it cleared, only four warriors were standing: Ajihad, the Twins, and Murtagh. The Urgals converged on them, blocking Eragon's view as he stared with rising horror and fear.

No! No! No!

Before Saphira could reach the fight, the knot of Urgals streamed back to the tunnel and scrambled underground, leaving only prone forms behind.

The moment Saphira touched down, Eragon vaulted off, then faltered, overcome by grief and anger. *I can't do this*. It reminded him too much of when he had returned to the farm to find his uncle Garrow dying. Fighting back his dread with every step, he began to search for survivors.

The site was eerily similar to the battlefield he had inspected earlier, except that here the blood was fresh.

In the center of the massacre lay Ajihad, his breastplate rent with numerous gashes, surrounded by five Urgals he had slain. His breath still came in ragged gasps. Eragon knelt by him and lowered his face so his tears would not land on the leader's ruined chest. No one could heal such wounds. Running up to them, Arya paused and stopped, her face transformed with sorrow when she saw that Ajihad could not be saved.

"Eragon." The name slipped from Ajihad's lips—no more than a whisper.

"Yes, I am here."

"Listen to me, Eragon.… I have one last command for you." Eragon leaned closer to catch the dying man's words. "You must promise me something: promise that you … won't let the Varden fall into chaos. They are the only hope for resisting the Empire.… They must be kept strong. You must promise me."

"I promise."

"Then peace be with you, Eragon Shadeslayer.…" With his last breath, Ajihad closed his eyes, setting his noble face in repose, and died.

Eragon bowed his head. He had trouble breathing past the lump in his throat, which was so hard it hurt. Arya blessed Ajihad in a ripple of the ancient language, then said in her musical voice, "Alas, his death will cause much strife. He is right, you must do all you can to avert a struggle for power. I will assist where possible."

Unwilling to speak, Eragon gazed at the rest of the bodies. He would have given anything to be elsewhere. Saphira nosed one of the Urgals and said, *This should not have happened. It is an evil doing, and*

all the worse for coming when we should be safe and victorious. She examined another body, then swung her head around. *Where are the Twins and Murtagh? They're not among the dead*.

Eragon scanned the corpses. *You're right!* Elation surged within him as he hurried to the tunnel's mouth. There pools of thickening blood filled the hollows in the worn marble steps like a series of black mirrors, glossy and oval, as if several torn bodies had been dragged down them. *The Urgals must have taken them! But why? They don't keep prisoners or hostages*. Despair instantly returned. *It doesn't matter. We can't pursue them without reinforcements; you wouldn't even fit through the opening*.

They may still be alive. Would you abandon them?

What do you expect me to do? The dwarf tunnels are an endless maze! I would only get lost. And I couldn't catch Urgals on foot, though Arya might be able to.

Then ask her to.

Arya! Eragon hesitated, torn between his desire for action and his loathing to put her in danger. Still, if any one person in the Varden could handle the Urgals, it was she. With a groan, he explained what they had found.

Arya's slanted eyebrows met in a frown. "It makes no sense."

"Will you pursue them?"

She stared at him for a heavy moment. "Wiol ono." For you. Then she bounded forward, sword flashing in her hand as she dove into the earth's belly.

Burning with frustration, Eragon settled cross-legged by Ajihad, keeping watch over the body. He could barely assimilate the fact that Ajihad was dead and Murtagh missing. *Murtagh*. Son of one of the Forsworn—the thirteen Riders who had helped Galbatorix destroy their order and anoint himself king of Alagaësia—and Eragon's friend. At times Eragon had wished Murtagh gone, but now that he had been forcibly removed, the loss left an unexpected void. He sat motionless as Orik approached with the men.

When Orik saw Ajihad, he stamped his feet and swore in Dwarvish, swinging his ax into the body of an Urgal. The men only stood in shock. Rubbing a pinch of dirt between his callused hands, the dwarf growled, "Ah, now a hornet's nest has broken; we'll have no peace among the Varden after this. *Barzûln*, but this makes things complicated. Were you in time to hear his last words?"

Eragon glanced at Saphira. "They must wait for the right person before I'll repeat them."

"I see. And where'd be Arya?"

Eragon pointed.

Orik swore again, then shook his head and sat on his heels.

Jörmundur soon arrived with twelve ranks of six warriors each. He motioned for them to wait outside the radius of bodies while he proceeded onward alone. He bent and touched Ajihad on the shoulder. "How can fate be this cruel, my old friend? I would have been here sooner if not for the size of this cursed mountain, and then you might have been saved. Instead, we are wounded at the height of our triumph."

Eragon softly told him about Arya and the disappearance of the Twins and Murtagh.

"She should not have gone," said Jörmundur, straightening, "but we can do naught about it now. Guards will be posted here, but it will be at least an hour before dwarf guides can be found for another expedition into the tunnels."

"I'd be willing to lead it," offered Orik.

Jörmundur looked back at Tronjheim, his gaze distant. "No, Hrothgar will need you now; someone else will have to go. I'm sorry, Eragon, but everyone important *must* stay here until Ajihad's successor is chosen. Arya will have to fend for herself.… We could not overtake her anyway."

Eragon nodded, accepting the inevitable.

Jörmundur swept his gaze around before saying so all could hear, "Ajihad has died a warrior's death! Look, he slew five Urgals where a lesser man might have been overwhelmed by one. We will give him every honor and hope his spirit pleases the gods. Bear him and our companions back to Tronjheim on your shields … and do not be ashamed to let your tears be seen, for this is a day of sorrow that all will remember. May we soon have the privilege of sheathing our blades in the monsters who have slain our leader!"

As one, the warriors knelt, baring their heads in homage to Ajihad. Then they stood and reverently lifted him on their shields so he lay between their shoulders. Already many of the Varden wept, tears flowing into beards, yet they did not disgrace their duty and allow Ajihad to fall. With solemn steps, they marched back to Tronjheim, Saphira and Eragon in the middle of the procession.

The Council of Elders

Eragon roused himself and rolled to the edge of the bed, looking about the room, which was suffused with the dim glow of a shuttered lantern. He sat and watched Saphira sleep. Her muscled sides expanded and contracted as the great bellows of her lungs forced air through her scaled nostrils. Eragon thought of the raging inferno that she could now summon at will and send roaring out of her maw. It was an awesome sight when flames hot enough to melt metal rushed past her tongue and ivory teeth without harming them. Since she first breathed fire during his fight with Durza—while plunging toward them from the top of Tronjheim—Saphira had been insufferably proud of her new talent. She was constantly releasing little jets of flame, and she took every opportunity to light objects ablaze.

Because Isidar Mithrim was shattered, Eragon and Saphira had been unable to remain in the dragonhold above it. The dwarves had given them quarters in an old guardroom on Tronjheim's bottom level. It was a large room, but with a low ceiling and dark walls.

Anguish gripped Eragon as he remembered the events of the previous day. Tears filled his eyes, spilling over, and he caught one on his hand. They had heard nothing from Arya until late that evening, when she emerged from the tunnel, weary and footsore. Despite her best efforts—and all her magic—the Urgals had escaped her. "I found these," she said. Then she revealed one of the Twins' purple robes, torn and bloodied, and Murtagh's tunic and both his leather gauntlets. "They were strewn along the edge of a black chasm, the bottom of which no tunnel reaches. The Urgals must have stolen their armor and weapons and thrown the bodies into the pit. I scryed both Murtagh and the Twins, and saw naught but the shadows of the abyss." Her eyes met Eragon's. "I'm sorry; they are gone."

Now, in the confines of his mind, Eragon mourned Murtagh. It was a dreadful, creeping feeling of loss and horror made worse by the fact that he had grown ever more familiar with it in past months.

As he stared at the tear in his hand—a small, glistening dome—he decided to scry the three men himself. He knew it was a desperate and futile prospect, but he had to try in order to convince himself that Murtagh was really gone. Even so, he was uncertain if he wanted to succeed where Arya had failed, if it would make him feel any better to catch a glimpse of Murtagh lying broken at the base of a cliff deep

below Farthen Dûr.

He whispered, “Draumr kópa.” Darkness enveloped the liquid, turning it into a small dot of night on his silver palm. Movement flickered through it, like the swish of a bird across a clouded moon … then nothing.

Another tear joined the first.

Eragon took a deep breath, leaned back, and let calm settle over him. Since recovering from Durza’s wound, he had realized—humbling as it was—that he had prevailed only through sheer luck. *If I ever face another Shade, or the Ra’zac, or Galbatorix, I* must *be stronger if I expect to win. Brom could have taught me more, I know he could have. But without him, I have but one choice: the elves*.

Saphira’s breathing quickened, and she opened her eyes, yawning expansively. *Good morning, little one*.

Is it? He looked down and leaned on his hands, compressing the mattress. *It’s terrible … Murtagh and Ajihad … Why didn’t sentries in the tunnels warn us of the Urgals? They shouldn’t have been able to trail Ajihad’s group without being noticed.… Arya was right, it doesn’t make sense*.

We may never know the truth, said Saphira gently. She stood, wings brushing the ceiling. *You need to eat, then we must discover what the Varden are planning. We can’t waste time; a new leader could be chosen within hours*.

Eragon agreed, thinking of how they had left everyone yesterday: Orik rushing off to give King Hrothgar the tidings, Jörmundur taking Ajihad’s body to a place where it would rest until the funeral, and Arya, who stood alone and watched the goings-on.

Eragon rose and strapped on Zar’roc and his bow, then bent and lifted Snowfire’s saddle. A line of pain sheared through his torso, driving him to the floor, where he writhed, scrabbling at his back. It felt like he was being sawed in half. Saphira growled as the ripping sensation reached her. She tried to soothe him with her own mind but was unable to alleviate his suffering. Her tail instinctually lifted, as if to fight.

It took minutes before the fit subsided and the last throb faded away, leaving Eragon gasping. Sweat drenched his face, making his hair stick and his eyes sting. He reached back and gingerly fingered the top of his scar. It was hot and inflamed and sensitive to touch. Saphira lowered her nose and touched him on the arm. *Oh, little one.…*

It was worse this time, he said, staggering upright. She let him lean against her as he wiped off the sweat with a rag, then he tentatively stepped toward the door.

Are you strong enough to go?

We have to. We’re obliged as dragon and Rider to make a public choice

regarding the next head of the Varden, and perhaps even influence the selection. I won't ignore the strength of our position; we now wield great authority within the Varden. At least the Twins aren't here to grab the position for themselves. That's the only good in the situation.

Very well, but Durza should suffer a thousand years of torture for what he did to you.

He grunted. *Just stay close to me*.

Together they made their way through Tronjheim, toward the nearest kitchen. In the corridors and hallways, people stopped and bowed to them, murmuring "Argetlam" or "Shadeslayer." Even dwarves made the motions, though not as often. Eragon was struck by the somber, haunted expressions of the humans and the dark clothing they wore to display their sadness. Many women were dressed entirely in black, lace veils covering their faces.

In the kitchen, Eragon brought a stone platter of food to a low table. Saphira watched him carefully in case he should have another attack. Several people tried to approach him, but she lifted a lip and growled, sending them scurrying away. Eragon picked at his food and pretended to ignore the disturbances. Finally, trying to divert his thoughts from Murtagh, he asked, *Who do you think has the means to take control of the Varden now that Ajihad and the Twins are gone?*

She hesitated. *It's possible you could, if Ajihad's last words were interpreted as a blessing to secure the leadership. Almost no one would oppose you. However, that does not seem a wise path to take. I see only trouble in that direction*.

I agree. Besides, Arya wouldn't approve, and she could be a dangerous enemy. Elves can't lie in the ancient language, but they have no such inhibition in ours—she could deny that Ajihad ever uttered those words if it served her purposes. No, I don't want the position.… What about Jörmundur?

Ajihad called him his right-hand man. Unfortunately, we know little about him or the Varden's other leaders. Such a short time has passed since we came here. We will have to make our judgment on our feelings and impressions, without the benefit of history.

Eragon pushed his fish around a lump of mashed tubers. *Don't forget Hrothgar and the dwarf clans; they won't be quiet in this. Except for Arya, the elves have no say in the succession—a decision will be made before word of this even reaches them. But the dwarves can't be—won't be—ignored. Hrothgar favors the Varden, but if enough clans oppose him, he might be maneuvered into backing someone unsuited for the command*.

And who might that be?

A person easily manipulated. He closed his eyes and leaned back. *It could be anyone in Farthen Dûr, anyone at all*.

For a long while, they both considered the issues facing them. Then

Saphira said, *Eragon, there is someone here to see you. I can't scare him away.*

Eh? He cracked his eyes open, squinting as they adjusted to the light. A pale-looking youth stood by the table. The boy eyed Saphira like he was afraid she would try to eat him. "What is it?" asked Eragon, not unkindly.

The boy started, flustered, then bowed. "You have been summoned, Argetlam, to speak before the Council of Elders."

"Who are they?"

The question confused the boy even more. "The—the council is … are … people we—that is, the Varden—choose to speak on our behalf to Ajihad. They were his trusted advisers, and now they wish to see you. It is a great honor!" He finished with a quick smile.

"Are you to lead me to them?"

"Yes, I am."

Saphira looked at Eragon questioningly. He shrugged and left the uneaten food, motioning for the boy to show the way. As they walked, the boy admired Zar'roc with bright eyes, then looked down shyly.

"What are you called?" asked Eragon.

"Jarsha, sir."

"That's a good name. You carried your message well; you should be proud." Jarsha beamed and bounced forward.

They reached a convex stone door, which Jarsha pushed open. The room inside was circular, with a sky blue dome decorated with constellations. A round marble table, inlaid with the crest of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum—an upright hammer ringed by twelve stars—stood in the center of the chamber. Seated there were Jörmundur and two other men, one tall and one broad; a woman with pinched lips, close-set eyes, and elaborately painted cheeks; and a second woman with an immense pile of gray hair above a matronly face, belied by a dagger hilt peeking out of the vast hills of her bodice.

"You may go," said Jörmundur to Jarsha, who quickly bowed and left.

Conscious that he was being watched, Eragon surveyed the room, then seated himself in the middle of a swath of empty chairs, so that the council members were forced to turn in their seats in order to look at him. Saphira hunkered directly behind him; he could feel her hot breath on the top of his head.

Jörmundur got halfway up to make a slight bow, then reseated himself. "Thank you for coming, Eragon, even though you have suffered your own loss. This is Umérth," the tall man; "Falberd," the broad one; "and Sabrae and Elessari," the two women.

Eragon inclined his head, then asked, "And what of the Twins, were they part of this council?"

Sabrae shook her head sharply and tapped a long fingernail on the table. “They had naught to do with us. They were slime—worse than slime—leeches that worked only for their own benefit. They had no desire to serve the Varden. Thus, they had no place in this council.” Eragon could smell her perfume all the way on the other side of the table; it was thick and oily, like a rotting flower. He hid a smile at the thought.

“Enough. We’re not here to discuss the Twins,” said Jörmundur. “We face a crisis that must be dealt with quickly and effectively. If we don’t choose Ajihad’s successor, someone else will. Hrothgar has already contacted us to convey his condolences. While he was more than courteous, he is sure to be forming his own plans even as we speak. We must also consider Du Vrangr Gata, the magic users. Most of them are loyal to the Varden, but it’s difficult to predict their actions even in the best of times. They might decide to oppose our authority for their own advantage. That is why we need your assistance, Eragon, to provide the legitimacy required by whoever is to take Ajihad’s place.”

Falberd heaved himself up, planting his meaty hands on the table. “The five of us have already decided whom to support. There is no doubt among us that it is the right person. But,” he raised a thick finger, “before we reveal who it is, you must give us your word of honor that whether you agree or disagree with us, nothing of our discussion will leave this room.”

Why would they want that? Eragon asked Saphira.

I don’t know, she said, snorting. *It might be a trap.… It’s a gamble you’ll have to take. Remember, though, they haven’t asked* me *to pledge anything. I can always tell Arya what they say, if needed. Silly of them, forgetting that I’m as intelligent as any human*.

Pleased with the thought, Eragon said, “Very well, you have my word. Now, who do you want to lead the Varden?”

“Nasuada.”

Surprised, Eragon dropped his gaze, thinking quickly. He had not considered Nasuada for the succession because of her youth—she was just a few years older than Eragon. No real reason existed, of course, for her not to lead, but why would the Council of Elders want her to? How would they benefit? He remembered Brom’s advice and tried to examine the issue from every angle, knowing that he had to decide swiftly.

Nasuada has steel in her, observed Saphira. *She would be like her father*.

Maybe, but what’s their reason for picking her?

To gain time, Eragon asked, “Why not you, Jörmundur? Ajihad called you his right-hand man. Doesn’t that mean you should take his

place now that he's gone?"

A current of unease ran through the council: Sabrae sat even straighter, hands clasped before her; Umérth and Falberd glanced at each other darkly, while Elessari just smiled, the dagger hilt jiggling on her chest.

"Because," said Jörmundur, selecting his words with care, "Ajihad was speaking of military matters then, nothing more. Also, I am a member of this council, which only has power because we support one another. It would be foolish and dangerous for one of us to raise himself above the rest." The council relaxed as he finished, and Elessari patted Jörmundur on the forearm.

Ha! exclaimed Saphira. *He probably would have taken power if it were possible to force the others to back him. Just look how they eye him. He's like a wolf in their midst.*

A wolf in a pack of jackals, perhaps.

"Does Nasuada have enough experience?" inquired Eragon.

Elessari pressed herself against the table's edge as she leaned forward. "I had already been here for seven years when Ajihad joined the Varden. I've watched Nasuada grow up from a darling girl to the woman she is. A trifle light-headed occasionally, but a good figure to lead the Varden. The people will love her. Now I," she patted herself affectionately on the bosom, "and my friends will be here to guide her through these troubled times. She will never be without someone to show her the way. Inexperience should be no barrier to her taking her rightful position."

Understanding flooded Eragon. *They want a puppet!*

"Ajihad's funeral will be held in two days," broke in Umérth. "Directly afterward, we plan to appoint Nasuada as our new leader. We have yet to ask her, but she will surely agree. We want you to be present at the appointing—no one, not even Hrothgar, can complain about it then—and to swear fealty to the Varden. That will give back the confidence Ajihad's death has stolen from the people, and prevent anyone from trying to splinter this organization."

Fealty!

Saphira quickly touched Eragon's mind. *Notice, they don't want you to swear to Nasuada—just to the Varden.*

Yes, and they want to be the ones to appoint Nasuada, which would indicate that the council is more powerful than she. They could have asked Arya or us to appoint her, but that would mean acknowledging whoever did it as above everyone in the Varden. This way, they assert their superiority over Nasuada, gain control over us through fealty, and also get the benefit of having a Rider endorse Nasuada in public.

"What happens," he asked, "if I decide not to accept your offer?"

"Offer?" Falberd asked, seeming puzzled. "Why, nothing, of course.

Only it would be a terrible slight if you're not present when Nasuada is chosen. If the hero of the battle of Farthen Dûr ignores her, what can she think but that a Rider has spited her and found the Varden unworthy to serve? Who could bear such a shame?"

The message could have been no clearer. Eragon clenched Zar'roc's pommel under the table, yearning to scream that it was unnecessary to force him to support the Varden, that he would have done it anyway. Now, however, he instinctively wanted to rebel, to elude the shackles they were trying to place on him. "Since Riders are so highly thought of, I could decide that my efforts would be best spent guiding the Varden myself."

The mood in the room hardened. "That would be unwise," stated Sabrae.

Eragon combed his mind for a way to escape the situation. *With Ajihad gone*, said Saphira, *it may be impossible to remain independent of every group, as he wanted us to. We cannot anger the Varden, and if this council is to control it once Nasuada is in place, then we must appease them. Remember, they act as much out of self-preservation as we do*.

But what will they want us to do once we are in their grasp? Will they respect the Varden's pact with the elves and send us to Ellesméra for training, or command otherwise? Jörmundur strikes me as an honorable man, but the rest of the council? I can't tell.

Saphira brushed the top of his head with her jaw. *Agree to be at this ceremony with Nasuada; that much I think we must do. As for swearing fealty, see if you can avoid acquiescing. Perhaps something will occur between now and then that will change our position … Arya may have a solution*.

Without warning, Eragon nodded and said, "As you wish; I shall attend Nasuada's appointment."

Jörmundur looked relieved. "Good, good. Then we have only one more matter to deal with before you go: Nasuada's acceptance. There's no reason to delay, with all of us here. I'll send for her immediately. And Arya too—we need the elves' approval before making this decision public. It shouldn't be difficult to procure; Arya cannot go against our council *and* you, Eragon. She will have to agree with our judgment."

"Wait," commanded Elessari, a steely glint in her eyes. "Your word, though, Rider. Will you give it in fealty at the ceremony?"

"Yes, you must do that," agreed Falberd. "The Varden would be disgraced if we couldn't provide you every protection."

A nice way to put it!

It was worth a try, said Saphira. *I fear you have no choice now*.

They wouldn't dare harm us if I refused.

No, but they could cause us no end of grief. It is not for my own sake

that I say accept, but for yours. Many dangers exist that I cannot protect you from, Eragon. With Galbatorix set against us, you need allies, not enemies, around you. We cannot afford to contend with both the Empire and the Varden.

Finally, "I'll give it." All around the table were signs of relaxation—even a poorly concealed sigh from Umérth. *They're afraid of us!*

As well they should be, sniped Saphira.

Jörmundur called for Jarsha, and with a few words sent the boy scampering off for Nasuada and Arya. While he was gone, the conversation fell into an uncomfortable silence. Eragon ignored the council, focusing instead on working a way out of his dilemma. None sprang to mind.

When the door opened again, everyone turned expectantly. First came Nasuada, chin held high and eyes steady. Her embroidered gown was the deepest shade of black, deeper even than her skin, broken only by a slash of royal purple that stretched from shoulder to hip. Behind her was Arya, her stride as lithe and smooth as a cat's, and an openly awestruck Jarsha.

The boy was dismissed, then Jörmundur helped Nasuada into a seat. Eragon hastened to do the same for Arya, but she ignored the proffered chair and stood at a distance from the table. *Saphira*, he said, *let her know all that's happened. I have a feeling the council won't inform her that they've compelled me to give the Varden my loyalty*.

"Arya," acknowledged Jörmundur with a nod, then concentrated on Nasuada. "Nasuada, Daughter of Ajihad, the Council of Elders wishes to formally extend its deepest condolences for the loss you, more than anyone else, have suffered.…" In a lower voice, he added, "You have our personal sympathies as well. We all know what it is like to have a family member killed by the Empire."

"Thank you," murmured Nasuada, lowering her almond eyes. She sat, shy and demure, and with an air of vulnerability that made Eragon want to comfort her. Her demeanor was tragically different from that of the energetic young woman who had visited him and Saphira in the dragonhold before the battle.

"Although this is your time of mourning, a quandary exists that you must resolve. This council cannot lead the Varden. And someone must replace your father after the funeral. We ask that you receive the position. As his heir, it is rightfully yours—the Varden expect it of you."

Nasuada bowed her head with shining eyes. Grief was plain in her voice when she said, "I never thought I would be called upon to take my father's place so young. Yet … if you insist it is my duty … I will embrace the office."

Truth Among Friends

The Council of Elders beamed with triumph, pleased that Nasuada had done what they wanted. “We do insist,” said Jörmundur, “for your own good and the good of the Varden.” The rest of the elders added their expressions of support, which Nasuada accepted with sad smiles. Sabrae threw an angry glance at Eragon when he did not join in.

Throughout the exchange, Eragon watched Arya for any reaction to either his news or the council’s announcement. Neither revelation caused her inscrutable expression to change. However, Saphira told him, *She wishes to talk with us afterward.*

Before Eragon could reply, Falberd turned to Arya. “Will the elves find this agreeable?”

She stared at Falberd until the man fidgeted under her piercing gaze, then lifted an eyebrow. “I cannot speak for my queen, but I find nothing objectionable to it. Nasuada has my blessing.”

How could she find it otherwise, knowing what we’ve told her? thought Eragon bitterly. *We’re all backed into corners.*

Arya’s remark obviously pleased the council. Nasuada thanked her and asked Jörmundur, “Is there anything else that must be discussed? For I am weary.”

Jörmundur shook his head. “We will make all the arrangements. I promise you won’t be troubled until the funeral.”

“Again, thank you. Would you leave me now? I need time to consider how best to honor my father and serve the Varden. You have given me much to ponder.” Nasuada splayed her delicate fingers on the dark cloth on her lap.

Umérth looked like he was going to protest at the council being dismissed, but Falberd waved a hand, silencing him. “Of course, whatever will give you peace. If you need help, we are ready and willing to serve.” Gesturing for the rest of them to follow, he swept past Arya to the door.

“Eragon, will you please stay?”

Startled, Eragon lowered himself back into his chair, ignoring alert looks from the councilors. Falberd lingered by the door, suddenly reluctant to depart, then slowly went out. Arya was the last to go. Before she closed the door, she looked at Eragon, her eyes revealing worry and apprehension that had been concealed before.

Nasuada sat partially turned away from Eragon and Saphira. “So we

meet again, Rider. You haven't greeted me. Have I offended you?"

"No, Nasuada; I was reluctant to speak for fear of being rude or foolish. Current circumstances are unkind to hasty statements." Paranoia that they might be eavesdropped on gripped him. Reaching through the barrier in his mind, he delved into the magic and intoned: "Atra nosu waíse vardo fra eld hórnya.… There, now we may speak without being overheard by man, dwarf, or elf."

Nasuada's posture softened. "Thank you, Eragon. You don't know what a gift that is." Her words were stronger and more self-assured than before.

Behind Eragon's chair, Saphira stirred, then carefully made her way around the table to stand before Nasuada. She lowered her great head until one sapphire eye met Nasuada's black ones. The dragon stared at her for a full minute before snorting softly and straightening. *Tell her*, said Saphira, *that I grieve for her and her loss. Also that her strength must become the Varden's when she assumes Ajihad's mantle. They will need a sure guide*.

Eragon repeated the words, adding, "Ajihad was a great man—his name will always be remembered.… There is something I must tell you. Before Ajihad died, he charged me, commanded me, to keep the Varden from falling into chaos. Those were his last words. Arya heard them as well.

"I was going to keep what he said a secret because of the implications, but you have a right to know. I'm not sure what Ajihad meant, nor exactly what he wanted, but I am certain of this: I will always defend the Varden with my powers. I wanted you to understand that, and that I've no desire to usurp the Varden's leadership."

Nasuada laughed brittlely. "But that leadership isn't to be me, is it?" Her reserve had vanished, leaving behind only composure and determination. "I know why you were here before me and what the council is trying to do. Do you think that in the years I served my father, we never planned for this eventuality? I expected the council to do exactly what it did. And now everything is in place for me to take command of the Varden."

"You have no intention of letting them rule you," said Eragon with wonder.

"No. Continue to keep Ajihad's instruction secret. It would be unwise to bandy it about, as people might take it to mean that he wanted you to succeed him, and that would undermine my authority and destabilize the Varden. He said what he thought he had to in order to protect the Varden. I would have done the same. My father …" She faltered briefly. "My father's work will not go unfinished, even if it takes me to the grave. That is what *I* want you,

as a Rider, to understand. All of Ajihad's plans, all his strategies and goals, they are mine now. I will not fail him by being weak. The Empire *will* be brought down, Galbatorix *will* be dethroned, and the rightful government *will* be raised."

By the time she finished, a tear ran down her cheek. Eragon stared, appreciating how difficult her position was and recognizing a depth of character he had not perceived before. "And what of me, Nasuada? What shall I do in the Varden?"

She looked directly into his eyes. "You can do whatever you want. The council members are fools if they think to control you. You are a hero to the Varden and the dwarves, and even the elves will hail your victory over Durza when they hear of it. If you go against the council or me, we will be forced to yield, for the people will support you wholeheartedly. Right now, you are the most powerful person in the Varden. However, if you accept my leadership, I will continue the path laid down by Ajihad: you will go with Arya to the elves, be instructed there, then return to the Varden."

Why is she so honest with us? wondered Eragon. *If she's right, could we have refused the council's demands?*

Saphira took a moment to answer. *Either way, it's too late. You have already agreed to their requests. I think Nasuada is honest because your spell lets her be, and also because she hopes to win our loyalty from the elders.*

An idea suddenly came to Eragon, but before sharing it, he asked, *Can we trust her to hold to what she's said? This is very important.*

Yes, said Saphira. *She spoke with her heart.*

Then Eragon shared his proposal with Saphira. She consented, so he drew Zar'roc and walked to Nasuada. He saw a flash of fear as he approached; her gaze darted toward the door, and she slipped a hand into a fold in her dress and grasped something. Eragon stopped before her, then knelt, Zar'roc flat in his hands.

"Nasuada, Saphira and I have been here for only a short while. But in that time we came to respect Ajihad, and now, in turn, you. You fought under Farthen Dûr when others fled, including the two women of the council, and have treated us openly instead of with deception. Therefore, I offer you my blade … and my fealty as a Rider."

Eragon uttered the pronouncement with a sense of finality, knowing he would never have mouthed it before the battle. Seeing so many men fall and die around him had altered his perspective. Resisting the Empire was no longer something he did for himself, but for the Varden and all the people still trapped under Galbatorix's rule. However long it would take, he had dedicated himself to that task. For the time being, the best thing he could do was serve.

Still, he and Saphira were taking a terrible risk in pledging

themselves to Nasuada. The council could not object because all Eragon had said was that he would swear fealty, but not to whom. Even so, he and Saphira had no guarantee that Nasuada would make a good leader. *It's better to be sworn to an honest fool than to a lying scholar*, decided Eragon.

Surprise flitted across Nasuada's face. She grasped Zar'roc's hilt and lifted it—staring at its crimson blade—then placed the tip on Eragon's head. "I do accept your fealty with honor, Rider, as you accept all the responsibilities accompanying the station. Rise as my vassal and take your sword."

Eragon did as he was bidden. He said, "Now I can tell you openly as my master, the council made me agree to swear to the Varden once you were appointed. This was the only way Saphira and I could circumvent them."

Nasuada laughed with genuine delight. "Ah, I see you have already learned how to play our game. Very well, as my newest and only vassal, will you agree to give your fealty to me again—in public, when the council expects your vow?"

"Of course."

"Good, that will take care of the council. Now, until then, leave me. I have much planning to do, and I must prepare for the funeral.… Remember, Eragon, the bond we have just created is equally binding; I am as responsible for your actions as you are required to serve me. Do not dishonor me."

"Nor you I."

Nasuada paused, then gazed into his eyes and added in a gentler tone: "You have my condolences, Eragon. I realize that others beside myself have cause for sorrow; while I have lost my father, you have also lost a friend. I liked Murtagh a great deal and it saddens me that he is gone.… Goodbye, Eragon."

Eragon nodded, a bitter taste in his mouth, and left the room with Saphira. The hallway outside was empty along its gray length. Eragon put his hands on his hips, tilted back his head, and exhaled. The day had barely begun, yet he was already exhausted by all the emotions that had flooded through him.

Saphira nosed him and said, *This way*. Without further explanation, she headed down the right side of the tunnel. Her polished claws clicked on the hard floor.

Eragon frowned, but followed her. *Where are we going?* No answer. *Saphira, please*. She just flicked her tail. Resigned to wait, he said instead, *Things have certainly changed for us. I never know what to expect from one day to the next—except sorrow and bloodshed*.

All is not bad, she reproached. *We* have *won a great victory. It should be celebrated, not mourned*.

It doesn't help, having to deal with this other nonsense.

She snorted angrily. A thin line of fire shot from her nostrils, singeing Eragon's shoulder. He jumped back with a yelp, biting back a string of curses. *Oops*, said Saphira, shaking her head to clear the smoke.

Oops! You nearly roasted my side!

I didn't expect it to happen. I keep forgetting that fire will come out if I'm not careful. Imagine that every time you raised your arm, lightning struck the ground. It would be easy to make a careless motion and destroy something unintentionally.

You're right.… Sorry I growled at you.

Her bony eyelid clicked as she winked at him. *No matter. The point I was trying to make is that even Nasuada can't force you to do anything*.

But I gave my word as a Rider!

Maybe so, but if I must break it to keep you safe, or to do the right thing, I will not hesitate. It is a burden I could easily carry. Because I'm joined to you, my honor is inherent in your pledge, but as an individual, I'm not bound by it. If I must, I will kidnap you. Any disobedience then would be no fault of your own.

It should never come to that. If we have to use such tricks to do what's right, then Nasuada and the Varden will have lost all integrity.

Saphira stopped. They stood before the carved archway of Tronjheim's library. The vast, silent room seemed empty, though the ranks of back-to-back bookshelves interspersed with columns could conceal many people. Lanterns poured soft light across the scroll-covered walls, illuminating the reading alcoves along their bases.

Weaving through the shelves, Saphira led him to one alcove, where Arya sat. Eragon paused as he studied her. She seemed more agitated than he had ever seen her, though it manifested itself only in the tension of her movements. Unlike before, she wore her sword with the graceful crossguard. One hand rested on the hilt.

Eragon sat at the opposite side of the marble table. Saphira positioned herself between them, where neither could escape her gaze.

"What have you done?" asked Arya with unexpected hostility.

"How so?"

She lifted her chin. "What have you promised the Varden? *What have you done?*"

The last part even reached Eragon mentally. He realized just how close the elf was to losing control. A bit of fear touched him. "We only did what we had to. I'm ignorant of elves' customs, so if our actions upset you, I apologize. There's no cause to be angry."

"Fool! You know nothing about me. I have spent seven decades representing my queen here—fifteen years of which I bore Saphira's egg between the Varden and the elves. In all that time, I struggled to

ensure the Varden had wise, strong leaders who could resist Galbatorix and respect our wishes. Brom helped me by forging the agreement concerning the new Rider—you. Ajihad was committed to your remaining independent so that the balance of power would not be upset. Now I see you siding with the Council of Elders, willingly or not, to control Nasuada! You have overturned a lifetime of work! *What have you done?*"

Dismayed, Eragon dropped all pretenses. With short, clear words, he explained why he had agreed to the council's demands and how he and Saphira had attempted to undermine them.

When he finished, Arya stated, "So."

"So." *Seventy years*. Though he knew elves' lives were extraordinarily long, he had never suspected that Arya was that old, and older, for she appeared to be a woman in her early twenties. The only sign of age on her unlined face was her emerald eyes—deep, knowing, and most often solemn.

Arya leaned back, studying him. "Your position is not what I would wish, but better than I had hoped. I was impolite; Saphira … and you … understand more than I thought. Your compromise will be accepted by the elves, though you must never forget your debt to us for Saphira. There would be no Riders without our efforts."

"The debt is burned into my blood and my palm," said Eragon. In the silence that followed, he cast about for a new topic, eager to prolong their conversation and perhaps learn more about her. "You have been gone for such a long time; do you miss Ellesméra? Or did you live elsewhere?"

"Ellesméra was, and always shall be, my home," she said, looking beyond him. "I have not lived in my family's house since I left for the Varden, when the walls and windows were draped with spring's first flowers. The times I've returned were only fleeting stays, vanishing flecks of memory by our measurement."

He noticed, once again, that she smelled like crushed pine needles. It was a faint, spicy odor that opened his senses and refreshed his mind. "It must be hard to live among all these dwarves and humans without any of your kind."

She cocked her head. "You speak of humans as if you weren't one."

"Perhaps …," he hesitated, "perhaps I am something else—a mixture of two races. Saphira lives inside me as much as I live in her. We share feelings, senses, thoughts, even to the point where we are more one mind than two." Saphira dipped her head in agreement, nearly bumping the table with her snout.

"That is how it should be," said Arya. "A pact more ancient and powerful than you can imagine links you. You won't truly understand what it means to be a Rider until your training is completed. But that

must wait until after the funeral. In the meantime, may the stars watch over you."

With that she departed, slipping into the library's shadowed depths. Eragon blinked. *Is it me, or is everyone on edge today? Like Arya—one moment she's angry, the next she's giving me a blessing!*

No one will be comfortable until things return to normal.

Define normal.

RORAN

Roran trudged up the hill.

He stopped and squinted at the sun through his shaggy hair. *Five hours till sunset. I won't be able to stay long.* With a sigh, he continued along the row of elm trees, each of which stood in a pool of uncut grass.

This was his first visit to the farm since he, Horst, and six other men from Carvahall had removed everything worth salvaging from the destroyed house and burned barn. It had been nearly five months before he could consider returning.

Once on the hilltop, Roran halted and crossed his arms. Before him lay the remains of his childhood home. A corner of the house still stood—crumbling and charred—but the rest had been flattened and was already covered with grass and weeds. Nothing could be seen of the barn. The few acres they had managed to cultivate each year were now filled with dandelions, wild mustard, and more grass. Here and there, stray beets or turnips had survived, but that was all. Just beyond the farm, a thick belt of trees obscured the Anora River.

Roran clenched a fist, jaw muscles knotting painfully as he fought back a combination of rage and grief. He stayed rooted to the spot for many long minutes, trembling whenever a pleasant memory rushed through him. This place had been his entire life and more. It had been his past … and his future. His father, Garrow, once said, "The land is a special thing. Care for it, and it'll care for you. Not many things will do that." Roran had intended to do exactly that up until the moment his world was ruptured by a quiet message from Baldor.

With a groan, he spun away and stalked back toward the road. The shock of that moment still resonated within him. Having everyone he loved torn away in an instant was a soul-changing event from which he would never recover. It had seeped into every aspect of his behavior and outlook.

It also forced Roran to think more than ever before. It was as if bands had been cinched around his mind, and those bands had snapped, allowing him to ponder ideas that were previously unimaginable. Such as the fact that he might not become a farmer, or that justice—the greatest standby in songs and legends—had little hold in reality. At times these thoughts filled his consciousness to the point where he could barely rise in the morning, feeling bloated with

their heaviness.

Turning on the road, he headed north through Palancar Valley, back to Carvahall. The notched mountains on either side were laden with snow, despite the spring greenery that had crept over the valley floor in past weeks. Overhead, a single gray cloud drifted toward the peaks.

Roran ran a hand across his chin, feeling the stubble. *Eragon caused all this—him and his blasted curiosity—by bringing that stone out of the Spine*. It had taken Roran weeks to reach that conclusion. He had listened to everyone's accounts. Several times he had Gertrude, the town healer, read aloud the letter Brom had left him. And there was no other explanation. *Whatever that stone was, it must have attracted the strangers*. For that alone, he blamed Garrow's death on Eragon, though not in anger; he knew that Eragon had intended no harm. No, what roused his fury was that Eragon had left Garrow unburied and fled Palancar Valley, abandoning his responsibilities to gallop off with the old storyteller on some harebrained journey. *How could Eragon have so little regard for those left behind? Did he run because he felt guilty? Afraid? Did Brom mislead him with wild tales of adventure? And why would Eragon listen to such things at a time like that? … I don't even know if he's dead or alive right now*.

Roran scowled and rolled his shoulders, trying to clear his mind. *Brom's letter … Bah!* He had never heard a more ridiculous collection of insinuations and ominous hints. The only thing it made clear was to avoid the strangers, which was common sense to begin with. *The old man was crazy*, he decided.

A flicker of movement caused Roran to turn, and he saw twelve deer—including a young buck with velvet horns—trotting back into the trees. He made sure to note their location so he could find them tomorrow. He was proud that he could hunt well enough to support himself in Horst's house, though he had never been as skilled as Eragon.

As he walked, he continued to order his thoughts. After Garrow's death, Roran had abandoned his job at Dempton's mill in Therinsford and returned to Carvahall. Horst had agreed to house him and, in the following months, had provided him with work in the forge. Grief had delayed Roran's decisions about the future until two days ago, when he finally settled upon a course of action.

He wanted to marry Katrina, the butcher's daughter. The reason he went to Therinsford in the first place was to earn money to ensure a smooth beginning to their life together. But now, without a farm, a home, or means to support her, Roran could not in good conscience ask for Katrina's hand. His pride would not allow it. Nor did Roran think Sloan, her father, would tolerate a suitor with such poor prospects. Even under the best of circumstances, Roran had expected

to have a hard time convincing Sloan to give up Katrina; the two of them had never been friendly. And it was impossible for Roran to wed Katrina without her father's consent, not unless they wished to divide her family, anger the village by defying tradition, and, most likely, start a blood feud with Sloan.

Considering the situation, it seemed to Roran that the only option available to him was to rebuild his farm, even if he had to raise the house and barn himself. It would be hard, starting from nothing, but once his position was secured, he could approach Sloan with his head held high. *Next spring is the soonest we might talk*, thought Roran, grimacing.

He knew Katrina would wait—for a time, at least.

He continued at a steady pace until evening, when the village came into view. Within the small huddle of buildings, wash hung on lines strung from window to window. Men filed back toward the houses from surrounding fields thick with winter wheat. Behind Carvahall, the half-mile-high Igualda Falls gleamed in the sunset as it tumbled down the Spine into the Anora. The sight warmed Roran because it was so ordinary. Nothing was more comforting than having everything where it should be.

Leaving the road, he made his way up the rise to where Horst's house sat with a view of the Spine. The door was already open. Roran tromped inside, following the sounds of conversation into the kitchen.

Horst was there, leaning on the rough table pushed into one corner of the room, his arms bare to the elbow. Next to him was his wife, Elain, who was nearly five months pregnant and smiling with quiet contentment. Their sons, Albriech and Baldor, faced them.

As Roran entered, Albriech said, "… and I still hadn't left the forge yet! Thane swears he saw me, but I was on the other side of town."

"What's going on?" asked Roran, slipping off his pack.

Elain exchanged a glance with Horst. "Here, let me get you something to eat." She set bread and a bowl of cold stew before him. Then she looked him in the eye, as if searching for a particular expression. "How was it?"

Roran shrugged. "All of the wood is either burnt or rotting—nothing worth using. The well is still intact, and that's something to be grateful for, I suppose. I'll have to cut timber for the house as soon as possible if I'm going to have a roof over my head by planting season. Now tell me, what's happened?"

"Ha!" exclaimed Horst. "There's been quite a row, there has. Thane is missing a scythe and he thinks Albriech took it."

"He probably dropped it in the grass and forgot where he left it," snorted Albriech.

"Probably," agreed Horst, smiling.

Roran bit into the bread. “It doesn’t make much sense, accusing you. If you needed a scythe, you could just forge one.”

“I know,” said Albriech, dropping into a chair, “but instead of looking for his, he starts grousing that he saw someone leaving his field and that it looked a bit like me … and since no one else looks like me, I must have stolen the scythe.”

It was true that no one looked like him. Albriech had inherited both his father’s size and Elain’s honey-blond hair, which made him an oddity in Carvahall, where brown was the predominant hair color. In contrast, Baldor was both thinner and dark-haired.

“I’m sure it’ll turn up,” said Baldor quietly. “Try not to get too angry over it in the meantime.”

“Easy for you to say.”

As Roran finished the last of the bread and started on the stew, he asked Horst, “Do you need me for anything tomorrow?”

“Not especially. I’ll just be working on Quimby’s wagon. The blasted frame still won’t sit square.”

Roran nodded, pleased. “Good. Then I’ll take the day and go hunting. There are a few deer farther down the valley that don’t look too scrawny. Their ribs weren’t showing, at least.”

Baldor suddenly brightened. “Do you want some company?”

“Sure. We can leave at dawn.”

When he finished eating, Roran scrubbed his face and hands clean, then wandered outside to clear his head. Stretching leisurely, he strolled toward the center of town.

Halfway there, the chatter of excited voices outside the Seven Sheaves caught his attention. He turned, curious, and made his way to the tavern, where an odd sight met him. Sitting on the porch was a middle-aged man draped in a patchwork leather coat. Beside him was a pack festooned with the steel jaws of the trappers’ trade. Several dozen villagers listened as he gestured expansively and said, “So when I arrived at Therinsford, I went to this man, Neil. Good, honest man; I help in his fields during the spring and summer.”

Roran nodded. Trappers spent the winter squirreled away in the mountains, returning in the spring to sell their skins to tanners like Gedric and then to take up work, usually as farmhands. Since Carvahall was the northernmost village in the Spine, many trappers passed through it, which was one of the reasons Carvahall had its own tavern, blacksmith, and tanner.

“After a few steins of ale—to lubricate my speaking, you understand, after a ’alf year with nary a word uttered, except perhaps for blaspheming the world and all beyond when losing a bear-biter—I come to Neil, the froth still fresh on my beard, and start exchanging

gossip. As our transaction proceeds, I ask him all gregarious-like, what news of the Empire or the king—may he rot with gangrene and trench mouth. Was anyone born or died or banished that I should know of? And then guess what? Neil leaned forward, going all serious 'bout the mouth, and said that word is going around, there is, from Dras-Leona and Gil'ead of strange happenings here, there, and everywhere in Alagaësia. The Urgals have fair disappeared from civilized lands, and good riddance, but not one man can tell why or where. 'Alf the trade in the Empire has dried up as a result of raids and attacks and, from what I heard, it isn't the work of mere brigands, for the attacks are too widespread, too calculated. No goods are stolen, only burned or soiled. But that's not the end of it, oh no, not by the tip of your blessed grandmother's whiskers."

The trapper shook his head and took a sip from his wineskin before continuing: "There be mutterings of a Shade haunting the northern territories. He's been seen along the edge of Du Weldenvarden and near Gil'ead. They say his teeth are filed to points, his eyes are as red as wine, and his hair is as red as the blood he drinks. Worse, something seems to have gotten our fine, mad monarch's dander up, so it has. Five days past, a juggler from the south stopped in Therinsford on his lonesome way to Ceunon, and he said that troops have been moving and gathering, though for *what* was beyond him." He shrugged. "As my pap taught me when I was a suckling babe, where there's smoke, there's fire. Perhaps it's the Varden. They've caused old Iron Bones enough pain in the arse over the years. Or perhaps Galbatorix finally decided he's had enough of tolerating Surda. At least he knows where to find it, unlike those rebels. He'll crush Surda like a bear crushes an ant, he will."

Roran blinked as a babble of questions exploded around the trapper. He was inclined to doubt the report of a Shade—it sounded too much like a story a drunk woodsman might invent—but the rest of it all sounded bad enough to be true. *Surda* … Little information reached Carvahall about that distant country, but Roran at least knew that, although Surda and the Empire were ostensibly at peace, Surdans lived in constant fear that their more powerful neighbor to the north would invade them. For that reason, it was said that Orrin, their king, supported the Varden.

If the trapper was right about Galbatorix, then it could mean ugly war crouched in the future, accompanied by the hardships of increased taxes and forced conscription. *I would rather live in an age devoid of momentous events. Upheaval makes already difficult lives, such as ours, nigh impossible*.

"What's more, there have even been tales of …" Here the trapper paused and, with a knowing expression, tapped the side of his nose

with his forefinger. “Tales of a new Rider in Alagaësia.” He laughed then, a big, hearty laugh, slapping his belly as he rocked back on the porch.

Roran laughed as well. Stories of Riders appeared every few years. They had excited his interest the first two or three times, but he soon learned not to trust such accounts, for they all came to naught. The rumors were nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of those who longed for a brighter future.

He was about to head off when he noticed Katrina standing by the corner of the tavern, garbed in a long russet dress decorated with green ribbon. She gazed at him with the same intensity with which he gazed at her. Going over, he touched her on the shoulder and, together, they slipped away.

They walked to the edge of Carvahall, where they stood looking at the stars. The heavens were brilliant, shimmering with thousands of celestial fires. And arching above them, from north to south, was the glorious pearly band that streamed from horizon to horizon, like diamond dust tossed from a pitcher.

Without looking at him, Katrina rested her head on Roran’s shoulder and asked, “How was your day?”

“I returned home.” He felt her stiffen against him.

“What was it like?”

“Terrible.” His voice caught and he fell silent, holding her tightly. The scent of her copper hair on his cheek was like an elixir of wine and spice and perfume. It seeped deep inside him, warm and comforting. “The house, the barn, the fields, they’re all being overrun. … I wouldn’t have found them if I didn’t know where to look.”

She finally turned to face him, stars flashing in her eyes, sorrow on her face. “Oh, Roran.” She kissed him, lips brushing his for a brief moment. “You have endured so much loss, and yet your strength has never failed you. Will you return to your farm now?”

“Aye. Farming is all I know.”

“And what shall become of me?”

He hesitated. From the moment he began to court her, an unspoken assumption that they would marry had existed between them. There had been no need to discuss his intentions; they were as plain as the day was long, and so her question unsettled him. It also felt improper to address the issue in such an open manner when he was not ready to tender an offer. It was *his* place to make the overtures—first to Sloan and then to Katrina—not hers. Still, he had to deal with her concern now that it had been expressed. “Katrina … I cannot approach your father as I had planned. He would laugh at me, and rightly so. We have to wait. Once I have a place for us to live and I’ve collected my first harvest, then he will listen to me.”

She faced the sky once more and whispered something so faint, he could not make it out. “What?”

“I said, are you afraid of him?”

“Of course not! I—”

“Then you must get his permission, tomorrow, and set the engagement. Make him understand that, though you have nothing now, you will give me a good home and be a son-in-law he can be proud of. There’s no reason we should waste our years living apart when we feel like this.”

“I can’t do that,” he said with a note of despair, willing her to understand. “I can’t provide for you, I can’t—”

“Don’t you *understand*?” She stepped away, her voice strained with urgency. “I love you, Roran, and I want to be with you, but Father has other plans for me. There are far more eligible men than you, and the longer you delay, the more he presses me to consent to a match of which he approves. He fears I will become an old maid, and I fear that too. I have only so much time or choice in Carvahall.… If I must take another, I will.” Tears glistened in her eyes as she gave him a searching glance, waiting for his response, then gathered up her dress and rushed back to the houses.

Roran stood there, motionless with shock. Her absence was as acute for him as losing the farm—the world suddenly gone cold and unfriendly. It was as if part of himself had been torn away.

It was hours before he could return to Horst’s and slip into bed.

The Hunted Hunters

Dirt crunched under Roran's boots as he led the way down the valley, which was cool and pale in the early hours of the overcast morning. Baldor followed close behind, both of them carrying strung bows. Neither spoke as they studied their surroundings for signs of the deer.

"There," said Baldor in a low voice, pointing at a set of tracks leading toward a bramble on the edge of the Anora.

Roran nodded and started after the spoor. It looked about a day old, so he risked speaking. "Could I have your advice, Baldor? You seem to have a good understanding of people."

"Of course. What is it?"

For a long time, the pad of their feet was the only noise. "Sloan wants to marry off Katrina, and not to me. Every day that passes increases the chance he will arrange a union to his liking."

"What does Katrina say of this?"

Roran shrugged. "He is her father. She cannot continue to defy his will when no one she *does* want has stepped forward to claim her."

"That is, you."

"Aye."

"And that's why you were up so early." It was no question.

In fact, Roran had been too worried to sleep at all. He had spent the entire night thinking about Katrina, trying to find a solution to their predicament. "I can't bear to lose her. But I don't think Sloan will give us his blessing, what with my position and all."

"No, I don't think he would," agreed Baldor. He glanced at Roran out of the corner of his eye. "What is it you want my advice on, though?"

A snort of laughter escaped Roran. "How can I convince Sloan otherwise? How can I resolve this dilemma without starting a blood feud?" He threw his hands up. "What should I do?"

"Have you no ideas?"

"I do, but not of a sort I find pleasing. It occurred to me that Katrina and I could simply announce we were engaged—not that we are yet—and hang the consequences. That would force Sloan to accept our betrothal."

A frown creased Baldor's brow. He said carefully, "Maybe, but it would also create a slew of bad feelings throughout Carvahall. Few would approve of your actions. Nor would it be wise to force Katrina

to choose between you or her family; she might resent you for it in years to come."

"I know, but what alternative do I have?"

"Before you take such a drastic step, I recommend you try to win Sloan over as an ally. There's a chance you might succeed, after all, if it's made clear to him that no one else will want to marry an angry Katrina. Especially when you're around to cuckold the husband." Roran grimaced and kept his gaze on the ground. Baldor laughed. "If you fail, well then, you can proceed with confidence, knowing that you have indeed exhausted all other routes. And people will be less likely to spit upon you for breaking tradition and more likely to say Sloan's bullheaded ways brought it upon himself."

"Neither course is easy."

"You knew that to begin with." Baldor grew somber again. "No doubt there'll be harsh words if you challenge Sloan, but things will settle down in the end—perhaps not comfortably, but at least bearably. Aside from Sloan, the only people you'll really offend are prudes like Quimby, though how Quimby can brew such a hale drink yet be so starched and bitter himself is beyond me."

Roran nodded, understanding. Grudges could simmer for years in Carvahall. "I'm glad we could talk. It's been …" He faltered, thinking of all the discussions he and Eragon used to share. They had been, as Eragon once said, brothers in all but blood. It had been deeply comforting to know that someone existed who would listen to him, no matter the time or circumstances. And to know that person would always help him, no matter the cost.

The absence of such a bond left Roran feeling empty.

Baldor did not press him to finish his sentence, but instead stopped to drink from his waterskin. Roran continued for a few yards, then halted as a scent intruded on his thoughts.

It was the heavy odor of seared meat and charred pine boughs. *Who would be here besides us?* Breathing deeply, he turned in a circle, trying to determine the source of the fire. A slight gust brushed past him from farther down the road, carrying a hot, smoky wave. The aroma of food was intense enough to make his mouth water.

He beckoned to Baldor, who hurried to his side. "Smell that?"

Baldor nodded. Together they returned to the road and followed it south. About a hundred feet away, it bent around a copse of cottonwoods and curved out of view. As they approached the turn, the rise and fall of voices reached them, muffled by the thick layer of morning fog over the valley.

At the copse's fringe, Roran slowed to a stop. It was foolish to surprise people when they too might be out hunting. Still, something bothered him. Perhaps it was the number of voices; the group seemed

bigger than any family in the valley. Without thinking, he stepped off the road and slipped behind the underbrush lining the copse.

"What are you doing?" whispered Baldor.

Roran put a finger to his lips, then crept along, parallel to the road, keeping his footsteps as quiet as possible. As they rounded the bend, he froze.

On the grass by the road was a camp of soldiers. Thirty helmets gleamed in a shaft of morning light as their owners devoured fowl and stew cooked over several fires. The men were mud splattered and travel stained, but Galbatorix's symbol was still visible on their red tunics, a twisting flame outlined in gold thread. Underneath the tunics, they wore leather brigandines—heavy with riveted squares of steel—mail shirts, and then padded gambesons. Most of the soldiers bore broadswords, though half a dozen were archers and another half-dozen carried wicked-looking halberds.

And hunched in their midst were two twisted black forms that Roran recognized from the numerous descriptions the villagers provided upon his return from Therinsford: the strangers who had destroyed his farm. His blood chilled. *They're servants of the Empire!* He began to step forward, fingers already reaching for an arrow, when Baldor grabbed his jerkin and dragged him to the ground.

"Don't. You'll get us both killed."

Roran glared at him, then snarled. "That's … they're the bastards …" He stopped, noticing that his hands were shaking. *"They've returned!"*

"Roran," whispered Baldor intently, "you can't do anything. Look, they work for the king. Even if you managed to escape, you'd be an outlaw everywhere, and you'd bring disaster on Carvahall."

"What do they want? What *can* they want?" *The king. Why did Galbatorix countenance my father's torture?*

"If they didn't get what they needed from Garrow, and Eragon fled with Brom, then they must want you." Baldor paused, letting the words sink in. "We have to get back and warn everyone. Then you have to hide. The strangers are the only ones with horses. We can get there first if we run."

Roran stared through the brush at the oblivious soldiers. His heart pounded fiercely for revenge, clamoring to attack and fight, to see those two agents of misfortune pierced with arrows and brought to their own justice. It mattered not that he would die as long as he could wash clean his pain and sorrow in one fell moment. All he had to do was break cover. The rest would take care of itself.

Just one small step.

With a choked sob, he clenched his fist and dropped his head. *I can't leave Katrina*. He remained rigid—eyes squeezed shut—then with

agonizing slowness dragged himself back. “Home then.”

Without waiting for Baldor’s reaction, Roran slipped through the trees as fast as he dared. Once the camp was out of sight, he broke out onto the road and ran down the dirt track, channeling his frustration, anger, and even fear into speed.

Baldor scrambled behind him, gaining on the open stretches. Roran slowed to a comfortable trot and waited for him to draw level before saying, “You spread the word. I’ll talk with Horst.” Baldor nodded, and they pushed on.

After two miles, they stopped to drink and rest briefly. When their panting subsided, they continued through the low hills preceding Carvahall. The rolling ground slowed them considerably, but even so, the village soon burst into view.

Roran immediately broke for the forge, leaving Baldor to make his way to the center of town. As he pounded past the houses, Roran wildly considered schemes to evade or kill the strangers without incurring the wrath of the Empire.

He burst into the forge to catch Horst tapping a peg into the side of Quimby’s wagon, singing:

… hey O!
And a ringing and a dinging
Rang from old iron! Wily old iron.
With a beat and a bang on the bones of the land,
I conquered wily old iron!

Horst stopped his mallet in midblow when he saw Roran. “What’s the matter, lad? Is Baldor hurt?”

Roran shook his head and leaned over, gasping for air. In short bursts, he reiterated all they had seen and its possible implications, most importantly that it was now clear the strangers were agents of the Empire.

Horst fingered his beard. “You have to leave Carvahall. Fetch some food from the house, then take my mare—Ivor’s pulling stumps with her—and ride into the foothills. Once we know what the soldiers want, I’ll send Albriech or Baldor with word.”

“What will you say if they ask for me?”

“That you’re out hunting and we don’t know when you’ll return. It’s true enough, and I doubt they’ll chance blundering around in the trees for fear of missing you. Assuming it’s you they’re really after.”

Roran nodded, then turned and ran to Horst’s house. Inside, he grabbed the mare’s tack and bags from the wall, quickly tied turnips, beets, jerky, and a loaf of bread in a knot of blankets, snatched up a

tin pot, and dashed out, pausing only long enough to explain the situation to Elain.

The supplies were an awkward bundle in his arms as he jogged east from Carvahall to Ivor's farm. Ivor himself stood behind the farmhouse, flicking the mare with a willow wand as she strained to tear the hairy roots of an elm tree from the ground.

"Come on now!" shouted the farmer. "Put your back into it!" The horse shuddered with effort, her bit lathered, then with a final surge tilted the stump on its side so the roots reached toward the sky like a cluster of gnarled fingers. Ivor stopped her exertion with a twitch of the reins and patted her good-naturedly. "All right.… There we go."

Roran hailed him from a distance and, when they were close, pointed to the horse. "I need to borrow her." He gave his reasons.

Ivor swore and began unhitching the mare, grumbling, "Always the moment I get a bit of work done, that's when the interruption comes. Never before." He crossed his arms and frowned as Roran cinched the saddle, intent on his work.

When he was ready, Roran swung onto the horse, bow in hand. "I am sorry for the trouble, but it can't be helped."

"Well, don't worry about it. Just make sure you aren't caught."

"I'll do that."

As he set heels to the mare's sides, Roran heard Ivor call, "And don't be hiding up my creek!"

Roran grinned and shook his head, bending low over the horse's neck. He soon reached the foothills of the Spine and worked his way up to the mountains that formed the north end of Palancar Valley. From there he climbed to a point on the mountainside where he could observe Carvahall without being seen. Then he picketed his steed and settled down to wait.

Roran shivered, eyeing the dark pines. He disliked being this close to the Spine. Hardly anyone from Carvahall dared set foot in the mountain range, and those who did often failed to return.

Before long Roran saw the soldiers march up the road in a double line, two ominous black figures at their head. They were stopped at the edge of Carvahall by a ragged group of men, some of them with picks in hand. The two sides spoke, then simply faced each other, like growling dogs waiting to see who would strike first. After a long moment, the men of Carvahall moved aside and let the intruders pass.

What happens now? wondered Roran, rocking back on his heels.

By evening the soldiers had set up camp in a field adjacent to the village. Their tents formed a low gray block that flickered with weird shadows as sentries patrolled the perimeter. In the center of the block, a large fire sent billows of smoke into the air.

Roran had made his own camp, and now he simply watched and thought. He always assumed that when the strangers destroyed his home, they got what they wanted, which was the stone Eragon brought from the Spine. *They must not have found it*, he decided. *Perhaps Eragon managed to escape with the stone.… Perhaps he felt that he had to leave in order to protect it*. He frowned. That would go a long way toward explaining why Eragon fled, but it still seemed far-fetched to Roran. *Whatever the reason, that stone must be a fantastic treasure for the king to send so many men to retrieve it. I can't understand what would make it so valuable. Maybe it's magic*.

He breathed deeply of the cool air, listening to the hoot of an owl. A flicker of movement caught his attention. Glancing down the mountain, he saw a man approaching in the forest below. Roran ducked behind a boulder, bow drawn. He waited until he was sure it was Albriech, then whistled softly.

Albriech soon arrived at the boulder. On his back was an overfull pack, which he dropped to the ground with a grunt. "I thought I'd never find you."

"I'm surprised you did."

"Can't say I enjoyed wandering through the forest after sundown. I kept expecting to walk into a bear, or worse. The Spine isn't a fit place for men, if you ask me."

Roran looked back out at Carvahall. "So why are they here?"

"To take you into custody. They're willing to wait as long as they have to for you to return from 'hunting.' "

Roran sat with a hard thump, his gut clenched with cold anticipation. "Did they give a reason? Did they mention the stone?"

Albriech shook his head. "All they would say is that it's the king's business. The whole day they've been asking questions about you and Eragon—it's all they're interested in." He hesitated. "I'd stay, but they'll notice if I am missing tomorrow. I brought plenty of food and blankets, plus some of Gertrude's salves in case you injure yourself. You should be fine up here."

Summoning his energy, Roran smiled. "Thanks for the help."

"Anyone would do it," said Albriech with an embarrassed shrug. He started to leave, then tossed over his shoulder, "By the way, the two strangers … they're called the Ra'zac."

✦ ✦ ✦

Saphira's Promise

The morning after meeting with the Council of Elders, Eragon was cleaning and oiling Saphira's saddle—careful not to overexert himself—when Orik came to visit. The dwarf waited until Eragon finished with a strap, then asked, "Are you better today?"

"A little."

"Good, we all need our strength. I came partly to see to your health and also because Hrothgar wishes to speak with you, if you are free."

Eragon gave the dwarf a wry smile. "I'm always free for him. He must know that."

Orik laughed. "Ah, but it's polite to ask nicely." As Eragon put down the saddle, Saphira uncoiled from her padded corner and greeted Orik with a friendly growl. "Morning to you as well," he said with a bow.

Orik led them through one of Tronjheim's four main corridors, toward its central chamber and the two mirroring staircases that curved underground to the dwarf king's throne room. Before they reached the chamber, however, he turned down a small flight of stairs. It took Eragon a moment to realize that Orik had taken a side passageway to avoid seeing the wreckage of Isidar Mithrim.

They came to a stop before the granite doors engraved with a seven-pointed crown. Seven armored dwarves on each side of the entrance pounded the floor simultaneously with the hafts of their mattocks. With the echoing thud of wood on stone, the doors swung inward.

Eragon nodded to Orik, then entered the dim room with Saphira. They advanced toward the distant throne, passing the rigid statues, hírna, of past dwarf kings. At the foot of the heavy black throne, Eragon bowed. The dwarf king inclined his silver-maned head in return, the rubies wrought into his golden helm glowing dully in the light like flecks of hot iron. Volund, the war hammer, lay across his mail-sheathed legs.

Hrothgar spoke: "Shadeslayer, welcome to my hall. You have done much since last we met. And, so it seems, I have been proved wrong about Zar'roc. Morzan's blade will be welcome in Tronjheim so long as you bear it."

"Thank you," said Eragon, rising.

"Also," rumbled the dwarf, "we wish you to keep the armor you wore in the battle of Farthen Dûr. Even now our most skilled smiths are repairing it. The dragon armor is being treated likewise, and when

it is restored, Saphira may use it as long as she wishes, or until she outgrows it. This is the least we can do to show our gratitude. If it weren't for the war with Galbatorix, there would be feasts and celebrations in your name … but those must wait until a more appropriate time."

Voicing both his and Saphira's sentiment, Eragon said, "You are generous beyond all expectations. We will cherish such noble gifts."

Clearly pleased, Hrothgar nevertheless scowled, bringing his snarled eyebrows together. "We cannot linger on pleasantries, though. I am besieged by the clans with demands that I do one thing or another about Ajihad's successor. When the Council of Elders proclaimed yesterday that they would support Nasuada, it created an uproar the likes of which I haven't seen since I ascended to the throne. The chiefs had to decide whether to accept Nasuada or look for another candidate. Most have concluded that Nasuada should lead the Varden, but I wish to know where you stand on this, Eragon, before I lend my word to either side. The worst thing a king can do is look foolish."

How much can we tell him? Eragon asked Saphira, thinking quickly.

He's always treated us fairly, but we can't know what he may have promised other people. We'd best be cautious until Nasuada actually takes power.

Very well.

"Saphira and I have agreed to help her. We won't oppose her ascension. And"—Eragon wondered if he was going too far—"I plead that you do the same; the Varden can't afford to fight among themselves. They need unity."

"Oeí," said Hrothgar, leaning back, "you speak with new authority. Your suggestion is a good one, but it will cost a question: Do you think Nasuada will be a wise leader, or are there other motives in choosing her?"

It's a test, warned Saphira. *He wants to know* why *we've backed her.*

Eragon felt his lips twitch in a half-smile. "I think her wise and canny beyond her years. She will be good for the Varden."

"And that is why you support her?"

"Yes."

Hrothgar nodded, dipping his long, snowy beard. "That relieves me. There has been too little concern lately with what is right and good, and more about what will bring individual power. It is hard to watch such idiocy and not be angry."

An uncomfortable silence fell between them, stifling in the long throne room. To break it, Eragon asked, "What will be done with the dragonhold? Will a new floor be laid down?"

For the first time, the king's eyes grew mournful, deepening the surrounding lines that splayed like spokes on a wagon wheel. It was

the closest Eragon had ever seen a dwarf come to weeping. “Much talk is needed before that step can be taken. It was a terrible deed, what Saphira and Arya did. Maybe necessary, but terrible. Ah, it might have been better if the Urgals had overrun us before Isidar Mithrim was ever broken. The heart of Tronjheim has been shattered, and so has ours.” Hrothgar placed his fist over his breast, then slowly unclenched his hand and reached down to grasp Volund’s leather-wrapped handle.

Saphira touched Eragon’s mind. He sensed several emotions in her, but what surprised him the most was her remorse and guilt. She truly regretted the Star Rose’s demise, despite the fact that it had been required. *Little one*, she said, *help me. I need to speak with Hrothgar. Ask him: Do the dwarves have the ability to reconstruct Isidar Mithrim out of the shards?*

As he repeated the words, Hrothgar muttered something in his own language, then said, “The skill we have, but what of it? The task would take months or years, and the end result would be a ruined mockery of the beauty that once graced Tronjheim! It is an abomination I will not sanction.”

Saphira continued to stare unblinkingly at the king. *Now tell him: If Isidar Mithrim were put together again, with not one piece missing, I believe I could make it whole once more*.

Eragon gaped at her, forgetting Hrothgar in his astonishment. *Saphira! The energy that would require! You told me yourself that you can’t use magic at will, so what makes you sure you can do this?*

I can do it if the need is great enough. It will be my gift to the dwarves. Remember Brom’s tomb; let that wash your doubt away. And close your mouth—it’s unbecoming and the king is watching.

When Eragon conveyed Saphira’s offer, Hrothgar straightened with an exclamation. “Is it possible? Not even the elves might attempt such a feat.”

“She is confident in her abilities.”

“Then we will rebuild Isidar Mithrim, no matter if it takes a hundred years. We will assemble a frame for the gem and set each piece into its original place. Not a single chip will be forgotten. Even if we must break the larger pieces to move them, it will be done with all our skill in working stone, so that no dust or flecks are lost. You will come then, when we are finished, and heal the Star Rose.”

“We will come,” agreed Eragon, bowing.

Hrothgar smiled, and it was like the cracking of a granite wall. “Such joy you have given me, Saphira. I feel once more a reason to rule and live. If you do this, dwarves everywhere will honor your name for uncounted generations. Go now with my blessings while I spread the tidings among the clans. And do not feel bound to wait upon my announcement, for no dwarf should be denied this news;

convey it to all whom you meet. May the halls echo with the jubilation of our race."

With one more bow, Eragon and Saphira departed, leaving the dwarf king still smiling on his throne. Out of the hall, Eragon told Orik what had transpired. The dwarf immediately bent and kissed the floor before Saphira. He rose with a grin and clasped Eragon's arm, saying, "A wonder indeed. You have given us exactly the hope we needed to combat recent events. There will be drinking tonight, I wager!"

"And tomorrow is the funeral."

Orik sobered for a moment. "Tomorrow, yes. But until then we shall not let unhappy thoughts disturb us! Come!"

Taking Eragon's hand, the dwarf pulled him through Tronjheim to a great feast hall where many dwarves sat at stone tables. Orik leaped onto one, scattering dishes across the floor, and in a booming voice proclaimed the news of Isidar Mithrim. Eragon was nearly deafened by the cheers and shouts that followed. Each of the dwarves insisted on coming to Saphira and kissing the floor as Orik had. When that was finished, they abandoned their food and filled their stone tankards with beer and mead.

Eragon joined the revelry with an abandon that surprised him. It helped to ease the melancholy gathered in his heart. However, he did try to resist complete debauchery, for he was conscious of the duties that awaited them the following day and he wanted to have a clear head.

Even Saphira took a sip of mead, and finding that she liked it, the dwarves rolled out a whole barrel for her. Delicately lowering her mighty jaws through the cask's open end, she drained it with three long draughts, then tilted her head toward the ceiling and belched a giant tongue of flame. It took several minutes for Eragon to convince the dwarves that it was safe to approach her again, but once he did, they brought her another barrel—overriding the cook's protests—and watched with amazement as she emptied it as well.

As Saphira became increasingly inebriated, her emotions and thoughts washed through Eragon with more and more force. It became difficult for him to rely upon the input of his own senses: her vision began to slip over his own, blurring movement and changing colors. Even the odors he smelled shifted at times, becoming sharper, more pungent.

The dwarves began to sing together. Weaving as she stood, Saphira hummed along, punctuating each line with a roar. Eragon opened his mouth to join in and was shocked when, instead of words, out came the snarling rasp of a dragon's voice. *That*, he thought, shaking his head, *is going too far.... Or am I just drunk?* He decided it did not

matter and proceeded to sing boisterously, dragon's voice or not.

Dwarves continued to stream into the hall as word of Isidar Mithrim spread. Hundreds soon packed the tables, with a thick ring around Eragon and Saphira. Orik called in musicians who arranged themselves in a corner, where they pulled slipcovers of green velvet off their instruments. Soon harps, lutes, and silver flutes floated their gilded melodies over the throng.

Many hours passed before the noise and excitement began to calm. When it did, Orik once more climbed onto the table. He stood there, legs spread wide for balance, tankard in hand, iron-bound cap awry, and cried, "Hear, hear! At last we have celebrated as is proper. The Urgals are gone, the Shade is dead, and we have won!" The dwarves all pounded their tables in approval. It was a good speech—short and to the point. But Orik was not finished. "To Eragon and Saphira!" he roared, lifting the tankard. This too was well received.

Eragon stood and bowed, which brought more cheers. Beside him, Saphira reared and swung a foreleg across her chest, attempting to duplicate his move. She tottered, and the dwarves, realizing their danger, scrambled away from her. They were barely in time. With a loud whoosh, Saphira fell backward, landing flat on a banquet table.

Pain shot through Eragon's back and he collapsed insensate by her tail.

REQUIEM

"Wake, Knurlhiem! You cannot sleep now. We are needed at the gate —they won't start without us."

Eragon forced his eyes open, conscious of an aching head and sore body. He was lying on a cold stone table. "What?" He grimaced at the sick taste on his tongue.

Orik tugged on his brown beard. "Ajihad's procession. We must be present for it!"

"No, what did you call me?" They were still in the banquet hall, but it was empty except for him, Orik, and Saphira, who lay on her side between two tables. She stirred and lifted her head, looking around with bleary eyes.

"Stonehead! I called you Stonehead because I've been trying to wake you for almost an hour."

Eragon pushed himself upright and slid off the table. Flashes of memory from the night before jumped through his mind. *Saphira, how are you?* he asked, stumbling to her.

She swiveled her head, running her crimson tongue in and out over her teeth, like a cat that ate something unpleasant. *Whole … I think. My left wing feels a bit strange; I think it's the one I landed on. And my head is filled with a thousand hot arrows*.

"Was anyone hurt when she fell?" asked Eragon, concerned.

A hearty chuckle exploded from the dwarf's thick chest. "Only those who dropped off their seats from laughing so hard. A dragon getting drunk and bowing at that! I'm sure lays will be sung about it for decades." Saphira shuffled her wings and looked away primly. "We thought it best to leave you here, since we couldn't move you, Saphira. It upset the head cook terribly—he feared you would drink more of his best stock than the four barrels you already did."

And you chastised me *once for drinking! If I consumed four barrels, it would kill me!*

That's why you're not a dragon.

Orik thrust a bundle of clothes into Eragon's arms. "Here, put these on. They are more appropriate for a funeral than your own attire. But hurry, we have little time." Eragon struggled into the items—a billowy white shirt with ties at the cuffs, a red vest decorated with gold braiding and embroidery, dark pants, shiny black boots that clacked on the floor, and a swirling cape that fastened under his throat with a

studded brooch. In place of the usual plain leather band, Zar'roc was fastened to an ornate belt.

Eragon splashed his face with water and tried to arrange his hair neatly. Then Orik rushed him and Saphira out of the hall and toward Tronjheim's south gate. "We must start from there," he explained, moving with surprising speed on his stocky legs, "because that is where the procession with Ajihad's body stopped three days ago. His journey to the grave cannot be interrupted, or else his spirit will find no rest."

An odd custom, remarked Saphira.

Eragon agreed, noting a slight unsteadiness in her gait. In Carvahall, people were usually buried on their farm, or if they lived in the village, in a small graveyard. The only rituals that accompanied the process were lines recited from certain ballads and a death feast held afterward for relatives and friends. *Can you make it through the whole funeral?* he asked as Saphira staggered again.

She grimaced briefly. *That and Nasuada's appointment, but then I'll need to sleep. A pox on all mead!*

Returning to his conversation with Orik, Eragon asked, "Where will Ajihad be buried?"

Orik slowed and glanced at Eragon with caution. "That has been a matter of contention among the clans. When a dwarf dies, we believe he must be sealed in stone or else he will never join his ancestors.… It is complex and I cannot say more to an outsider … but we go to great lengths to assure such a burial. Shame falls on a family or clan if they allow any of their own to lie in a lesser element.

"Under Farthen Dûr exists a chamber that is the home of all knurlan, all dwarves, who have died here. It is there Ajihad will be taken. He cannot be entombed with us, as he is human, but a hallowed alcove has been set aside for him. There the Varden may visit him without disturbing our sacred grottos, and Ajihad will receive the respect he is due."

"Your king has done much for the Varden," commented Eragon.

"Some think too much."

Before the thick gate—drawn up on its hidden chains to reveal faint daylight drifting into Farthen Dûr—they found a carefully arranged column. Ajihad lay at the front, cold and pale on a white marble bier borne by six men in black armor. Upon his head was a helm strewn with precious stones. His hands were clasped beneath his collarbone, over the ivory hilt of his bare sword, which extended from underneath the shield covering his chest and legs. Silver mail, like circlets of moonbeams, weighed down his limbs and fell onto the bier.

Close behind the body stood Nasuada—grave, sable-cloaked, and

strong in stature, though tears adorned her countenance. To the side was Hrothgar in dark robes; then Arya; the Council of Elders, all with suitably remorseful expressions; and finally a stream of mourners that extended a mile from Tronjheim.

Every door and archway of the four-story-high hall that led to the central chamber of Tronjheim, half a mile away, was thrown open and crowded with humans and dwarves alike. Between the gray bands of faces, the long tapestries swayed as they were brushed with hundreds of sighs and whispers when Saphira and Eragon came into view.

Jörmundur beckoned for them to join him. Trying not to disturb the formation, Eragon and Saphira picked through the column to the space by his side, earning a disapproving glare from Sabrae. Orik went to stand behind Hrothgar.

Together they waited, though for what, Eragon knew not.

All the lanterns were shuttered halfway so that a cool twilight suffused the air, lending an ethereal feel to the event. No one seemed to move or breathe: for a brief moment, Eragon fancied that they were all statues frozen for eternity. A single plume of incense drifted from the bier, winding toward the hazy ceiling as it spread the scent of cedar and juniper. It was the only motion in the hall, a whiplash line undulating sinuously from side to side.

Deep in Tronjheim, a drum gonged. *Boom.* The sonorous bass note resonated through their bones, vibrating the city-mountain and causing it to echo like a great stone bell.

They stepped forward.

Boom. On the second note, another, lower drum melded with the first, each beat rolling inexorably through the hall. The force of the sound propelled them along at a majestic pace. It gave each step significance, a purpose and gravity suited to the occasion. No thought could exist in the throbbing that surrounded them, only an upwelling of emotion that the drums expertly beguiled, summoning tears and bittersweet joy at the same time.

Boom.

When the tunnel ended, Ajihad's bearers paused between the onyx pillars before gliding into the central chamber. There Eragon saw the dwarves grow even more solemn upon beholding Isidar Mithrim.

Boom.

They walked through a crystal graveyard. A circle of towering shards lay in the center of the great chamber, surrounding the inlaid hammer and pentacles. Many pieces were larger than Saphira. The rays of the star sapphire still shimmered in the fragments, and on some, petals of the carved rose were visible.

Boom.

The bearers continued forward, between the countless razor edges.

Then the procession turned and descended broad flights of stairs to the tunnels below. Through many caverns they marched, passing stone huts where dwarven children clutched their mothers and stared with wide eyes.

Boom.

And with that final crescendo, they halted under ribbed stalactites that branched over a great catacomb lined with alcoves. In each alcove lay a tomb carved with a name and clan crest. Thousands—hundreds of thousands—were buried here. The only light came from sparsely placed red lanterns, pale in the shadows.

After a moment, the bearers strode to a small room annexed to the main chamber. In the center, on a raised platform, was a great crypt open to waiting darkness. On the top was carved in runes:

May all, Knurlan, Humans, and Elves,
Remember
This Man.
For he was Noble, Strong, and Wise.

Gûntera Arûna

When the mourners were gathered around, Ajihad was lowered into the crypt, and those who had known him personally were allowed to approach. Eragon and Saphira were fifth in line, behind Arya. As they ascended the marble steps to view the body, Eragon was gripped by an overwhelming sense of sorrow, his anguish compounded by the fact that he considered this as much Murtagh's funeral as Ajihad's.

Stopping alongside the tomb, Eragon gazed down at Ajihad. He appeared far more calm and tranquil than he ever did in life, as if death had recognized his greatness and honored him by removing all traces of his worldly cares. Eragon had known Ajihad only a short while, but in that time he had come to respect him both as a person and for what he represented: freedom from tyranny. Also, Ajihad was the first person to grant safe haven to Eragon and Saphira since they left Palancar Valley.

Stricken, Eragon tried to think of the greatest praise he could give. In the end, he whispered past the lump in his throat, "You will be remembered, Ajihad. I swear it. Rest easy knowing that Nasuada shall continue your work and the Empire will be overthrown because of what you accomplished." Conscious of Saphira's touch on his arm, Eragon stepped off the platform with her and allowed Jörmundur to take his place.

When at last everyone had paid their respects, Nasuada bowed over Ajihad and touched her father's hand, holding it with gentle urgency.

Uttering a pained groan, she began to sing in a strange, wailing language, filling the cavern with her lamentations.

Then came twelve dwarves, who slid a marble slab over Ajihad's upturned face. And he was no more.

FEALTY

Eragon yawned and covered his mouth as people filed into the underground amphitheater. The spacious arena echoed with a babble of voices discussing the funeral that had just concluded.

Eragon sat on the lowest tier, level with the podium. With him were Orik, Arya, Hrothgar, Nasuada, and the Council of Elders. Saphira stood on the row of stairs that cut upward through the tiers. Leaning over, Orik said, "Ever since Korgan, each of our kings has been chosen here. It's fitting that the Varden should do likewise."

It's yet to be seen, thought Eragon, *if this transfer of power will remain peaceful*. He rubbed an eye, brushing away fresh tears; the funeral ceremony had left him shaken.

Lathered over the remnants of his grief, anxiety now twisted his gut. He worried about his own role in the upcoming events. Even if all went well, he and Saphira were about to make potent enemies. His hand dropped to Zar'roc and tightened on the pommel.

It took several minutes for the amphitheater to fill. Then Jörmundur stepped up to the podium. "People of the Varden, we last stood here fifteen years ago, at Deynor's death. His successor, Ajihad, did more to oppose the Empire and Galbatorix than any before. He won countless battles against superior forces. He nearly killed Durza, putting a scratch on the Shade's blade. And greatest of all, he welcomed Rider Eragon and Saphira into Tronjheim. However, a new leader must be chosen, one who will win us even more glory."

Someone high above shouted, "Shadeslayer!"

Eragon tried not to react—he was pleased to see that Jörmundur did not even blink. He said, "Perhaps in years to come, but he has other duties and responsibilities now. No, the Council of Elders has thought long on this: we need one who understands our needs and wants, one who has lived and suffered alongside us. One who refused to flee, even when battle was imminent."

At that moment, Eragon sensed comprehension rush through the listeners. The name came as a whisper from a thousand throats and was uttered by Jörmundur himself: "Nasuada." With a bow, Jörmundur stepped aside.

Next was Arya. She surveyed the waiting audience, then said, "The elves honor Ajihad tonight.… And on behalf of Queen Islanzadí, I recognize Nasuada's ascension and offer her the same support and

friendship we extended to her father. May the stars watch over her."

Hrothgar took the podium and stated gruffly, "I too support Nasuada, as do the clans." He moved aside.

Then it was Eragon's turn. Standing before the crowd, with all eyes upon him and Saphira, he said, "We support Nasuada as well." Saphira growled in affirmation.

Pledges spoken, the Council of Elders lined themselves on either side of the podium, Jörmundur at their head. Bearing herself proudly, Nasuada approached and knelt before him, her dress splayed in raven billows. Raising his voice, Jörmundur said, "By the right of inheritance and succession, we have chosen Nasuada. By merit of her father's achievements and the blessings of her peers, we have chosen Nasuada. I now ask you: Have we chosen well?"

The roar was overwhelming. *"Yes!"*

Jörmundur nodded. "Then by the power granted to this council, we pass the privileges and responsibilities accorded to Ajihad to his only descendant, Nasuada." He gently placed a circlet of silver on Nasuada's brow. Taking her hand, he lifted her upright and pronounced, "I give you our new leader!"

For ten minutes, the Varden and dwarves cheered, thundering their approbation until the hall rang with the clamor. Once their cries subsided, Sabrae motioned to Eragon, whispering, "Now is the time to fulfill your promise."

At that moment, all noise seemed to cease for Eragon. His nervousness disappeared too, swallowed in the tide of the moment. Steeling himself with a breath, he and Saphira started toward Jörmundur and Nasuada, each step an eternity. As they walked, he stared at Sabrae, Elessari, Umérth, and Falberd—noting their half-smiles, smugness, and on Sabrae's part, outright disdain. Behind the council members stood Arya. She nodded in support.

We are about to change history, said Saphira.

We're throwing ourselves off a cliff without knowing how deep the water below is.

Ah, but what a glorious flight!

With a brief look at Nasuada's serene face, Eragon bowed and kneeled. Slipping Zar'roc from its sheath, he placed the sword flat on his palms, then lifted it, as if to proffer it to Jörmundur. For a moment, the sword hovered between Jörmundur and Nasuada, teetering on the wire edge of two different destinies. Eragon felt his breath catch—such a simple choice to balance a life on. And more than a life—a dragon, a king, an Empire!

Then his breath rushed in, filling his lungs with time once again, and he swung to face Nasuada. "Out of deep respect … and appreciation of the difficulties facing you … I, Eragon, first Rider of

the Varden, Shadeslayer and Argetlam, give you my blade and my fealty, Nasuada."

The Varden and dwarves stared, dumbstruck. In that same instant, the Council of Elders flashed from triumphant gloating to enraged impotence. Their glares burned with the strength and venom of those betrayed. Even Elessari let outrage burst through her pleasant demeanor. Only Jörmundur—after a brief jolt of surprise—seemed to accept the announcement with equanimity.

Nasuada smiled and grasped Zar'roc, placing the sword's tip on Eragon's forehead, just as before. "I am honored that you choose to serve me, Rider Eragon. I accept, as you accept all the responsibilities accompanying the station. Rise as my vassal and take your sword."

Eragon did so, then stepped back with Saphira. With shouts of approval, the crowd rose to their feet, the dwarves stamping in rhythm with their hobnail boots while human warriors banged swords across shields.

Turning to the podium, Nasuada gripped it on either side and looked up at all the people in the amphitheater. She beamed at them, pure joy shining from her face. "People of the Varden!"

Silence.

"As my father did before me, I give my life to you and our cause. I will never cease fighting until the Urgals are vanquished, Galbatorix is dead, and Alagaësia is free once more!"

More cheering and applause.

"Therefore, I say to you, now is the time to prepare. Here in Farthen Dûr—after endless skirmishes—we won our greatest battle. It is our turn to strike back. Galbatorix is weak after losing so many forces, and there will never again be such an opportunity.

"Therefore, I say again, now is the time to prepare so that we may once more stand victorious!"

After more speeches by various personages—including a still-glowering Falberd—the amphitheater began to empty. As Eragon stood to leave, Orik grasped his arm, stopping him. The dwarf was wide-eyed. "Eragon, did you plan all that beforehand?"

Eragon briefly considered the wisdom of telling him, then nodded. "Yes."

Orik exhaled, shaking his head. "That was a bold stroke, it was. You've given Nasuada a strong position to begin with. It was dangerous, though, if the reactions of the Council of Elders are anything to judge by. Did Arya approve of this?"

"She agreed it was necessary."

The dwarf studied him thoughtfully. "I'm sure it was. You just altered the balance of power, Eragon. No one will underestimate you

again because of it.… Beware the rotten stone. You have earned some powerful enemies today.” He slapped Eragon on the side and continued past.

Saphira watched him go, then said, *We should prepare to leave Farthen Dûr. The council will be thirsty for revenge. The sooner we’re out of their reach, the better.*

A Sorceress, a Snake, and a Scroll

That evening, as Eragon returned to his quarters from bathing, he was surprised to find a tall woman waiting for him in the hall. She had dark hair, startling blue eyes, and a wry mouth. Wound around her wrist was a gold bracelet shaped like a hissing snake. Eragon hoped that she wasn't there to ask him for advice, like so many of the Varden.

"Argetlam." She curtsied gracefully.

He inclined his head in return. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I'm Trianna, sorceress of Du Vrangr Gata."

"Really? A sorceress?" he asked, intrigued.

"And battle mage and spy and anything else the Varden deem necessary. There aren't enough magic users, so we each end up with a half-dozen tasks." She smiled, displaying even, white teeth. "That's why I came today. We would be honored to have you take charge of our group. You're the only one who can replace the Twins."

Almost without realizing it, he smiled back. She was so friendly and charming, he hated to say no. "I'm afraid I can't; Saphira and I are leaving Tronjheim soon. Besides, I'd have to consult with Nasuada first anyway." *And I don't want to be entangled in any more politics … especially not where the Twins used to lead.*

Trianna bit her lip. "I'm sorry to hear that." She moved a step closer. "Perhaps we can spend some time together before you have to go. I could show you how to summon and control spirits.… It would be *educational* for both of us."

Eragon felt a hot flush warm his face. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm really too busy at the moment."

A spark of anger flared within Trianna's eyes, then vanished so quickly, he wondered whether he had seen it at all. She sighed delicately. "I understand."

She sounded so disappointed—and looked so forlorn—Eragon felt guilty for rebuffing her. *It can't hurt to talk with her for a few minutes*, he told himself. "I'm curious; how did you learn magic?"

Trianna brightened. "My mother was a healer in Surda. She had a bit of power and was able to instruct me in the old ways. Of course, I'm nowhere near as powerful as a Rider. None of Du Vrangr Gata could have defeated Durza alone, like you did. That was a heroic deed."

Embarrassed, Eragon scuffed his boots against the ground. “I wouldn’t have survived if not for Arya.”

“You are too modest, Argetlam,” she admonished. “It was *you* who struck the final blow. You should be proud of your accomplishment. It’s a feat worthy of Vrael himself.” She leaned toward him. His heart quickened as he smelled her perfume, which was rich and musky, with a hint of an exotic spice. “Have you heard the songs composed about you? The Varden sing them every night around their fires. They say you’ve come to take the throne from Galbatorix!”

“No,” said Eragon, quick and sharp. That was one rumor he would not tolerate. “They might, but I don’t. Whatever my fate may be, I don’t aspire to rule.”

“And it’s wise of you not to. What is a king, after all, but a man imprisoned by his duties? That would be a poor reward indeed for the last free Rider and his dragon. No, for you the ability to go and do what you will and, by extension, to shape the future of Alagaësia.” She paused. “Do you have any family left in the Empire?”

What? “Only a cousin.”

“Then you’re not betrothed?”

The question caught him off guard. He had never been asked that before. “No, I’m not betrothed.”

“Surely there must be someone you care about.” She came another step closer, and her ribboned sleeve brushed his arm.

“I wasn’t close to anyone in Carvahall,” he faltered, “and I’ve been traveling since then.”

Trianna drew back slightly, then lifted her wrist so the serpent bracelet was at eye level. “Do you like him?” she inquired. Eragon blinked and nodded, though it was actually rather disconcerting. “I call him Lorga. He’s my familiar and protector.” Bending forward, she blew upon the bracelet, then murmured, “Sé orúm thornessa hávr sharjalví lífs.”

With a dry rustle, the snake stirred to life. Eragon watched, fascinated, as the creature writhed around Trianna’s pale arm, then lifted itself and fixed its whirling ruby eyes upon him, wire tongue whipping in and out. Its eyes seemed to expand until they were each as large as Eragon’s fist. He felt as if he were tumbling into their fiery depths; he could not look away no matter how hard he tried.

Then at a short command, the serpent stiffened and resumed its former position. With a tired sigh, Trianna leaned against the wall. “Not many people understand what we magic users do. But I wanted you to know that there are others like you, and we will help if we can.”

Impulsively, Eragon put his hand on hers. He had never attempted to approach a woman this way before, but instinct urged him onward,

daring him to take the chance. It was frightening, exhilarating. “If you want, we could go and eat. There’s a kitchen not far from here.”

She slipped her other hand over his, fingers smooth and cool, so different from the rough grips he was accustomed to. “I’d like that. Shall we—” Trianna stumbled forward as the door burst open behind her. The sorceress whirled around, only to yelp as she found herself face to face with Saphira.

Saphira remained motionless, except for one lip that slowly lifted to reveal a line of jagged teeth. Then she growled. It was a marvelous growl—richly layered with scorn and menace—that rose and fell through the hall for more than a minute. Listening to it was like enduring a blistering, hackle-raising tirade.

Eragon glared at her the whole time.

When it was over, Trianna was clenching her dress with both fists, twisting the fabric. Her face was white and scared. She quickly curtsied to Saphira, then, with a barely controlled motion, turned and fled. Acting as if nothing had happened, Saphira lifted a leg and licked a claw. *It was nearly impossible to get the door open*, she sniffed.

Eragon could not contain himself any longer. *Why did you do that?* he exploded. *You had no reason to interfere!*

You needed my help, she continued, unperturbed.

If I’d needed your help, I would have called!

Don’t *yell at me*, she snapped, letting her jaws click together. He could sense her emotions boiling with as much turmoil as his. *I’ll not have you run around with a slattern who cares more for Eragon as Rider than you as a person.*

She wasn’t a slattern, roared Eragon. He pounded the wall in frustration. *I’m a man now, Saphira, not a hermit. You can’t expect me to ignore … ignore women just because of who I am. And it’s certainly not your decision to make. At the very least, I might have enjoyed a conversation with her, anything other than the tragedies we’ve dealt with lately. You’re in my head enough to know how I feel. Why couldn’t you leave me alone? Where was the harm?*

You don’t understand. She refused to meet his eyes.

Don’t understand! Will you prevent me from ever having a wife and children? What of a family?

Eragon. She finally fixed one great eye on him. *We are intimately linked.*

Obviously!

And if you pursue a relationship, with or without my blessing, and become … attached … to someone, my feelings will become engaged as well. You should know that. Therefore—and I warn you only once—be careful who you choose, because it will involve both of us.

He briefly considered her words. *Our bond works both ways, however.*

If you hate someone, I will be influenced likewise.… I understand your concern. So you weren't just jealous?

She licked the claw once more. *Perhaps a little*.

Eragon was the one who growled this time. He brushed past her into the room, grabbed Zar'roc, then stalked away, belting on the sword.

He wandered through Tronjheim for hours, avoiding contact with everyone. What had occurred pained him, though he could not deny the truth of Saphira's words. Of all the matters they shared, this was the most delicate and the one they agreed upon least. That night—for the first time since he was captured at Gil'ead—he slept away from Saphira, in one of the dwarves' barracks.

Eragon returned to their quarters the following morning. By unspoken consent, he and Saphira avoided discussing what had transpired; further argument was pointless when neither party was willing to yield ground. Besides, they were both so relieved to be reunited, they did not want to risk endangering their friendship again.

They were eating lunch—Saphira tearing at a bloody haunch—when Jarsha trotted up. Like before, he stared wide-eyed at Saphira, following her movements as she nibbled off the end of a leg bone. "Yes?" asked Eragon, wiping his chin and wondering if the Council of Elders had sent for them. He had heard nothing from them since the funeral.

Jarsha turned away from Saphira long enough to say, "Nasuada would like to see you, sir. She's waiting in her father's study."

Sir! Eragon almost laughed. Only a little while ago, *he* would have been calling people sir, not the other way around. He glanced at Saphira. "Are you done, or should we wait a few minutes?"

Rolling her eyes, she fit the rest of the meat into her mouth and split the bone with a loud crack. *I'm done*.

"All right," said Eragon, standing, "you can go, Jarsha. We know the way."

It took almost half an hour to reach the study because of the city-mountain's size. As during Ajihad's rule, the door was guarded, but instead of two men, an entire squad of battle-hardened warriors now stood before it, alert for the slightest hint of danger. They would clearly sacrifice themselves to protect their new leader from ambush or attack. Though the men could not have failed to recognize Eragon and Saphira, they barred the way while Nasuada was alerted of her visitors. Only then were the two allowed to enter.

Eragon immediately noticed a change: a vase of flowers in the study. The small purple blossoms were unobtrusive, but they suffused the air with a warm fragrance that—for Eragon—evoked summers of fresh-picked raspberries and scythed fields turning bronze under the

sun. He inhaled, appreciating the skill with which Nasuada had asserted her individuality without obliterating Ajihad's memory.

She sat behind the broad desk, still cloaked in the black of mourning. As Eragon seated himself, Saphira beside him, she said, "Eragon." It was a simple statement, neither friendly nor hostile. She turned away briefly, then focused on him, her gaze steely and intent. "I have spent the last few days reviewing the Varden's affairs, such as they are. It was a dismal exercise. We are poor, overextended, and low on supplies, and few recruits are joining us from the Empire. I mean to change that.

"The dwarves cannot support us much longer, as it's been a lean year for farming and they've suffered losses of their own. Considering this, I have decided to move the Varden to Surda. It's a difficult proposition, but one I believe necessary to keep us safe. Once in Surda, we will finally be close enough to engage the Empire directly."

Even Saphira stirred with surprise. *The work that would involve!* said Eragon. *It could take months to get everyone's belongings to Surda, not to mention all the people. And they'd probably be attacked along the way*. "I thought King Orrin didn't dare openly oppose Galbatorix," he protested.

Nasuada smiled grimly. "His stance has changed since we defeated the Urgals. He will shelter and feed us and fight by our side. Many Varden are already in Surda, mainly women and children who couldn't or wouldn't fight. They will also support us, else I will strip our name from them."

"How," asked Eragon, "did you communicate with King Orrin so quickly?"

"The dwarves use a system of mirrors and lanterns to relay messages through their tunnels. They can send a dispatch from here to the western edge of the Beor Mountains in less than a day. Couriers then transport it to Aberon, capital of Surda. Fast as it is, that method is still too slow when Galbatorix can surprise us with an Urgal army and give us less than a day's notice. I intend to arrange something far more expedient between Du Vrangr Gata and Hrothgar's magicians before we go."

Opening the desk drawer, Nasuada removed a thick scroll. "The Varden will depart Farthen Dûr within the month. Hrothgar has agreed to provide us with safe passage through the tunnels. Moreover, he sent a force to Orthíad to remove the last vestiges of Urgals and seal the tunnels so no one can invade the dwarves by that route again. As this may not be enough to guarantee the Varden's survival, I have a favor to ask of you."

Eragon nodded. He had expected a request or order. That was the only reason for her to have summoned them. "I am yours to

command."

"Perhaps." Her eyes flicked to Saphira for a second. "In any case, this is not a command, and I want you to think carefully before replying. To help rally support for the Varden, I wish to spread word throughout the Empire that a new Rider—named Eragon Shadeslayer—and his dragon, Saphira, have joined our cause. I would like your permission before doing so, however."

It's too dangerous, objected Saphira.

Word of our presence here will reach the Empire anyway, pointed out Eragon. *The Varden will want to brag about their victory and Durza's death. Since it'll happen with or without our approval, we should agree to help*.

She snorted softly. *I'm worried about Galbatorix. Until now we haven't made it public where our sympathies lie*.

Our actions have been clear enough.

Yes, but even when Durza fought you in Tronjheim, he wasn't trying to kill you. If we become outspoken in our opposition to the Empire, Galbatorix won't be so lenient again. Who knows what forces or plots he may have kept in abeyance while he tried to gain hold of us? As long as we remain ambiguous, he won't know what to do.

The time for ambiguity has passed, asserted Eragon. *We fought the Urgals, killed Durza, and I have sworn fealty to the leader of the Varden. No ambiguity exists. No, with your permission, I will agree to her proposal*.

She was silent for a long while, then dipped her head. *As you wish*.

He put a hand on her side before returning his attention to Nasuada and saying, "Do what you see fit. If this is how we can best assist the Varden, so be it."

"Thank you. I know it is a lot to ask. Now, as we discussed before the funeral, I expect you to travel to Ellesméra and complete your training."

"With Arya?"

"Of course. The elves have refused contact with both humans and dwarves ever since she was captured. Arya is the only being who can convince them to emerge from seclusion."

"Couldn't she use magic to tell them of her rescue?"

"Unfortunately not. When the elves retreated into Du Weldenvarden after the fall of the Riders, they placed wards around the forest that prevent any thought, item, or being from entering it through arcane means, though not from exiting it, if I understood Arya's explanation. Thus, Arya must physically visit Du Weldenvarden before Queen Islanzadí will know that she is alive, that you and Saphira exist, and of the numerous events that have befallen the Varden these past months." Nasuada handed him the scroll. It was stamped with a wax sigil. "This is a missive for Queen Islanzadí, telling her about the

Varden's situation and my own plans. Guard it with your life; it would cause a great deal of harm in the wrong hands. I hope that after all that's happened, Islanzadí will feel kindly enough toward us to reinitiate diplomatic ties. Her assistance could mean the difference between victory and defeat. Arya knows this and has agreed to press our case, but I wanted you aware of the situation too, so you could take advantage of any opportunities that might arise."

Eragon tucked the scroll into his jerkin. "When will we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning … unless you have something already planned?"

"No."

"Good." She clasped her hands. "You should know, one other person will be traveling with you." He looked at her quizzically. "King Hrothgar insisted that in the interest of fairness there should be a dwarf representative present at your training, since it affects their race as well. So he's sending Orik along."

Eragon's first reaction was irritation. Saphira could have flown Arya and him to Du Weldenvarden, thereby eliminating weeks of unnecessary travel. Three passengers, however, were too many to fit on Saphira's shoulders. Orik's presence would confine them to the ground.

Upon further reflection, Eragon acknowledged the wisdom of Hrothgar's request. It was important for Eragon and Saphira to maintain a semblance of equality in their dealings with the different races. He smiled. "Ah, well, it'll slow us down, but I suppose we have to placate Hrothgar. To tell the truth, I'm glad Orik is coming. Crossing Alagaësia with only Arya was a rather daunting prospect. She's …"

Nasuada smiled too. "She's different."

"Aye." He grew serious again. "Do you really mean to attack the Empire? You said yourself that the Varden are weak. It doesn't seem like the wisest course. If we wait—"

"If we wait," she said sternly, "Galbatorix will only get stronger. This is the first time since Morzan was slain that we have even the slightest opportunity of catching him unprepared. He had no reason to suspect we could defeat the Urgals—which we did thanks to you—so he won't have readied the Empire for invasion."

Invasion! exclaimed Saphira. *And how does she plan to kill Galbatorix when he flies out to obliterate their army with magic?*

Nasuada shook her head in response when Eragon restated the objection. "From what we know of him, he won't fight until Urû'baen itself is threatened. It doesn't matter to Galbatorix if we destroy half the Empire, so long as we come to him, not the other way around. Why should he bother anyway? If we do manage to reach him, our

troops will be battered and depleted, making it all the easier for him to destroy us."

"You still haven't answered Saphira," protested Eragon.

"That's because I can't yet. This will be a long campaign. By its end you might be powerful enough to defeat Galbatorix, or the elves may have joined us … and their spellcasters are the strongest in Alagaësia. No matter what happens, we cannot afford to delay. Now is the time to gamble and dare what no one thinks we can accomplish. The Varden have lived in the shadows for too long—we must either challenge Galbatorix or submit and pass away."

The scope of what Nasuada was suggesting disturbed Eragon. So many risks and unknown dangers were involved, it was almost absurd to consider such a venture. However, it was not his place to make the decision, and he accepted that. Nor would he dispute it further. *We have to trust in her judgment now*.

"But what of you, Nasuada? Will you be safe while we're gone? I must think of my vow. It's become my responsibility to ensure that you won't have your own funeral soon."

Her jaw tightened as she gestured at the door and the warriors beyond. "You needn't fear, I am well defended." She looked down. "I will admit … one reason for going to Surda is that Orrin knows me of old and will offer his protection. I cannot tarry here with you and Arya gone and the Council of Elders still with power. They won't accept me as their leader until I prove beyond doubt that the Varden are under *my* control, not theirs."

Then she seemed to draw on some inner strength, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin so she was distant and aloof. "Go now, Eragon. Ready your horse, gather supplies, and be at the north gate by dawn."

He bowed low, respecting her return to formality, then left with Saphira.

After dinner, Eragon and Saphira flew together. They sailed high above Tronjheim, where crenulated icicles hung from the sides of Farthen Dûr, forming a great white band around them. Though it was still hours until night, it was already nearly dark within the mountain.

Eragon threw back his head, savoring the air on his face. He missed the wind—wind that would rush through the grass and stir the clouds until everything was tousled and fresh. Wind that would bring rain and storms and lash the trees so they bent. *For that matter, I miss trees as well*, he thought. *Farthen Dûr is an incredible place, but it's as empty of plants and animals as Ajihad's tomb*.

Saphira agreed. *The dwarves seem to think that gems take the place of flowers*. She was silent as the light continued to fade. When it was too

dark for Eragon to see comfortably, she said, *It's late. We should return.*

All right.

She drifted toward the ground in great, lazy spirals, drawing nearer to Tronjheim—which glowed like a beacon in the center of Farthen Dûr. They were still far from the city-mountain when she swung her head, saying, *Look.*

He followed her gaze, but all he could see was the gray, featureless plain below them. *What?*

Instead of answering, she tilted her wings and glided to their left, slipping down to one of the four roads that radiated from Tronjheim along the cardinal compass points. As they landed, he noticed a patch of white on a small hill nearby. The patch wavered strangely in the dusk, like a floating candle, then resolved into Angela, who was wearing a pale wool tunic.

The witch carried a wicker basket nearly four feet across and filled with a wild assortment of mushrooms, most of which Eragon did not recognize. As she approached, he gestured at them and said, "You've been gathering toadstools?"

"Hello," laughed Angela, putting her load down. "Oh no, *toadstool* is far too general a term. And anyway, they really ought to be called frogstools, not toadstools." She spread them with her hand. "*This* one is sulphur tuft, and *this* is an inkcap, and here's navelcap, and dwarf shield, russet tough-shank, blood ring, and *that* is a spotted deceiver. Delightful, isn't it!" She pointed to each in turn, ending on a mushroom with pink, lavender, and yellow splashed in rivulets across its cap.

"And that one?" he asked, indicating a mushroom with a lightning-blue stem, molten-orange gills, and a glossy black two-tiered cap.

She looked at it fondly. "Fricai Andlát, as the elves might say. The stalk is instant death, while the cap can cure most poisons. It's what Tunivor's Nectar is extracted from. Fricai Andlát only grows in caves in Du Weldenvarden and Farthen Dûr, and it would die out here if the dwarves started carting their dung elsewhere."

Eragon looked back at the hill and realized that was exactly what it was, a dung heap.

"Hello, Saphira," said Angela, reaching past him to pat Saphira on the nose. Saphira blinked and looked pleased, tail twitching. At the same time, Solembum padded into sight, his mouth clamped firmly around a limp rat. Without so much as a flick of his whiskers, the werecat settled on the ground and began to nibble on the rodent, studiously ignoring the three of them.

"So," said Angela, tucking back a curl of her enormous hair, "off to Ellesméra?" Eragon nodded. He did not bother asking how she had found out; she always seemed to know what was going on. When he

remained silent, she scowled. “Well, don’t act so morose. It’s not as if it’s your execution!”

“I know.”

“Then *smile*, because if it’s not your execution, you should be happy! You’re as flaccid as Solembum’s rat. *Flaccid*. What a wonderful word, don’t you think?”

That wrung a grin out of him, and Saphira chortled with amusement deep in her throat. “I’m not sure it’s quite as wonderful as you think, but yes, I understand your point.”

“I’m glad you understand. Understanding is good.” With arched eyebrows, she hooked a fingernail underneath a mushroom and flipped it over, inspecting its gills as she said, “It’s fortuitous we met tonight, as you are about to leave and I … I will accompany the Varden to Surda. As I told you before, I like to be where things are happening, and that’s the place.”

Eragon grinned even more. “Well then, that must mean we’ll have a safe journey, else you’d be with us.”

Angela shrugged, then said seriously, “Be careful in Du Weldenvarden. Just because elves do not display their emotions doesn’t mean they aren’t subject to rage and passion like the rest of us mortals. What can make them so deadly, though, is how they conceal it, sometimes for years.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Once upon a time.”

After a pause, he asked, “What do you think of Nasuada’s plans?”

“Mmm … she’s doomed! You’re doomed! They’re all doomed!” She cackled, doubling over, then straightened abruptly. “Notice I didn’t specify what kind of doom, so no matter what happens, I predicted it. How very *wise* of me.” She lifted the basket again, setting it on one hip. “I suppose I won’t see you for a while, so farewell, best of luck, avoid roasted cabbage, don’t eat earwax, and look on the bright side of life!” And with a cheery wink, she strolled off, leaving Eragon blinking and nonplussed.

After an appropriate pause, Solembum picked up his dinner and followed, ever so dignified.

HROTHGAR'S GIFT

Dawn was a half hour away when Eragon and Saphira arrived at Tronjheim's north gate. The gate was raised just enough to let Saphira pass, so they hurried underneath it, then waited in the recessed area beyond, where red jasper pillars loomed above and carved beasts snarled between the bloody piers. Past those, at the very edge of Tronjheim, sat two thirty-foot-high gold griffins. Identical pairs guarded each of the city-mountain's gates. No one was in sight.

Eragon held Snowfire's reins. The stallion was brushed, reshod, and saddled, his saddlebags bulging with goods. He pawed the floor impatiently; Eragon had not ridden him for over a week.

Before long Orik ambled up, bearing a large pack on his back and a bundle in his arms. "No horse?" asked Eragon, somewhat surprised. *Are we supposed to walk all the way to Du Weldenvarden?*

Orik grunted. "We'll be stopping at Tarnag, just north of here. From there we take rafts along the Az Ragni to Hedarth, an outpost for trading with the elves. We won't need steeds before Hedarth, so I'll use my own feet till then."

He set the bundle down with a clang, then unwrapped it, revealing Eragon's armor. The shield had been repainted—so the oak tree stood clearly in the center—and all the dings and scrapes removed. Beneath it was the long mail shirt, burnished and oiled until the steel gleamed brilliantly. No sign existed of where it had been rent when Durza cut Eragon's back. The coif, gloves, bracers, greaves, and helmet were likewise repaired.

"Our greatest smiths worked on these," said Orik, "as well as your armor, Saphira. However, since we can't take dragon armor with us, it was given to the Varden, who will guard it against our return."

Please thank him for me, said Saphira.

Eragon obliged, then laced on the greaves and bracers, storing the other items in his bags. Last of all, he reached for his helm, only to find Orik holding it. The dwarf rolled the piece between his hands, then said, "Do not be so quick to don this, Eragon. There is a choice you must make first."

"What choice is that?"

Raising the helmet, Orik uncovered its polished brow, which, Eragon now saw, had been altered: etched in the steel were the hammer and stars of Hrothgar and Orik's clan, the Ingeitum. Orik

scowled, looking both pleased and troubled, and said in a formal voice, “Mine king, Hrothgar, desires that I present this helm as a symbol of the friendship he bears for you. And with it Hrothgar extends an offer to adopt you as one of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, as a member of his own family.”

Eragon stared at the helm, amazed that Hrothgar would make such a gesture. *Does this mean I’d be subjected to his rule? … If I continue to accrue loyalties and allegiances at this pace, I’ll be incapacitated before long—unable to do anything without breaking some oath!*

You don’t have to put it on, pointed out Saphira.

And risk insulting Hrothgar? Once again, we’re trapped.

It may be intended as a gift, though, another sign of otho, not a trap. I would guess he’s thanking us for my offer to repair Isidar Mithrim.

That had not occurred to Eragon, for he had been too busy trying to figure out how the dwarf king might gain advantage over them. *True. But I think it’s also an attempt to correct the imbalance of power created when I swore fealty to Nasuada. The dwarves couldn’t have been pleased with that turn of events*. He looked back at Orik, who was waiting anxiously. “How often has this been done?”

“For a human? Never. Hrothgar argued with the Ingeitum families for a day and a night before they agreed to accept you. If you consent to bear our crest, you will have full rights as clan member. You may attend our councils and give voice on every issue. And,” he grew very somber, “if you so wish, you will have the right to be buried with our dead.”

For the first time, the enormity of Hrothgar’s action struck Eragon. The dwarves could offer no higher honor. With a swift motion, he took the helm from Orik and pressed it down upon his head. “I am privileged to join Dûrgrimst Ingeitum.”

Orik nodded with approval and said, “Then take this Knurlnien, this Heart of Stone, and cup it between your hands—yes, like so. You must steel yourself now and prick open a vein to wet the stone. A few drops will suffice.… To finish, repeat after me: Os il dom qirânû carn dûr thargen, zeitmen, oen grimst vor formv edaris rak skilfz. Narho is belgond …” It was a lengthy recitation and all the longer because Orik stopped to translate every few sentences. Afterward, Eragon healed his wrist with a quick spell.

“Whatever else the clans may say about this business,” observed Orik, “you have behaved with integrity and respect. They cannot ignore that.” He grinned. “We are of the same clan now, eh? You are my foster brother! Under more normal circumstances, Hrothgar would have presented your helm himself and we would have held a lengthy ceremony to commemorate your induction into Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, but events move too swiftly for us to tarry. Fear not that you are being

slighted, though! Your adoption shall be celebrated with the proper rituals when you and Saphira next return to Farthen Dûr. You shall feast and dance and have many pieces of paper to sign in order to formalize your new position."

"I look forward to the day," said Eragon. He was still preoccupied with sifting through the numerous possible ramifications of belonging to Dûrgrimst Ingeitum.

Sitting against a pillar, Orik shrugged off his pack and drew his ax, which he proceeded to twirl between his palms. After several minutes, he leaned forward, glaring back into Tronjheim. "Barzûl knurlar! Where are they? Arya said she would be right here. Ha! Elves' only concept of time is late and even later."

"Have you dealt with them much?" asked Eragon, crouching. Saphira watched with interest.

The dwarf laughed suddenly. "Eta. Only Arya, and then sporadically because she traveled so often. In seven decades, I've learned but one thing about her: You can't rush an elf. Trying is like hammering a file—it might break, but it'll never bend."

"Aren't dwarves the same?"

"Ah, but stone will shift, given enough time." Orik sighed and shook his head. "Of all the races, elves change the least, which is one reason I'm reluctant to go."

"But we'll get to meet Queen Islanzadí and see Ellesméra and who knows what else? When was the last time a dwarf was invited into Du Weldenvarden?"

Orik frowned at him. "Scenery means nothing. Urgent tasks remain in Tronjheim and our other cities, yet I must tramp across Alagaësia to exchange pleasantries and sit and grow fat as you are tutored. It could take years!"

Years! … Still, if that's what is required to defeat Shades and the Ra'zac, I'll do it.

Saphira touched his mind: *I doubt Nasuada will let us stay in Ellesméra for more than a few months. With what she told us, we'll be needed fairly soon.*

"At last!" said Orik, pushing himself upright.

Approaching were Nasuada—slippers flashing beneath her dress, like mice darting from a hole—Jörmundur, and Arya, who bore a pack like Orik's. She wore the same black leather outfit Eragon had first seen her in, as well as her sword.

At that moment, it struck Eragon that Arya and Nasuada might not approve of him joining the Ingeitum. Guilt and trepidation shot through him as he realized that it had been his duty to consult Nasuada first. *And Arya!* He cringed, remembering how angry she had been after his first meeting with the Council of Elders.

Thus, when Nasuada stopped before him, he averted his eyes, ashamed. But she only said, “You accepted.” Her voice was gentle, restrained.

He nodded, still looking down.

“I wondered if you would. Now once again, all three races have a hold on you. The dwarves can claim your allegiance as a member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, the elves will train and shape you—and their influence may be the strongest, for you and Saphira are bound by their magic—and you have sworn fealty to me, a human.… Perhaps it is best that we share your loyalty.” She met his surprise with an odd smile, then pressed a small bag of coins into his palm and stepped away.

Jörmundur extended a hand, which Eragon shook, feeling a bit dazed. “Have a good trip, Eragon. Guard yourself well.”

“Come,” said Arya, gliding past them into the darkness of Farthen Dûr. “It is time to leave. Aiedail has set, and we have far to go.”

“Aye,” Orik agreed. He pulled out a red lantern from the side of his pack.

Nasuada looked them over once more. “Very well. Eragon and Saphira, you have the Varden’s blessings, as well as mine. May your journey be safe. Remember, you carry the weight of our hopes and expectations, so acquit yourselves honorably.”

“We will do our best,” promised Eragon.

Gripping Snowfire’s reins firmly, he started after Arya, who was already several yards away. Orik followed, then Saphira. As Saphira passed Nasuada, Eragon saw her pause and lightly lick Nasuada on the cheek. Then she lengthened her stride, catching up with him.

As they continued north along the road, the gate behind them shrank smaller and smaller until it was reduced to a pinprick of light —with two lonely silhouettes where Nasuada and Jörmundur remained watching.

When they finally reached Farthen Dûr’s base, they found a pair of gigantic doors—thirty feet tall—open and waiting. Three dwarf guards bowed and moved away from the aperture. Through the doors was a tunnel of matching proportions, lined with columns and lanterns for the first fifty feet. After that it was as empty and silent as a mausoleum.

It looked exactly like Farthen Dûr’s western entrance, but Eragon knew that this tunnel was different. Instead of burrowing through the mile-thick base to emerge outside, it proceeded underneath mountain after mountain, all the way to the dwarf city Tarnag.

“Here is our path,” said Orik, lifting the lantern.

He and Arya crossed over the threshold, but Eragon held back, suddenly uncertain. While he did not fear the dark, neither did he

welcome being surrounded by eternal night until they arrived at Tarnag. And once he entered the barren tunnel, he would again be hurling himself into the unknown, abandoning the few things he had grown accustomed to among the Varden in exchange for an uncertain destiny.

What is it? asked Saphira.

Nothing.

He took a breath, then strode forward, allowing the mountain to swallow him in its depths.

Hammer and Tongs

Three days after the Ra'zac's arrival, Roran found himself pacing uncontrollably along the edge of his camp in the Spine. He had heard nothing since Albriech's visit, nor was it possible to glean information by observing Carvahall. He glared at the distant tents where the soldiers slept, then continued pacing.

At midday Roran had a small, dry lunch. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he wondered, *How long are the Ra'zac willing to wait?* If it was a test of patience, he was determined to win.

To pass the time, he practiced his archery on a rotting log, stopping only when an arrow shattered on a rock embedded in the trunk. After that nothing else remained to do, except to resume striding back and forth along the bare track that stretched from a boulder to where he slept.

He was still pacing when footsteps sounded in the forest below. Grabbing his bow, Roran hid and waited. Relief rushed through him when Baldor's face bobbed into view. Roran waved him over.

As they sat, Roran asked, "Why hasn't anyone come?"

"We couldn't," said Baldor, wiping sweat off his brow. "The soldiers have been watching us too closely. This was the first opportunity we had to get away. I can't stay long either." He turned his face toward the peak above them and shuddered. "You're braver than I, staying here. Have you had any trouble with wolves, bears, mountain cats?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Did the soldiers say anything new?"

"One of them bragged to Morn last night that their squad was handpicked for this mission." Roran frowned. "They haven't been too quiet.… At least two or three of them get drunk each night. A group of them tore up Morn's common room the first day."

"Did they pay for the damage?"

" 'Course not."

Roran shifted, staring down at the village. "I still have trouble believing that the Empire would go to these lengths to capture me. What could I give them? What do they *think* I can give them?"

Baldor followed his gaze. "The Ra'zac questioned Katrina today. Someone mentioned that the two of you are close, and the Ra'zac were curious if she knew where you'd gone."

Roran refocused on Baldor's open face. "Is she all right?"

"It would take more than those two to scare her," reassured Baldor.

His next sentence was cautious and probing. “Perhaps you should consider turning yourself in.”

“I’d sooner hang myself and them with me!” Roran started up and stalked over his usual route, still tapping his leg. “How can you say that, knowing how they tortured my father?”

Catching his arm, Baldor said, “What happens if you remain in hiding and the soldiers don’t give up and leave? They’ll assume we lied to help you escape. The Empire doesn’t forgive traitors.”

Roran shrugged off Baldor. He spun around, tapping his leg, then abruptly sat. *If I don’t show myself, the Ra’zac will blame the people at hand. If I attempt to lead the Ra’zac away …* Roran was not a skilled enough woodsman to evade thirty men and the Ra’zac. *Eragon could do it, but not me*. Still, unless the situation changed, it might be the only choice available to him.

He looked at Baldor. “I don’t want anyone to be hurt on my behalf. I’ll wait for now, and if the Ra’zac grow impatient and threaten someone … Well then, I’ll think of something else to do.”

“It’s a nasty situation all around,” offered Baldor.

“One I intend to survive.”

Baldor departed soon afterward, leaving Roran alone with his thoughts on his endless path. He covered mile after mile, grinding a rut into the earth under the weight of his ruminations. When chill dusk arrived, he removed his boots—for fear of wearing them out—and proceeded to pad barefoot.

Just as the waxing moon rose and subsumed the night shadows in beams of marble light, Roran noticed a disturbance in Carvahall. Scores of lanterns bobbed through the darkened village, winking in and out as they floated behind houses. The yellow specks clustered in the center of Carvahall, like a cloud of fireflies, then streamed haphazardly toward the edge of town, where they were met by a hard line of torches from the soldiers’ camp.

For two hours, Roran watched the opposing sides face each other—the agitated lanterns milling helplessly against the stolid torches. Finally, the lambent groups dispersed and filtered back into the tents and houses.

When nothing else of interest occurred, Roran untied his bedroll and slipped under the blankets.

Throughout the next day, Carvahall was consumed with unusual activity. Figures strode between houses and even, Roran was surprised to see, rode out into Palancar Valley toward various farms. At noon he saw two men enter the soldiers’ camp and disappear into the Ra’zac’s tent for almost an hour.

So involved was he with the proceedings, Roran barely moved the

entire day.

He was in the middle of dinner when, as he had hoped, Baldor reappeared. “Hungry?” asked Roran, gesturing.

Baldor shook his head and sat with an air of exhaustion. Dark lines under his eyes made his skin look thin and bruised. “Quimby’s dead.”

Roran’s bowl clattered as it struck the ground. He cursed, wiping cold stew off his leg, then asked, “How?”

“A couple of soldiers started bothering Tara last night.” Tara was Morn’s wife. “She didn’t really mind, except the men got in a fight over who she was supposed to serve next. Quimby was there—checking a cask Morn said had turned—and he tried to break them up.” Roran nodded. That was Quimby, always interfering to make sure others behaved properly. “Only thing is, a soldier threw a pitcher and hit him on the temple. Killed him instantly.”

Roran stared at the ground with his hands on his hips, struggling to regain control over his ragged breathing. He felt as if Baldor had knocked the wind out of him. *It doesn’t seem possible.… Quimby, gone?* The farmer and part-time brewer was as much a part of the landscape as the mountains surrounding Carvahall, an unquestioned presence that shaped the fabric of the village. “Will the men be punished?”

Baldor held up his hand. “Right after Quimby died, the Ra’zac stole his body from the tavern and hauled it out to their tents. We tried to get it back last night, but they wouldn’t talk with us.”

“I saw.”

Baldor grunted, rubbing his face. “Dad and Loring met with the Ra’zac today and managed to convince them to release the body. The soldiers, however, won’t face any consequences.” He paused. “I was about to leave when Quimby was handed over. You know what his wife got? Bones.”

“Bones!”

“Every one of them was nibbled clean—you could see the bite marks—and most had been cracked open for the marrow.”

Disgust gripped Roran, as well as profound horror for Quimby’s fate. It was well known that a person’s spirit could never rest until his body was given a proper burial. Revolted by the desecration, he asked, “What, *who*, ate him then?”

“The soldiers were just as appalled. It must have been the Ra’zac.”

“Why? To what end?”

“I don’t think,” said Baldor, “that the Ra’zac are human. You’ve never seen them up close, but their breath is foul, and they always cover their faces with black scarves. Their backs are humped and twisted, and they speak to each other with clicks. Even their men seem to fear them.”

“If they aren’t human, then what kind of creatures can they be?”

demanded Roran. “They’re not Urgals.”

“Who knows?”

Fear now joined Roran’s revulsion—fear of the supernatural. He saw it echoed on Baldor’s face as the young man clasped his hands. For all the stories of Galbatorix’s misdeeds, it was still a shock to have the king’s evil roosted among their homes. A sense of history settled on Roran as he realized he was involved with forces he had previously been acquainted with only through songs and stories. “Something should be done,” he muttered.

The air grew warmer through the night, until by afternoon Palancar Valley shimmered and sweltered with the unexpected spring heat. Carvahall looked peaceful under the bald blue sky, yet Roran could feel the sour resentment that clenched its inhabitants with malicious intensity. The calm was like a sheet stretched taut in the wind.

Despite the aura of expectation, the day proved to be utterly boring; Roran spent most of his time brushing Horst’s mare. At last he lay to sleep, looking up past the towering pines at the haze of stars that adorned the night sky. They seemed so close, it felt as if he hurtled among them, falling toward the blackest void.

The moon was setting when Roran woke, his throat raw from smoke. He coughed and rolled upright, blinking as his eyes burned and watered. The noxious fumes made it difficult to breathe.

Roran grabbed his blankets and saddled the frightened mare, then spurred her farther up the mountain, hoping to find clear air. It quickly became apparent that the smoke was ascending with him, so he turned and cut sideways through the forest.

After several minutes spent maneuvering in the dark, they finally broke free and rode onto a ledge swept clean by a breeze. Purging his lungs with long breaths, Roran scanned the valley for the fire. He spotted it in an instant.

Carvahall’s hay barn glowed white in a cyclone of flames, transforming its precious contents into a fountain of amber motes. Roran trembled as he watched the destruction of the town’s feed. He wanted to scream and run through the forest to help with the bucket brigade, yet he could not force himself to abandon his own safety.

Now a molten spark landed on Delwin’s house. Within seconds, the thatched roof exploded in a wave of fire.

Roran cursed and tore his hair, tears streaming down his face. This was why mishandling fire was a hanging offense in Carvahall. *Was it an accident? Was it the soldiers? Are the Ra’zac punishing the villagers for shielding me? … Am I somehow responsible for this?*

Fisk’s house joined the conflagration next. Aghast, Roran could only

avert his face, hating himself for his cowardice.

By dawn all the fires had been extinguished or burned out on their own. Only sheer luck and a calm night saved the rest of Carvahall from being consumed.

Roran waited until he was sure of the outcome, then retreated to his old camp and threw himself down to rest. From morning through evening, he was oblivious to the world, except through the lens of his troubled dreams.

Upon his return to awareness, Roran simply waited for the visitor he was sure would appear. This time it was Albriech. He arrived at dusk with a grim, worn expression. “Come with me,” he said.

Roran tensed. “Why?” *Have they decided to give me up?* If he *was* the cause of the fire, he could understand the villagers wanting him gone. He might even agree it was necessary. It was unreasonable to expect everyone in Carvahall to sacrifice themselves for him. Still, that did not mean he would allow them to just hand him over to the Ra’zac. After what the two monsters had done to Quimby, Roran would fight to the death to avoid being their prisoner.

“Because,” said Albriech, clenching his jaw muscles, “it was the soldiers who started the fire. Morn banned them from the Seven Sheaves, but they still got drunk on their own beer. One of them dropped a torch against the hay barn on his way to bed.”

“Was anyone hurt?” asked Roran.

“A few burns. Gertrude was able to handle them. We tried to negotiate with the Ra’zac. They spat on our requests that the Empire replace our losses and the guilty face justice. They even refused to confine the soldiers to the tents.”

“So why should I return?”

Albriech chuckled hollowly. “For hammer and tongs. We need your help to … *remove* the Ra’zac.”

“You would do that for me?”

“We’re not risking ourselves for your sake alone. This concerns the entire village now. At least come talk to Father and the others and hear their thoughts … I’d think you would be glad to get out of these cursed mountains.”

Roran considered Albriech’s proposition long and hard before deciding to accompany him. *It’s this or run for it, and I can always run later*. He fetched the mare, tied his bags to the saddle, then followed Albriech toward the valley floor.

Their progress slowed as they neared Carvahall, using trees and brush for cover. Slipping behind a rain barrel, Albriech checked to see if the streets were clear, then signaled to Roran. Together they crept from shadow to shade, constantly on guard for the Empire’s servants.

At Horst's forge, Albriech opened one of the double doors just far enough for Roran and the mare to quietly enter.

Inside, the workshop was lit by a single candle, which cast a trembling glow over the ring of faces that hovered about it in the surrounding darkness. Horst was there—his thick beard protruded like a shelf into the light—flanked by the hard visages of Delwin, Gedric, and then Loring. The rest of the group was composed of younger men: Baldor, Loring's three sons, Parr, and Quimby's boy, Nolfavrell, who was only thirteen.

They all turned to look as Roran entered the assembly. Horst said, "Ah, you made it. You escaped misfortune while in the Spine?"

"I was lucky."

"Then we can proceed."

"With what, exactly?" Roran hitched the mare to an anvil as he spoke.

Loring answered, the shoemaker's parchment face a mass of contorting lines and grooves. "We have attempted reason with these Ra'zac … these *invaders*." He stopped, his thin frame racked with an unpleasant, metallic wheeze deep in his chest. "They have refused *reason*. They have endangered us all with no sign of remorse or *contrition*." He made a noise in his throat, then said with pronounced deliberation, "They … must … go. Such creatures—"

"No," said Roran. "Not creatures. Desecrators."

The faces scowled and bobbed in agreement. Delwin picked up the thread of conversation: "The point is, everyone's life is at stake. If that fire had spread any farther, dozens of people would have been killed and those who escaped would have lost everything they own. As a result, we've agreed to drive the Ra'zac away from Carvahall. Will you join us?"

Roran hesitated. "What if they return or send for reinforcements? We can't defeat the entire Empire."

"No," said Horst, grave and solemn, "but neither can we stand silent and allow the soldiers to kill us and to destroy our property. A man can endure only so much abuse before he must strike back."

Loring laughed, throwing back his head so the flame gilded the stumps of his teeth. "First we fortify," he whispered with glee, "then we fight. We'll make them regret they ever clapped their festering eyes on Carvahall! Ha ha!"

RETALIATION

After Roran agreed to their plan, Horst began distributing shovels, pitchforks, flails—anything that could be used to beat the soldiers and the Ra'zac away.

Roran hefted a pick, then set it aside. Though he had never cared for Brom's stories, one of them, the "Song of Gerand," resonated with him whenever he heard it. It told of Gerand, the greatest warrior of his time, who relinquished his sword for a wife and farm. He found no peace, however, as a jealous lord initiated a blood feud against Gerand's family, which forced Gerand to kill once more. Yet he did not fight with his blade, but with a simple hammer.

Going to the wall, Roran removed a medium-sized hammer with a long handle and a rounded blade on one side of the head. He tossed it from hand to hand, then went to Horst and asked, "May I have this?"

Horst eyed the tool and Roran. "Use it wisely." Then he said to the rest of the group, "Listen. We want to scare, not kill. Break a few bones if you want, but don't get carried away. And whatever you do, don't stand and fight. No matter how brave or heroic you feel, remember that they are trained soldiers."

When everyone was equipped, they left the forge and wound their way through Carvahall to the edge of the Ra'zac's camp. The soldiers had already gone to bed, except for four sentries who patrolled the perimeter of the gray tents. The Ra'zac's two horses were picketed by a smoldering fire.

Horst quietly issued orders, sending Albriech and Delwin to ambush two of the sentries, and Parr and Roran to ambush the other two.

Roran held his breath as he stalked the oblivious soldier. His heart began to shudder as energy spiked through his limbs. He hid behind the corner of a house, quivering, and waited for Horst's signal. *Wait.*

Wait.

With a roar, Horst burst from hiding, leading the charge into the tents. Roran darted forward and swung his hammer, catching the sentry on the shoulder with a grisly crunch.

The man howled and dropped his halberd. He staggered as Roran struck his ribs and back. Roran raised the hammer again and the man retreated, screaming for help.

Roran ran after him, shouting incoherently. He knocked in the side of a wool tent, trampling whatever was inside, then smashed the top

of a helmet he saw emerging from another tent. The metal rang like a bell. Roran barely noticed as Loring danced past—the old man cackled and hooted in the night as he jabbed the soldiers with a pitchfork. Everywhere was a confusion of struggling bodies.

Whirling around, Roran saw a soldier attempting to string his bow. He rushed forward and hit the back of the bow with his steel mallet, breaking the wood in two. The soldier fled.

The Ra'zac scrambled free of their tent with terrible screeches, swords in hand. Before they could attack, Baldor untethered the horses and sent them galloping toward the two scarecrow figures. The Ra'zac separated, then regrouped, only to be swept away as the soldiers' morale broke and they ran.

Then it was over.

Roran panted in the silence, his hand cramped around the hammer's handle. After a moment, he picked his way through the crumpled mounds of tents and blankets to Horst. The smith was grinning under his beard. "That's the best brawl I've had in years."

Behind them, Carvahall jumped to life as people tried to discover the source of the commotion. Roran watched lamps flare up behind shuttered windows, then turned as he heard soft sobbing.

The boy, Nolfavrell, was kneeling by the body of a soldier, methodically stabbing him in the chest as tears slid down his chin. Gedric and Albriech hurried over and pulled Nolfavrell away from the corpse.

"He shouldn't have come," said Roran.

Horst shrugged. "It was his right."

All the same, killing one of the Ra'zac's men will only make it harder to rid ourselves of the desecrators. "We should barricade the road and between the houses so they won't catch us by surprise." Studying the men for any injuries, Roran saw that Delwin had received a long cut on his forearm, which the farmer bandaged with a strip torn from his ruined shirt.

With a few shouts, Horst organized their group. He dispatched Albriech and Baldor to retrieve Quimby's wagon from the forge and had Loring's sons and Parr scour Carvahall for items that could be used to secure the village.

Even as he spoke, people congregated on the edge of the field, staring at what was left of the Ra'zac's camp and the dead soldier. "What happened?" cried Fisk.

Loring scuttled forward and stared the carpenter in the eye. "What happened? I'll tell you what *happened*. We routed the dung-beardlings … caught them with their boots off and whipped them like dogs!"

"I am glad." The strong voice came from Birgit, an auburn-haired

woman who clasped Nolfavrell against her bosom, ignoring the blood smeared across his face. “They deserve to die like cowards for my husband’s death.”

The villagers murmured in agreement, but then Thane spoke: “Have you gone mad, Horst? Even if you frightened off the Ra’zac and their soldiers, Galbatorix will just send more men. The Empire will never give up until they get Roran.”

“We should hand him over,” snarled Sloan.

Horst raised his hands. “I agree; no one is worth more than all of Carvahall. But if we surrender Roran, do you really think Galbatorix will let us escape punishment for our resistance? In his eyes, we’re no better than the Varden.”

“Then *why* did you attack?” demanded Thane. “Who gave you the authority to make this decision? You’ve doomed us all!”

This time Birgit answered. “Would you let them kill your wife?” She pressed her hands on either side of her son’s face, then showed Thane her bloody palms, like an accusation. “Would you let them burn us? … Where is your manhood, loam breaker?”

He lowered his gaze, unable to face her stark expression.

“They burned my farm,” said Roran, “devoured Quimby, and nearly destroyed Carvahall. Such crimes cannot go unpunished. Are we frightened rabbits to cower down and accept our fate? No! We have a right to defend ourselves.” He stopped as Albriech and Baldor trudged up the street, dragging the wagon. “We can debate later. Now we have to prepare. Who will help us?”

Forty or more men volunteered. Together they set about the difficult task of making Carvahall impenetrable. Roran worked incessantly, nailing fence slats between houses, piling barrels full of rocks for makeshift walls, and dragging logs across the main road, which they blocked with two wagons tipped on their sides.

As Roran hurried from one chore to another, Katrina waylaid him in an alley. She hugged him, then said, “I’m glad you’re back, and that you’re safe.”

He kissed her lightly. “Katrina … I have to speak with you as soon as we’re finished.” She smiled uncertainly, but with a spark of hope. “You were right; it was foolish of me to delay. Every moment we spend together is precious, and I have no desire to squander what time we have when a whim of fate could tear us apart.”

Roran was tossing water on the thatching of Kiselt’s house—so it could not catch fire—when Parr shouted, “Ra’zac!”

Dropping the bucket, Roran ran to the wagons, where he had left his hammer. As he grabbed the weapon, he saw a single Ra’zac sitting on a horse far down the road, almost out of bowshot. The creature

was illuminated by a torch in its left hand, while its right was drawn back, as if to throw something.

Roran laughed. “Is he going to toss rocks at us? He’s too far away to even hit—” He was cut off as the Ra’zac whipped down its arm and a glass vial arched across the distance between them and shattered against the wagon to his right. An instant later, a fireball launched the wagon into the air while a fist of burning air flung Roran against a wall.

Dazed, he fell to his hands and knees, gasping for breath. Through the roaring in his ears came the tattoo of galloping horses. He forced himself upright and faced the sound, only to dive aside as the Ra’zac raced into Carvahall through the burning gap in the wagons.

The Ra’zac reined in their steeds, blades flashing as they hacked at the people strewn around them. Roran saw three men die, then Horst and Loring reached the Ra’zac and began pressing them back with pitchforks. Before the villagers could rally, soldiers poured through the breach, killing indiscriminately in the darkness.

Roran knew they had to be stopped, else Carvahall would be taken. He jumped at a soldier, catching him by surprise, and hit him in the face with the hammer’s blade. The soldier crumpled without a sound. As the man’s compatriots rushed toward him, Roran wrestled the corpse’s shield off his limp arm. He barely managed to get it free in time to block the first strike.

Backstepping toward the Ra’zac, Roran parried a sword thrust, then swung his hammer up under the man’s chin, sending him to the ground. “To me!” shouted Roran. “Defend your homes!” He sidestepped a jab as five men attempted to encircle him. “To me!”

Baldor answered his call first, then Albriech. A few seconds later, Loring’s sons joined him, followed by a score of others. From the side streets, women and children pelted the soldiers with rocks. “Stay together,” ordered Roran, standing his ground. “There are more of us.”

The soldiers halted as the line of villagers before them continued to thicken. With more than a hundred men at his back, Roran slowly advanced.

“Attack, you foolsss,” screamed a Ra’zac, dodging Loring’s pitchfork.

A single arrow whizzed toward Roran. He caught it on his shield and laughed. The Ra’zac were level with the soldiers now, hissing with frustration. They glared at the villagers from under their inky cowls. Suddenly Roran felt himself become lethargic and powerless to move; it was hard to even think. Fatigue seemed to chain his arms and legs in place.

Then from farther in Carvahall, Roran heard a raw shout from Birgit. A second later, a rock hurtled over his head and bored toward the lead Ra’zac, who twitched with supernatural speed to avoid the

missile. The distraction, slight though it was, freed Roran's mind from the soporific influence. *Was that magic?* he wondered.

He dropped the shield, grasped his hammer with both hands, and raised it far above his head—just like Horst did when spreading metal. Roran went up on tiptoe, his entire body bowed backward, then whipped his arms down with a *huh!* The hammer cartwheeled through the air and bounced off the Ra'zac's shield, leaving a formidable dent.

The two attacks were enough to disrupt the last of the Ra'zac's strange power. They clicked rapidly to each other as the villagers roared and marched forward, then the Ra'zac yanked on their reins, wheeling around.

"Retreat," they growled, riding past the soldiers. The crimson-clad warriors sullenly backed out of Carvahall, stabbing at anyone who came too close. Only when they were a good distance from the burning wagons did they dare turn their backs.

Roran sighed and retrieved his hammer, feeling the bruises on his side and back where he had hit the wall. He bowed his head as he saw that the explosion had killed Parr. Nine other men had died. Already wives and mothers rent the night with their wails of grief.

How could this happen here?

"Everyone, come!" called Baldor.

Roran blinked and stumbled to the middle of the road, where Baldor stood. A Ra'zac sat beetle-like on a horse only twenty yards away. The creature crooked a finger at Roran and said, "You … you sssmell like your cousin. We never forget a sssmell."

"What do you want?" he shouted. "Why are you here?"

The Ra'zac chuckled in a horrible, insectile way. "We want … *information*." It glanced over its shoulder, where its companions had disappeared, then cried, "Release Roran and you ssshall be sold as ssslaves. Protect him, and we will eat you all. We ssshall have your answer when next we come. Be sssure it is the right one."

Az Sweldn rak Anhûin

Light burst into the tunnel as the doors dragged open. Eragon winced, his eyes sorely unaccustomed to daylight after so long underground. Beside him, Saphira hissed and arched her neck to get a better view of their surroundings.

It had taken them two days to traverse the subterranean passage from Farthen Dûr, though it felt longer to Eragon, due to the never-ending dusk that surrounded them and the silence it had imposed upon their group. In all, he could recall only a handful of words being exchanged during their journey.

Eragon had hoped to learn more about Arya while they traveled together, but the only information he had gleaned came simply as a result of observation. He had not supped with her before and was startled to see that she brought her own food and ate no meat. When he asked her why, she said, "You will never again consume an animal's flesh after you have been trained, or if you do, it will be only on the rarest of occasions."

"Why should I give up meat?" he scoffed.

"I cannot explain with words, but you will understand once we reach Ellesméra."

All that was forgotten now as he hurried to the threshold, eager to see their destination. He found himself standing on a granite outcropping, more than a hundred feet above a purple-hued lake, brilliant under the eastern sun. Like Kóstha-mérna, the water reached from mountain to mountain, filling the valley's end. From the lake's far side, the Az Ragni flowed north, winding between the peaks until —in the far distance—it rushed out onto the eastern plains.

To his right, the mountains were bare, save for a few trails, but to his left … to his left was the dwarf city Tarnag. Here the dwarves had reworked the seemingly immutable Beors into a series of terraces. The lower terraces were mainly farms—dark curves of land waiting to be planted—dotted with squat halls, which as best he could tell were built entirely of stone. Above those empty levels rose tier upon tier of interlocking buildings until they culminated in a giant dome of gold and white. It was as if the entire city was nothing more than a line of steps leading to the dome. The cupola glistened like polished moonstone, a milky bead floating atop a pyramid of gray slate.

Orik anticipated Eragon's question, saying, "That is Celbedeil, the

greatest temple of dwarfdom and home of Dûrgrimst Quan—the Quan clan—who act as servants and messengers to the gods."

Do they rule Tarnag? asked Saphira. Eragon repeated the query.

"Nay," said Arya, stepping past them. "Though the Quan are strong, they are small in numbers, despite their power over the afterlife … and gold. It is the Ragni Hefthyn—the River Guard—who control Tarnag. We will stay with their clan chief, Ûndin, while here."

As they followed the elf off the outcropping and through the gnarled forest that blanketed the mountain, Orik whispered to Eragon, "Mind her not. She has been arguing with the Quan for many a year. Every time she visits Tarnag and speaks with a priest, it produces a quarrel fierce enough to scare a Kull."

"Arya?"

Orik nodded grimly. "I know little of it, but I've heard she disagrees strongly with much that the Quan practice. It seems that elves do not hold with 'muttering into the air for help.' "

Eragon stared at Arya's back as they descended, wondering if Orik's words were true, and if so, what Arya herself believed. He took a deep breath, pushing the matter from his mind. It felt wonderful to be back in the open, where he could smell the moss and ferns and trees of the forest, where the sun was warm on his face and bees and other insects swarmed pleasantly.

The path took them down to the edge of the lake before rising back toward Tarnag and its open gates. "How have you hidden Tarnag from Galbatorix?" asked Eragon. "Farthen Dûr I understand, but this … I've never seen anything like it."

Orik laughed softly. "Hide it? That would be impossible. No, after the Riders fell, we were forced to abandon all our cities above-ground and retreat into our tunnels in order to escape Galbatorix and the Forsworn. They would often fly through the Beors, killing anyone whom they encountered."

"I thought that dwarves always lived underground."

Orik's thick eyebrows met in a frown. "Why should we? We may have an affinity for stone, but we like the open air as much as elves or humans. However, it has only been in the last decade and a half, ever since Morzan died, that we have dared return to Tarnag and other of our ancient dwellings. Galbatorix may be unnaturally powerful, but even he would not attack an entire city alone. Of course, he and his dragon could cause us no end of trouble if they wanted, but these days they rarely leave Urû'baen, even for short trips. Nor could Galbatorix bring an army here without first defeating Buragh or Farthen Dûr."

Which he nearly did, commented Saphira.

Cresting a small mound, Eragon jolted with surprise as an animal crashed through the underbrush and onto the path. The scraggly

creature looked like a mountain goat from the Spine, except that it was a third larger and had giant ribbed horns that curled around its cheeks, making an Urgal's seem no bigger than a swallow nest. Odder still was the saddle lashed across the goat's back and the dwarf seated firmly on it, aiming a half-drawn bow into the air.

"Hert dûrgrimst? Fild rastn?" shouted the strange dwarf.

"Orik Thrifkz menthiv oen Hrethcarach Eragon rak Dûrgrimst Ingeitum," answered Orik. "Wharn, az vanyali-carharûg Arya. Né oc Ûndinz grimstbelardn." The goat stared warily at Saphira. Eragon noted how bright and intelligent its eyes were, though its face was rather droll with its frosty beard and somber expression. It reminded him of Hrothgar, and he almost laughed, thinking how very dwarfish the animal was.

"Azt jok jordn rast," came the reply.

With no discernible command on the dwarf's part, the goat leaped forward, covering such an extraordinary distance it seemed to take flight for a moment. Then rider and steed vanished between the trees.

"What was that?" asked Eragon, amazed.

Orik resumed walking. "A Feldûnost, one of the five animals unique to these mountains. A clan is named after each one. However, Dûrgrimst Feldûnost is perhaps the bravest and most revered of the clans."

"Why so?"

"We depend upon Feldûnost for milk, wool, and meat. Without their sustenance, we could not live in the Beors. When Galbatorix and his traitorous Riders were terrorizing us, it was Dûrgrimst Feldûnost who risked themselves—and still do—to tend the herds and fields. As such, we are all in their debt."

"Do all dwarves ride Feldûnost?" He stumbled slightly over the unusual word.

"Only in the mountains. Feldûnost are hardy and sure-footed, but they are better suited for cliffs than open plains."

Saphira nudged Eragon with her nose, causing Snowfire to shy away. *Now those would be good hunting, better than any I had in the Spine or hence! If I have time in Tarnag—*

No, he said. *We can't afford to offend the dwarves*.

She snorted, irritated. *I could ask permission first*.

Now the path that had concealed them for so long under dark boughs entered the great clearing that surrounded Tarnag. Groups of observers had already begun to gather in the fields when seven Feldûnost with jeweled harnesses bounded out from the city. Their riders bore lances tipped with pennants that snapped like whips in the air. Reining in his strange beast, the lead dwarf said, "Thou art well-come to this city of Tarnag. By otho of Ûndin and Gannel, I, Thorv,

son of Brokk, offer in peace the shelter of our halls." His accent grumbled and rasped with a rough burr quite unlike Orik's.

"And by Hrothgar's otho, we of the Ingeitum accept your hospitality," responded Orik.

"As do I, in Islanzadí's stead," added Arya.

Appearing satisfied, Thorv motioned to his fellow riders, who spurred their Feldûnost into formation around the four of them. With a flourish, the dwarves rode off, guiding them to Tarnag and through the city gates.

The outer wall was forty feet thick and formed a shadowed tunnel to the first of the many farms that belted Tarnag. Five more tiers—each of which was defended by a fortified gate—carried them past the fields and into the city proper.

In contrast to Tarnag's thickly built ramparts, the buildings within, though of stone, were shaped with such cunning as to give the impression of grace and lightness. Strong, bold carvings, usually of animals, adorned the houses and shops. But even more striking was the stone itself: vibrant hues, from bright scarlet to the subtlest of greens, glazed the rock in translucent layers.

And hung throughout the city were the dwarves' flameless lanterns, their multicolored sparks harbingers of the Beors' long dusk and night.

Unlike Tronjheim, Tarnag had been constructed in proportion to the dwarves, with no concession for human, elf, or dragon visitors. At the most, doorways were five feet high, and they were often only four and a half. Eragon was of middling height, but now he felt like a giant transported onto a puppet stage.

The streets were wide and crammed. Dwarves of various clans hurried about their business or stood haggling in and around shops. Many were garbed in strange, exotic costumes, such as a block of fierce black-haired dwarves who wore silver helmets forged in the likeness of wolf heads.

Eragon stared at the dwarf women the most, as he had only caught brief glimpses of them while in Tronjheim. They were broader than the men, and their faces were heavyset, yet their eyes sparkled and their hair was lustrous and their hands were gentle on their diminutive children. They eschewed frippery, except for small, intricate brooches of iron and stone.

At the Feldûnost's piercing footsteps, the dwarves turned to look at the new arrivals. They did not cheer as Eragon had expected, but rather bowed and murmured, "Shadeslayer." As they saw the hammer and stars upon Eragon's helm, admiration was replaced by shock and, in many cases, outrage. A number of the angrier dwarves contracted around the Feldûnost, glaring between the animals at Eragon and shouting imprecations.

The back of Eragon's neck prickled. *It seems that adopting me wasn't the most popular decision Hrothgar could make.*

Aye, agreed Saphira. *He may have strengthened his hold on you, but at the cost of alienating many of the dwarves.… We'd better get out of sight before blood is shed.*

Thorv and the other guards rode forward as if the crowd was nonexistent, clearing the way through seven additional tiers until only a single gate separated them from the mass of Celbedeil. Then Thorv turned left, toward a great hall pressed against the side of the mountain and protected in fore by a barbican with two machicolated towers.

As they neared the hall, a group of armed dwarves streamed out from between the houses and formed a thick line, blocking the street. Long purple veils covered their faces and draped over their shoulders, like mail coifs.

The guards immediately reined in their Feldûnost, faces hard. "What is it?" Eragon asked Orik, but the dwarf only shook his head and strode forward, a hand on his ax.

"Etzil nithgech!" cried a veiled dwarf, raising a fist. "Formv Hrethcarach … formv Jurgencarmeitder nos eta goroth bahst Tarnag, dûr ensesti rak kythn! Jok is warrev az barzûlegûr dûr dûrgrimst, Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, môgh tor rak Jurgenvren? Né ûdim etal os rast knurlag. Knurlag ana …" For a long minute, he continued to rant with growing spleen.

"Vrron!" barked Thorv, cutting him off, then the two dwarves began arguing. Despite the harsh exchange, Eragon saw that Thorv seemed to respect the other dwarf.

Eragon shifted to the side—trying to get a better view past Thorv's Feldûnost—and the veiled dwarf abruptly fell silent, jabbing at Eragon's helm with an expression of horror.

"Knurlag qana qirânû Dûrgrimst Ingeitum!" he screamed. "Qarzûl ana Hrothgar oen volfild—"

"Jok is frekk dûrgrimstvren?" interrupted Orik quietly, drawing his ax. Worried, Eragon glanced at Arya, but she was too intent on the confrontation to notice him. He surreptitiously slid his hand down and around Zar'roc's wire-wrapped hilt.

The strange dwarf stared hard at Orik, then removed an iron ring from his pocket, plucked three hairs from his beard, twined them around the ring, and threw it onto the street with an impervious clink, spitting after it. Without a word, the purple-shrouded dwarves filed away.

Thorv, Orik, and the other warriors flinched as the ring bounced across the granite pavement. Even Arya seemed taken aback. Two of the younger dwarves blanched and reached for their blades, then

dropped their hands as Thorv barked, “Eta!”

Their reactions unsettled Eragon far more than the raucous exchange had. As Orik strode forward alone and deposited the ring in a pouch, Eragon asked, “What does it mean?”

“It means,” said Thorv, “that you have enemies.”

They hurried through the barbican to a wide courtyard arrayed with three banquet tables, decorated with lanterns and banners. Before the tables stood a group of dwarves, foremost among them a gray-bearded dwarf swathed in wolfskin. He spread his arms, saying, “Welcome to Tarnag, home of Dûrgrimst Ragni Hefthyn. We have heard much praise of you, Eragon Shadeslayer. I am Ûndin, son of Derûnd and clan chief.”

Another dwarf stepped forward. He had the shoulders and chest of a warrior, topped with hooded black eyes that never left Eragon’s face. “And I, Gannel, son of Orm Blood-ax and clan chief of Dûrgrimst Quan.”

“It is an honor to be your guests,” said Eragon, inclining his head. He felt Saphira’s irritation at being ignored. *Patience*, he murmured, forcing a smile.

She snorted.

The clan chiefs greeted Arya and Orik in turn, but their hospitality was lost on Orik, whose only response was to extend his hand, the iron ring on his palm.

Ûndin’s eyes widened, and he gingerly lifted the ring, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger as if it were a venomous snake. “Who gave this to you?”

“It was Az Sweldn rak Anhûin. And not to me, but to Eragon.”

As alarm spread across their faces, Eragon’s earlier apprehension returned. He had seen lone dwarves face an entire group of Kull without shirking. The ring must symbolize something dreadful indeed if it could undermine their courage.

Ûndin frowned as he listened to the muttering of his advisers, then said, “We must consult on this issue. Shadeslayer, a feast is prepared in your honor. If you would allow my servants to guide you to your quarters, you can refresh yourself, and then we might begin.”

“Of course.” Eragon handed Snowfire’s reins to a waiting dwarf and followed a guide into the hall. As he passed through the doorway, he glanced back and saw Arya and Orik bustling away with the clan chiefs, their heads pressed close together. *I won’t be long*, he promised Saphira.

After crouching through dwarf-sized corridors, he was relieved that the room assigned to him was spacious enough to stand freely. The servant bowed and said, “I will return when Grimstborith Ûndin is ready.”

Once the dwarf was gone, Eragon paused and took a deep breath, grateful for the silence. The encounter with the veiled dwarves hovered in his mind, making it difficult for him to relax. *At least we won't be in Tarnag long. That should prevent them from hindering us*.

Peeling off his gloves, Eragon went to a marble basin set on the floor next to the low bed. He put his hands in the water, then jerked them out with an involuntary yelp. The water was almost boiling. *It must be a dwarf custom*, he realized. He waited until it cooled a bit, then doused his face and neck, rubbing them clean as steam swirled off his skin.

Rejuvenated, he stripped out of his breeches and tunic and outfitted himself in the clothes he had worn to Ajihad's funeral. He touched Zar'roc, but decided it would only insult Ûndin's table and instead belted on his hunting knife.

Then, from his pack, he took the scroll Nasuada had charged him with delivering to Islanzadí and weighed it in his hand, wondering where to hide it. The missive was too important to leave out in the open, where it could be read or stolen. Unable to think of a better place, he slipped the scroll up his sleeve. *It'll be safe there unless I get into a fight, in which case I'll have bigger problems to worry about*.

When at last the servant returned for Eragon, it was only an hour or so past noon, but the sun had already vanished behind the looming mountains, plunging Tarnag into dusk. Exiting the hall, Eragon was struck by the city's transformation. With the premature advent of night, the dwarves' lanterns revealed their true strength, flooding the streets with pure, unwavering light that made the entire valley glow.

Ûndin and the other dwarves were gathered in the courtyard, along with Saphira, who had situated herself at the head of a table. No one appeared interested in disputing her choice.

Has anything happened? asked Eragon, hurrying toward her.

Ûndin summoned extra warriors, then had the gates barred.

Does he expect an attack?

At the very least, he's concerned about the possibility.

"Eragon, please join me," said Ûndin, gesturing at the chair to his right. The clan chief seated himself as Eragon did, and the rest of the company hurriedly followed suit.

Eragon was happy when Orik ended up beside him with Arya directly across the table, although both looked grim. Before he could ask Orik about the ring, Ûndin slapped the table and roared, "Ignh az voth!"

Servants streamed out of the hall, bearing platters of beaten gold piled high with meats, pies, and fruit. They divided into three columns —one for each table—and deposited the dishes with a flourish.

Before them were soups and stews filled with various tubers, roasted venison, long hot loaves of sourdough bread, and rows of honeycakes dripped with raspberry preserve. In a bed of greens lay filleted trout garnished with parsley, and on the side, pickled eel stared forlornly at an urn of cheese, as if hoping to somehow escape back into a river. A swan sat on each table, surrounded by a flock of stuffed partridges, geese, and ducks.

Mushrooms were everywhere: broiled in juicy strips, placed atop a bird's head like a bonnet, or carved in the shape of castles amid moats of gravy. An incredible variety was on display, from puffy white mushrooms the size of Eragon's fist, to ones he could have mistaken for gnarled bark, to delicate toadstools sliced neatly in half to showcase their blue flesh.

Then the centerpiece of the feast was revealed: a gigantic roasted boar, glistening with sauce. At least Eragon thought it was a boar, for the carcass was as large as Snowfire and took six dwarves to carry. The tusks were longer than his forearms, the snout as wide as his head. And the smell, it overwhelmed all others in pungent waves that made his eyes water from their strength.

"Nagra," whispered Orik. "Giant boar. Ûndin truly honors you tonight, Eragon. Only the bravest dwarves dare hunt Nagran, and it is only served to those who have great valor. Also, I think he makes a gesture that he will support you over Dûrgrimst Nagra."

Eragon leaned toward him so no one else could hear. "Then this is another animal native to the Beors? What are the rest?"

"Forest wolves big enough to prey on a Nagra and nimble enough to catch Feldûnost. Cave bears, which we call Urzhadn and the elves call Beorn and for which they dubbed these peaks, though we do not call them such ourselves. The mountains' name is a secret that we share with no race. And—"

"Smer voth," commanded Ûndin, smiling at his guests. The servants immediately drew small curved knives and cut portions of the Nagra, which they set on everyone's plates—except for Arya's—including a weighty piece for Saphira. Ûndin smiled again, took a dagger, and sliced off a bit of his meat.

Eragon reached for his own knife, but Orik grabbed his arm. "Wait."

Ûndin chewed slowly, rolling his eyes and nodding in an exaggerated fashion, then swallowed and proclaimed, "Ilf gauhnith!"

"Now," said Orik, turning to the meal as conversation erupted along the tables.

Eragon had never tasted anything like the boar. It was juicy, soft, and oddly spicy—as if the meat had been soaked in honey and cider—which was enhanced by the mint used to flavor the pork. *I wonder how they managed to cook something so large*.

Very slowly, commented Saphira, nibbling on her Nagra.

Between bites, Orik explained, "It is custom, from days when poisoning was rampant among clans, for the host to taste the food first and declare it safe for his guests."

During the banquet, Eragon divided his time between sampling the multitude of dishes and conversing with Orik, Arya, and dwarves farther down the table. In that manner, the hours hastened by, for the feast was so large, it was late afternoon before the last course had been served, the last bite consumed, and the last chalice drained. As servants removed the tableware, Ûndin turned to Eragon and said, "The meal pleased you, yes?"

"It was delicious."

Ûndin nodded. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. I had the tables moved outside yesterday so the dragon might dine with us." He remained intently focused on Eragon all the while he spoke.

Eragon went cold inside. Intentionally or not, Ûndin had treated Saphira as no more than a beast. Eragon had intended to ask about the veiled dwarves in private, but now—out of a desire to unsettle Ûndin—he said, "Saphira and I thank you." Then, "Sir, why was the ring thrown at us?"

A painful silence crept over the courtyard. Out of the corner of his eye, Eragon saw Orik wince. Arya, however, smiled as if she understood what he was doing.

Ûndin put down his dagger, scowling thickly. "The knurlagn you met are of a tragic clan. Before the Riders' fall, they were among the oldest, richest families of our kingdom. Their doom was sealed, though, by two mistakes: they lived on the western edge of the Beor Mountains, and they volunteered their greatest warriors in Vrael's service."

Anger broke through his voice with sharp cracks. "Galbatorix and his ever-cursed Forsworn slaughtered them in your city of Urû'baen. Then they flew on us, killing many. Of that clan, only Grimstcarvlorss Anhûin and her guards survived. Anhûin soon died of grief, and her men took the name Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, The Tears of Anhûin, covering their faces to remind themselves of their loss and their desire for revenge."

Eragon's cheeks stung with shame as he fought to keep his face expressionless. "So," said Ûndin, glowering at a pastry, "they rebuilt the clan over the decades, waiting and hunting for recompense. And now you come, bearing Hrothgar's mark. It is the ultimate insult to them, no matter your service in Farthen Dûr. Thus the ring, the ultimate challenge. It means Dûrgrimst Az Sweldn rak Anhûin will oppose you with all their resources, in every matter, big or small. They have set themselves against you utterly, declared themselves

blood enemies."

"Do they mean me bodily harm?" asked Eragon stiffly.

Ûndin's gaze faltered for a moment as he cast a look at Gannel, then he shook his head and uttered a gruff laugh that was, perhaps, louder than the occasion warranted. "No, Shadeslayer! Not even they would dare hurt a guest. It is forbidden. They only want you gone, gone, gone." Yet Eragon still wondered. Then Ûndin said, "Please, let us talk no more of these unpleasant matters. Gannel and I have offered our food and mead in friendship; is that not what matters?" The priest murmured in concordance.

"It is appreciated," Eragon finally relented.

Saphira looked at him with solemn eyes and said, *They are afraid, Eragon. Afraid and resentful because they have been forced to accept a Rider's assistance*.

Aye. They may fight with us, but they don't fight for us.

CELBEDEIL

The dawnless morning found Eragon in Ûndin's main hall, listening as the clan chief spoke to Orik in Dwarvish. Ûndin broke off as Eragon approached, then said, "Ah, Shadeslayer. You slept well?"

"Yes."

"Good." He gestured at Orik. "We have been considering your departure. I had hoped you'd be able to spend some time with us. But under the circumstances, it seems best if you resume your journey early tomorrow morning, when few are in the streets who might trouble you. Supplies and transportation are being readied even as I speak. It was Hrothgar's orders that guards should accompany you as far as Ceris. I have increased their numbers from three to seven."

"And in the meantime?"

Ûndin shrugged his fur-bound shoulders. "I had intended to show you the wonders of Tarnag, but it would be foolish now for you to wander mine city. However, Grimstborith Gannel has invited you to Celbedeil for the day. Accept if you wish. You'll be safe with him." The clan chief seemed to have forgotten his earlier assertion that Az Sweldn rak Anhûin would not harm a guest.

"Thank you, I might at that." As Eragon left the hall, he pulled Orik aside and asked, "How serious is this feud, really? I need to know the truth."

Orik answered with obvious reluctance: "In the past, it was not uncommon for blood feuds to endure for generations. Entire families were driven extinct because of them. It was rash of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin to invoke the old ways; such a thing has not been done since the last of the clan wars.… Until they rescind their oath, you must guard against their treachery, whether it be for a year or a century. I'm sorry that your friendship with Hrothgar has brought this upon you, Eragon. But you are not alone. Dûrgrimst Ingeitum stands with you in this."

Once outside, Eragon hurried to Saphira, who had spent the night coiled in the courtyard. *Do you mind if I visit Celbedeil?*

Go if you must. But take Zar'roc. He followed her advice, also tucking Nasuada's scroll into his tunic.

When Eragon approached the gates to the hall's enclosure, five dwarves pushed the rough-hewn timbers aside, then closed in around

him, hands on their axes and swords as they inspected the street. The guards remained as Eragon retraced yesterday's path to the barred entrance of Tarnag's foremost tier.

Eragon shivered. The city seemed unnaturally empty. Doors were closed, windows were shuttered, and the few pedestrians in evidence averted their faces and turned down alleys to avoid walking past him. *They're scared to be seen near me*, he realized. *Perhaps because they know Az Sweldn rak Anhûin will retaliate against anyone who helps me*. Eager to escape the open street, Eragon raised his hand to knock, but before he could, one door grated outward, and a black-robed dwarf beckoned from within. Tightening his sword belt, Eragon entered, leaving his guards outside.

His first impression was of color. A burning-green sward splayed around the pillared mass of Celbedeil, like a mantle dropped over the symmetrical hill that upheld the temple. Ivy strangled the building's ancient walls in foot after foot of hairy ropes, dew still glittering on the pointed leaves. And curving above all but the mountains was the great white cupola ribbed with chiseled gold.

His next impression was of smell. Flowers and incense mixed their perfumes into an aroma so ethereal, Eragon felt as if he could live on the scent alone.

Last was sound, for despite clumps of priests strolling along mosaic pathways and spacious grounds, the only noise Eragon could discern was the soft thump of a rook flying overhead.

The dwarf beckoned again and strode down the main avenue toward Celbedeil. As they passed under its eaves, Eragon could only marvel at the wealth and craftsmanship displayed around him. The walls were spotted with gems of every color and cut—though all flawless—and red gold had been hammered into the veins lacing the stone ceilings, walls, and floor. Pearls and silver provided accents. Occasionally, they passed a screen partition carved entirely of jade.

The temple was devoid of cloth decorations. In their absence, the dwarves had carved a profusion of statues, many depicting monsters and deities locked in epic battles.

After climbing several floors, they passed through a copper door waxy with verdigris and embossed with intricate, patterned knots into a bare room floored with wood. Armor hung thickly on the walls, along with racks of staff-swords identical to the one Angela had fought with in Farthen Dûr.

Gannel was there, sparring with three younger dwarves. The clan chief's robe was rucked up over his thighs so he could move freely, his face a fierce scowl as the wood shaft spun in his hands, unsharpened blades darting like riled hornets.

Two dwarves lunged at Gannel, only to be stymied in a clatter of

wood and metal as he spun past them, rapping their knees and heads and sending them to the floor. Eragon grinned as he watched Gannel disarm his last opponent in a brilliant flurry of blows.

At last the clan chief noticed Eragon and dismissed the other dwarves. As Gannel set his weapon on a rack, Eragon said, "Are all Quan so proficient with the blade? It seems an odd skill for priests."

Gannel faced him. "We must be able to defend ourselves, no? Many enemies stalk this land."

Eragon nodded. "Those are unique swords. I've never seen their like, except for one an herbalist used in the battle of Farthen Dûr."

The dwarf sucked in his breath, then let it hiss out between his teeth. "Angela." His expression soured. "She won her staff from a priest in a game of riddles. It was a nasty trick, as we are the only ones allowed to use hûthvírn. She and Arya …" He shrugged and went to a small table, where he filled two mugs with ale. Handing one to Eragon, he said, "I invited you here today at Hrothgar's request. He told me that if you accepted his offer to become Ingeitum, I was to acquaint you with dwarf traditions."

Eragon sipped the ale and kept silent, eyeing how Gannel's thick brow caught the light, shadows dripping down his cheeks from the bony ridge.

The clan chief continued: "Never before has an outsider been taught our secret beliefs, nor may you speak of them to human or elf. Yet without this knowledge, you cannot uphold what it means to be knurla. You are Ingeitum now: our blood, our flesh, our honor. You understand?"

"I do."

"Come." Keeping his ale in hand, Gannel took Eragon from the sparring room and conveyed him through five grand corridors, stopping in the archway to a dim chamber hazy with incense. Facing them, the squat outline of a statue swelled ponderously from floor to ceiling, a faint light cast across the brooding dwarf face hacked with uncharacteristic crudeness from brown granite.

"Who is he?" asked Eragon, intimidated.

"Gûntera, King of the Gods. He is a warrior and a scholar, though fickle in his moods, so we burn offerings to assure his affection at the solstices, before sowing, and at deaths and births." Gannel twisted his hand in a strange gesture and bowed to the statue. "It is to him we pray before battles, for he molded this land from the bones of a giant and gives the world its order. All realms are Gûntera's."

Then Gannel instructed Eragon how to properly venerate the god, explaining the signs and words that were used for homage. He elucidated the meaning of the incense—how it symbolized life and happiness—and spent long minutes recounting legends about Gûntera,

how the god was born fully formed to a she-wolf at the dawn of stars, how he had battled monsters and giants to win a place for his kin in Alagaësia, and how he had taken Kílf, the goddess of rivers and the sea, as his mate.

Next they went to Kílf's statue, which was carved with exquisite delicacy out of pale blue stone. Her hair flew back in liquid ripples, rolling down her neck and framing merry amethyst eyes. In her hands, she cupped a water lily and a chunk of porous red rock that Eragon did not recognize.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing.

"Coral taken from deep within the sea that borders the Beors."

"Coral?"

Gannel took a draught of ale, then said, "Our divers found it while searching for pearls. It seems that, in brine, certain stones grow like plants."

Eragon stared with wonder. He had never thought of pebbles or boulders as alive, yet here was proof that all they needed was water and salt to flourish. It finally explained how rocks had continued to appear in their fields in Palancar Valley, even after the soil had been combed clean each spring. *They grew!*

They proceeded to Urûr, master of the air and heavens, and his brother Morgothal, god of fire. At the carmine statue of Morgothal, the priest told how the brothers loved each other so much, neither could exist independently. Thus, Morgothal's burning palace in the sky during the day, and the sparks from his forge that appeared overhead every night. And also thus, how Urûr constantly fed his sibling so he would not die.

Only two more gods were left after that: Sindri—mother of the earth—and Helzvog.

Helzvog's statue was different from the rest. The nude god was bowed in half over a dwarf-sized lump of gray flint, caressing it with the tip of his forefinger. The muscles of his back bunched and knotted with inhuman strain, yet his expression was incredibly tender, as if a newborn child lay before him.

Gannel's voice dropped to a low rasp: "Gûntera may be King of the Gods, but it is Helzvog who holds our hearts. It was he who felt that the land should be peopled after the giants were vanquished. The other gods disagreed, but Helzvog ignored them and, in secret, formed the first dwarf from the roots of a mountain.

"When his deed was discovered, jealousy swept the gods and Gûntera created elves to control Alagaësia for himself. Then Sindri brought forth humans from the soil, and Urûr and Morgothal combined their knowledge and released dragons into the land. Only Kílf restrained herself. So the first races entered this world."

Eragon absorbed Gannel's words, accepting the clan chief's sincerity but unable to quell a simple question: *How does he know?* Eragon sensed that it would be an awkward query, however, and merely nodded as he listened.

"This," said Gannel, finishing the last of his ale, "leads to our most important rite, which I know Orik has discussed with you.… All dwarves must be buried in stone, else our spirits will never join Helzvog in his hall. We are not of earth, air, or fire, but of *stone*. And as Ingeitum, it is your responsibility to assure a proper resting place for any dwarf who may die in your company. If you fail—in the absence of injury or enemies—Hrothgar will exile you, and no dwarf will acknowledge your presence until after your death." He straightened his shoulders, staring hard at Eragon. "You have much more to learn, yet uphold the customs I outlined today and you will do well."

"I won't forget," said Eragon.

Satisfied, Gannel led him away from the statues and up a winding staircase. As they climbed, the clan chief dipped a hand into his robe and withdrew a simple necklace, a chain threaded through the pommel of a miniature silver hammer. He gave it to Eragon.

"This is another favor Hrothgar asked of me," Gannel explained. "He worries that Galbatorix may have gleaned an image of you from the minds of Durza, the Ra'zac, or any number of soldiers who saw you throughout the Empire."

"Why should I fear that?"

"Because then Galbatorix could scry you. Perhaps he already has."

A shiver of apprehension wormed down Eragon's side, like an icy snake. *I should have thought of that*, he berated himself.

"The necklace will prevent anyone from scrying you or your dragon, as long as you wear it. I placed the spell myself, so it should hold before even the strongest mind. But be forewarned, when activated, the necklace will draw upon your strength until you either take it off or the danger has passed."

"What if I'm asleep? Could the necklace consume all my energy before I was aware of it?"

"Nay. It will wake you."

Eragon rolled the hammer between his fingers. It was difficult to avert another's spells, least of all Galbatorix's. *If Gannel is so accomplished, what other enchantments might be hidden in his gift?* He noticed a line of runes cut along the hammer's haft. They spelled *Astim Hefthyn*. The stairs ended as he asked, "Why do dwarves write with the same runes as humans?"

For the first time since they met, Gannel laughed, his voice booming through the temple as his large shoulders shook. "It is the other way

around; humans write with *our* runes. When your ancestors landed in Alagaësia, they were as illiterate as rabbits. However, they soon adopted our alphabet and matched it to *this* language. Some of your words even come from us, like *father*, which was originally *farthen*."

"So then Farthen Dûr means …?" Eragon slipped the necklace over his head and tucked it under his tunic.

"Our Father."

Stopping at a door, Gannel ushered Eragon through to a curved gallery located directly below the cupola. The passageway banded Celbedeil, providing a view through the open archways of the mountains behind Tarnag, as well as the terraced city far below.

Eragon barely glanced at the landscape, for the gallery's inner wall was covered with a single continuous painting, a gigantic narrative band that began with a depiction of the dwarves' creation under Helzvog's hand. The figures and objects stood in relief from the surface, giving the panorama a feeling of hyperrealism with its saturated, glowing colors and minute detail.

Captivated, Eragon asked, "How was this made?"

"Each scene is carved out of small plates of marble, which are fired with enamel, then fitted into a single piece."

"Wouldn't it be easier to use regular paint?"

"It would," said Gannel, "but not if we wanted it to endure centuries —millennia—without change. Enamel never fades or loses its brilliancy, unlike oil paint. This first section was carved only a decade after the discovery of Farthen Dûr, well before elves set foot on Alagaësia."

The priest took Eragon by the arm and guided him along the tableau. Each step carried them through uncounted years of history.

Eragon saw how the dwarves were once nomads on a seemingly endless plain, until the land grew so hot and desolate they were forced to migrate south to the Beor Mountains. *That was how the Hadarac Desert was formed*, he realized, amazed.

As they proceeded down the mural, heading toward the back of Celbedeil, Eragon witnessed everything from the domestication of Feldûnost to the carving of Isidar Mithrim, the first meeting between dwarves and elves, and the coronation of each new dwarf king. Dragons frequently appeared, burning and slaughtering. Eragon had difficulty restraining comment during those sections.

His steps slowed as the painting shifted to the event he had hoped to find: the war between elves and dragons. Here the dwarves had devoted a vast amount of space to the destruction wreaked upon Alagaësia by the two races. Eragon shuddered with horror at the sight of elves and dragons killing each other. The battles continued for yards, each image more bloody than the last, until the darkness lifted

and a young elf was shown kneeling on the edge of a cliff, holding a white dragon egg.

"Is that …?" whispered Eragon.

"Aye, it's Eragon, the First Rider. It's a good likeness too, as he agreed to sit for our artisans."

Drawn forward by his fascination, Eragon studied the face of his namesake. *I always imagined him older*. The elf had angled eyes that peered down a hooked nose and narrow chin, giving him a fierce appearance. It was an alien face, completely different from his own … and yet the set of his shoulders, high and tense, reminded Eragon of how he had felt upon finding Saphira's egg. *We're not so different, you and I*, he thought, touching the cool enamel. *And once my ears match yours, we shall truly be brothers through time.… I wonder, would you approve of my actions?* He knew they had made at least one identical choice; they had both kept the egg.

He heard a door open and close and turned to see Arya approaching from the far end of the gallery. She scanned the wall with the same blank expression Eragon had seen her use when confronting the Council of Elders. Whatever her specific emotions, he sensed that she found the situation distasteful.

Arya inclined her head. "Grimstborith."

"Arya."

"You have been educating Eragon in your mythology?"

Gannel smiled flatly. "One should always understand the faith of the society that one belongs to."

"Yet comprehension does not imply belief." She fingered the pillar of an archway. "Nor does it mean that those who purvey such beliefs do so for more than … material gain."

"You would deny the sacrifices my clan makes to bring comfort to our brethren?"

"I deny nothing, only ask what good might be accomplished if your wealth were spread among the needy, the starving, the homeless, or even to buy supplies for the Varden. Instead, you've piled it into a monument to your own wishful thinking."

"Enough!" The dwarf clenched his fists, his face mottled. "Without us, the crops would wither in drought. Rivers and lakes would flood. Our flocks would give birth to one-eyed beasts. The very heavens would shatter under the gods' rage!" Arya smiled. "Only *our* prayers and service prevent that from happening. If not for Helzvog, where—"

Eragon soon lost track of the argument. He did not understand Arya's vague criticisms of Dûrgrimst Quan, but he gathered from Gannel's responses that, in some indirect way, she had implied that the dwarf gods did not exist, questioned the mental capacity of every dwarf who entered a temple, and pointed out what she took to be

flaws in their reasoning—all in a pleasant and polite voice.

After a few minutes, Arya raised her hand, stopping Gannel, and said, "That is the difference between us, Grimstborith. You devote yourself to that which you believe to be true but cannot prove. There, we must agree to disagree." She turned to Eragon then. "Az Sweldn rak Anhûin has inflamed Tarnag's citizens against you. Ûndin believes, as do I, that it would be best for you to remain behind his walls until we leave."

Eragon hesitated. He wanted to see more of Celbedeil, but if there was to be trouble, then his place was by Saphira's side. He bowed to Gannel and begged to be excused. "You need not apologize, Shadeslayer," said the clan chief. He glared at Arya. "Do what you must, and may the blessings of Gûntera be upon you."

Together Eragon and Arya departed the temple and, surrounded by a dozen warriors, trotted through the city. As they did, Eragon heard shouts from an angry mob on a lower tier. A stone skipped over a nearby roof. The motion drew his eye to a dark plume of smoke rising from the city's edge.

Once in the hall, Eragon hurried to his room. There he slipped on his mail hauberk; strapped the greaves to his shins and the bracers to his forearms; jammed the leather cap, coif, and then helm over his head; and grabbed his shield. Scooping up his pack and saddlebags, he ran back to the courtyard, where he sat against Saphira's right foreleg.

Tarnag is like an overturned anthill, she observed.

Let's hope we don't get bitten.

Arya joined them before long, as did a group of fifty heavily armed dwarves who settled in the middle of the courtyard. The dwarves waited impassively, talking in low grunts as they eyed the barred gate and the mountain that rose up behind them.

"They fear," said Arya, seating herself by Eragon, "that the crowds may prevent us from reaching the rafts."

"Saphira can always fly us out."

"Snowfire as well? And Ûndin's guards? No, if we are stopped, we shall have to wait until the dwarves' outrage subsides." She studied the darkening sky. "It's unfortunate that you managed to offend so many dwarves, but perhaps inevitable. The clans have ever been contentious; what pleases one infuriates another."

He fingered the edge of his mail. "I wish now I hadn't accepted Hrothgar's offer."

"Ah, yes. As with Nasuada, I think you made the only viable choice. You are not to blame. The fault, if any, lies with Hrothgar for making the offer in the first place. He must have been well aware of the repercussions."

Silence reigned for several minutes. A half-dozen dwarves marched

around the courtyard, stretching their legs. Finally, Eragon asked, “Do you have any family in Du Weldenvarden?”

It was a long time before Arya answered. “None that I’m close to.”

“Why … why is that?”

She hesitated again. “They disliked my choice to become the Queen’s envoy and ambassador; it seemed inappropriate. When I ignored their objections and still had the yawë tattooed on my shoulder—which indicates that I have devoted myself to the greater good of our race, as is the case with your ring from Brom—my family refused to see me again.”

“But that was over seventy years ago,” he protested.

Arya looked away, concealing her face behind a veil of hair. Eragon tried to imagine what it must have been like for her—ostracized from her family and sent to live among two completely different races. *No wonder she’s so withdrawn*, he realized. “Are there any other elves outside of Du Weldenvarden?”

Still keeping her face covered, she said, “Three of us were sent forth from Ellesméra. Fäolin and Glenwing always traveled with me when we transported Saphira’s egg between Du Weldenvarden and Tronjheim. Only I survived Durza’s ambush.”

“What were they like?”

“Proud warriors. Glenwing loved speaking to birds with his mind. He would stand in the forest surrounded by a flock of songbirds and listen to their music for hours. Afterward, he might sing us the prettiest melodies.”

“And Fäolin?” This time Arya refused to answer, though her hands tightened on her bow. Undaunted, Eragon cast around for another subject. “Why do you dislike Gannel so much?”

She faced him suddenly and touched his cheek with soft fingers. Eragon flinched with surprise. “That,” she said, “is a discussion for another time.” Then she stood and calmly relocated herself across the courtyard.

Confused, Eragon stared at her back. *I don’t understand*, he said, leaning against Saphira’s belly. She snorted, amused, then curled her neck and tail around him and promptly fell asleep.

As the valley darkened, Eragon struggled to stay alert. He pulled out Gannel’s necklace and examined it several times with magic, but found only the priest’s guarding spell. Giving up, he replaced the necklace under his tunic, pulled his shield over him, and settled down to wait through the night.

At the first hint of light in the sky overhead—though the valley itself was still in shadow and would remain so until almost midday—Eragon roused Saphira. The dwarves were already up, busy muffling their

weapons so they could creep through Tarnag with utter secrecy. Ûndin even had Eragon tie rags around Saphira's claws and Snowfire's hooves.

When all was ready, Ûndin and his warriors assembled in a large block around Eragon, Saphira, and Arya. The gates were carefully opened—no sound came from the oiled hinges—and then they set out for the lake.

Tarnag seemed deserted, the vacant streets lined with houses where its inhabitants lay oblivious and dreaming. The few dwarves they encountered gazed at them silently, then padded away like ghosts in the twilight.

At the gate to each tier, a guard waved them through without comment. They soon left the buildings and found themselves crossing the barren fields at Tarnag's base. Beyond those, they reached the stone quay that edged the still, gray water.

Waiting for them were two wide rafts tied alongside a pier. Three dwarves squatted on the first raft, four on the second. They stood as Ûndin came into view.

Eragon helped the dwarves hobble and blindfold Snowfire, then coax the reluctant horse onto the second raft, where he was forced to his knees and tied down. Meanwhile, Saphira slipped off the pier into the lake. Only her head remained above the surface as she paddled through the water.

Ûndin grasped Eragon's arm. "Here is where we part. You have my best men; they will protect you until you reach Du Weldenvarden." Eragon tried to thank him, but Ûndin shook his head. "No, it is not a matter for gratitude. It is my duty. I am only shamed that your stay was darkened by the hatred of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin."

Eragon bowed, then boarded the first raft with Orik and Arya. The mooring ropes were unknotted, and the dwarves pushed away from shore with long poles. As dawn approached, the two rafts drifted toward the mouth of the Az Ragni, Saphira swimming between them.

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DIAMONDS IN THE NIGHT

The Empire has violated my home.

So thought Roran as he listened to the anguished moans of the men injured during the previous night's battle with the Ra'zac and soldiers. Roran shuddered with fear and rage until his whole body was consumed with feverish chills that left his cheeks burning and his breath short. And he was sad, so very sad … as if the Ra'zac's deeds had destroyed the innocence of his childhood haunts.

Leaving the healer, Gertrude, tending to the wounded, Roran continued toward Horst's house, noting the makeshift barriers that filled the gaps between buildings: the boards, the barrels, the piles of rocks, and the splintered frames of the two wagons destroyed by the Ra'zac's explosives. It all seemed pitifully fragile.

The few people who moved through Carvahall were glassy-eyed with shock, grief, and exhaustion. Roran was tired too, more than he could ever remember being. He had not slept since the night before last, and his arms and back ached from the fighting.

He entered Horst's house and saw Elain standing by the open doorway to the dining room, listening to the steady burn of conversation that emanated from within. She beckoned him over.

After they had foiled the Ra'zac's counterattack, the prominent members of Carvahall had sequestered themselves in an attempt to decide what action the village should take and if Horst and his allies should be punished for initiating the hostilities. The group had been in deliberation most of the morning.

Roran peeked into the room. Seated around the long table were Birgit, Loring, Sloan, Gedric, Delwin, Fisk, Morn, and a number of others. Horst presided at the head of the table.

"… and I say that it was stupid and reckless!" exclaimed Kiselt, propping himself upright on his bony elbows. "You had no cause to endanger—"

Morn waved a hand. "We've been over this before. Whether what *has* been done *should* have been done is beside the point. I happen to agree with it—Quimby was my friend as much as anyone's, and I shudder to think what those monsters would do with Roran—but … but what I want to know is how we can escape this predicament."

"Easy, kill the soldiers," barked Sloan.

“And then what? More men will follow until we drown in a sea of crimson tunics. Even if we surrender Roran, it’ll do no good; you heard what the Ra’zac said—they’ll kill us if we protect Roran and enslave us if we don’t. You may feel differently, but, as for myself, I would rather die than spend my life as a slave.” Morn shook his head, his mouth set in a flat grim line. “We cannot survive.”

Fisk leaned forward. “We could leave.”

“There’s nowhere to go,” retorted Kiselt. “We’re backed against the Spine, the soldiers have blocked the road, and beyond them is the rest of the Empire.”

“It’s all your fault,” cried Thane, stabbing a shaking finger at Horst. “They will torch our houses and murder our children because of you. You!”

Horst stood so quickly, his chair toppled over backward. “Where is your honor, man? Will you let them eat us without fighting back?”

“*Yes*, if it means suicide otherwise.” Thane glared around the table, then stormed out past Roran. His face was contorted by pure, unadulterated fear.

Gedric spotted Roran then and waved him in. “Come, come, we’ve been waiting for you.”

Roran clasped his hands in the small of his back as scores of hard eyes inspected him. “How can I help?”

“I think,” said Gedric, “we’ve all agreed that it would accomplish nothing to give you to the Empire at this point. Whether we would if that wasn’t the case is neither here nor there. The only thing we can do is prepare for another attack. Horst will make spearheads—and other weapons if he has time—and Fisk has agreed to construct shields. Fortunately, his carpentry shop didn’t burn. And someone needs to oversee our defenses. We would like it to be you. You’ll have plenty of assistance.”

Roran nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

Beside Morn, Tara stood, towering over her husband. She was a large woman, with gray-streaked black hair and strong hands that were just as capable of twisting off a chicken’s head as separating a pair of brawlers. She said, “Make sure you do, Roran, else we’ll have more funerals.” Then she turned to Horst. “Before we go any further, there are men to bury. And there are children who should be sent to safety, maybe to Cawley’s farm on Nost Creek. You should go as well, Elain.”

“I won’t leave Horst,” said Elain calmly.

Tara bristled. “This is no place for a woman five months pregnant. You’ll lose the child running around like you have.”

“It would do me far more harm to worry in ignorance than remain here. I have borne my sons; I will stay, as I know you and every other

wife in Carvahall will."

Horst came around the table and, with a tender expression, took Elain's hand. "Nor would I have you anywhere but at my side. The children should go, though. Cawley will care for them well, but we must make sure that the route to his farm is clear."

"Not only that," rasped Loring, "none of us, not one blasted man jack can have a thing to do with the families down the valley, 'side from Cawley, of course. They can't help us, and we don't want those *desecrators* to trouble 'em."

Everyone agreed that he was right, then the meeting ended and the attendees dispersed throughout Carvahall. Before long, however, they recongregated—along with most of the village—in the small cemetery behind Gertrude's house. Ten white-swathed corpses were arranged beside their graves, a sprig of hemlock on each of their cold chests and a silver amulet around each of their necks.

Gertrude stood forth and recited the men's names: "Parr, Wyglif, Ged, Bardrick, Farold, Hale, Garner, Kelby, Melkolf, and Albem." She placed black pebbles over their eyes, then raised her arms, lifted her face to the sky, and began the quavering death lay. Tears seeped from the corners of her closed eyes as her voice rose and fell with the immemorial phrases, sighing and moaning with the village's sorrow. She sang of the earth and the night and of humanity's ageless sorrow from which none escape.

After the last mournful note faded into silence, family members praised the feats and traits of those they had lost. Then the bodies were buried.

As Roran listened, his gaze lit upon the anonymous mound where the three soldiers had been interred. *One killed by Nolfavrell, and two by me*. He could still feel the visceral shock of muscle and bone giving … crunching … pulping under his hammer. His bile rose and he had to struggle not to be sick in full view of the village. *I am the one who destroyed them*. Roran had never expected or wanted to kill, and yet he had taken more lives than anyone else in Carvahall. It felt as if his brow was marked with blood.

He left as soon as possible—not even stopping to speak with Katrina—and climbed to a point where he could survey Carvahall and consider how best to protect it. Unfortunately, the houses were too far apart to form a defensive perimeter by just fortifying the spaces between buildings. Nor did Roran think it would be a good idea to have soldiers fighting up against the walls of people's houses and trampling their gardens. *The Anora River guards our western flank*, he thought, *but as for the rest of Carvahall, we couldn't even keep a child out of it.… What can we build in a few hours that will be a strong enough barrier?*

He jogged into the middle of the village and shouted, “I need everyone who is free to help cut down trees!” After a minute, men began to trickle out of the houses and through the streets. “Come on, more! We all have to help!” Roran waited as the group around him continued to grow.

One of Loring’s sons, Darmmen, shouldered to his side. “What’s your plan?”

Roran raised his voice so they could all hear. “We need a wall around Carvahall; the thicker the better. I figure if we get some big trees, lay them on their sides, and sharpen the branches, the Ra’zac will have a pretty hard time getting over them.”

“How many trees do you think it’ll take?” asked Orval.

Roran hesitated, trying to gauge Carvahall’s circumference. “At least fifty. Maybe sixty to do it properly.” The men swore and began to argue. “Wait!” Roran counted the number of people in the crowd. He arrived at forty-eight. “If you each fell a tree in the next hour, we’ll be almost done. Can you do that?”

“What do you take us for?” retorted Orval. “The last time I took an hour on a tree, I was ten!”

Darmmen spoke up: “What about brambles? We could drape them over the trees. I don’t know anyone who can climb through a knot of thorny vines.”

Roran grinned. “That’s a great idea. Also, those of you with sons, have them harness your horses so we can drag the trees back.” The men agreed and scattered through Carvahall to gather axes and saws for the job. Roran stopped Darmmen and said, “Make sure that the trees have branches all along the trunk or else they won’t work.”

“Where will you be?” asked Darmmen.

“Working on another line of defense.” Roran left him then and ran to Quimby’s house, where he found Birgit busy boarding up the windows.

“Yes?” she said, looking at him.

He quickly explained his plan with the trees. “I want to dig a trench inside the ring of trees, to slow down anyone who gets through. We could even put pointed stakes in the bottom of it and—”

“What is your point, Roran?”

“I’d like you to organize every woman and child, and everyone else you can, to dig. It’s too much for me to handle by myself, and we don’t have long….” Roran looked her straight in the eyes. “Please.”

Birgit frowned. “Why ask me?”

“Because, like me, you hate the Ra’zac, and I know you will do everything possible to stop them.”

“Aye,” whispered Birgit, then clapped her hands briskly. “Very well, as you wish. But I will never forget, Roran Garrowsson, that it was

you and your family who brought about my husband's doom." She strode away before Roran could respond.

He accepted her animosity with equanimity; it was to be expected, considering her loss. He was only lucky she had not started a blood feud. Then he shook himself and ran to where the main road entered Carvahall. It was the weakest spot in the village and had to be doubly protected. *The Ra'zac can't be allowed to just blast their way in again*.

Roran recruited Baldor, and together they began excavating a ditch across the road. "I'll have to go soon," warned Baldor between strokes of his pickax. "Dad needs me in the forge."

Roran grunted an acknowledgment without looking up. As he worked, his mind once again filled with memories of the soldiers: how they had looked as he struck them, and the feeling, the horrible *feeling* of smashing a body as if it were a rotten stump. He paused, nauseated, and noted the commotion throughout Carvahall as people readied themselves for the next assault.

After Baldor left, Roran completed the thigh-deep ditch himself, then went to Fisk's workshop. With the carpenter's permission, he had five logs from the stockpile of seasoned wood pulled by horses back to the main road. There Roran tipped the logs on end into the trench so that they formed an impenetrable barrier into Carvahall.

As he tamped down the earth around the logs, Darmmen trotted up. "We got the trees. They're just being put into place now." Roran accompanied him to Carvahall's northern edge, where twelve men wrestled four lush green pines into alignment while a team of draft horses under the whip of a young boy returned to the foothills. "Most of us are helping to retrieve the trees. The others got inspired; they seemed determined to chop down the rest of the forest when I left."

"Good, we can use the extra timber."

Darmmen pointed to a pile of dense brambles that sat on the edge of Kiselt's fields. "I cut those along the Anora. Use them however you want. I'm going to find more."

Roran clapped him on the arm, then turned toward the eastern side of Carvahall, where a long, curved line of women, children, and men labored in the dirt. He went to them and found Birgit issuing orders like a general and distributing water among the diggers. The trench was already five feet wide and two feet deep. When Birgit paused for breath, he said, "I'm impressed."

She brushed back a lock of hair without looking at him. "We plowed the ground to begin with. It made things easier."

"Do you have a shovel I can use?" he asked. Birgit pointed to a mound of tools at the other end of the trench. As Roran walked toward it, he spied the copper gleam of Katrina's hair in the midst of the bobbing backs. Beside her, Sloan hacked at the soft loam with a

furious, obsessive energy, as if he were attempting to tear open the earth's skin, to peel back its clay hide and expose the muscle beneath. His eyes were wild, and his teeth were bared in a knotted grimace, despite the flecks of dirt and filth that spotted his lips.

Roran shuddered at Sloan's expression and hurried past, averting his face so as to avoid meeting his bloodshot gaze. He grabbed a shovel and immediately plunged it into the soil, doing his best to forget his worries in the heat of physical exertion.

The day progressed in a continuous rush of activity, without breaks for meals or rest. The trench grew longer and deeper, until it cupped two-thirds of the village and reached the banks of the Anora River. All the loose dirt was piled on the inside edge of the trench in an attempt to prevent anyone from jumping over it … and to make it difficult to climb out.

The wall of trees was finished in early afternoon. Roran stopped digging then to help sharpen the innumerable branches—which were overlapped and interlocked as much as possible—and affix the nets of brambles. Occasionally, they had to pull out a tree so farmers like Ivor could drive their livestock into the safety of Carvahall.

By evening the fortifications were stronger and more extensive than Roran had dared hope, though they still required several more hours of work to complete to his satisfaction.

He sat on the ground, gnawing a hunk of sourdough bread and staring at the stars through a haze of exhaustion. A hand dropped on his shoulder, and he looked up to see Albriech. "Here." Albriech extended a rough shield—made of sawed boards pegged together—and a six-foot-long spear. Roran accepted them gratefully, then Albriech proceeded onward, distributing spears and shields to whomever he encountered.

Roran dragged himself upright, got his hammer from Horst's house, and thus armed, went to the entrance to the main road, where Baldor and two others kept watch. "Wake me when you need to rest," Roran said, then lay on the soft grass underneath the eaves of a nearby house. He arranged his weapons so he could find them in the dark and closed his eyes in eager anticipation.

"Roran."

The whisper came from by his right ear. "Katrina?" He struggled into a sitting position, blinking as she unshuttered a lantern so a key of light struck his thigh. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." Her eyes, large and mysterious against her pale face, pooled with the night's shadows. She took his arm and led him to a deserted porch far out of earshot of Baldor and the other guards. There she placed her hands on his cheeks and softly kissed

him, but he was too tired and troubled to respond to her affection. She drew away and studied him. “What is wrong, Roran?”

A bark of humorless laughter escaped him. “What’s wrong? The world is wrong; it’s as askew as a picture frame knocked on its side.” He jammed his fist against his gut. “And I am wrong. Every time I allow myself to relax, I see the soldiers bleeding under my hammer. Men I *killed*, Katrina. And their eyes … their *eyes*! They knew they were about to die and that they could do nothing about it.” He trembled in the darkness. “They knew … I knew … and I still had to do it. It couldn’t—” Words failed him as he felt hot tears roll down his cheeks.

Katrina cradled his head as Roran cried from the shock of the past few days. He wept for Garrow and Eragon; he wept for Parr, Quimby, and the other dead; he wept for himself; and he wept for the fate of Carvahall. He sobbed until his emotions ebbed and left him as dry and hollow as an old barley husk.

Forcing himself to take a long breath, Roran looked at Katrina and noticed her own tears. He brushed them away with his thumb, like diamonds in the night. “Katrina … my love.” He said it again, tasting the words: “My love. I have naught to give you but my love. Still … I must ask. Will you marry me?”

In the dim lantern light, he saw pure joy and wonder leap across her face. Then she hesitated and troubled doubt appeared. It was wrong for him to ask, or for her to accept, without Sloan’s permission. But Roran no longer cared; he had to know now if he and Katrina would spend their lives together.

Then, softly: “Yes, Roran, I will.”

Under a Darkling Sky

That night it rained.

Layer upon layer of pregnant clouds blanketed Palancar Valley, clinging to the mountains with tenacious arms and filling the air with heavy, cold mist. From inside, Roran watched as cords of gray water pelted the trees with their frothing leaves, muddied the trench around Carvahall, and scrabbled with blunt fingers against the thatched roofs and eaves as the clouds disgorged their load. Everything was streaked, blurred, and hidden behind the torrent's inexorable streamers.

By midmorning the storm had abated, although a continuous drizzle still percolated through the mist. It quickly soaked Roran's hair and clothes when he took his watch at the barricade to the main road. He squatted by the upright logs, shook his cloak, then pulled the hood farther over his face and tried to ignore the cold.

Despite the weather, Roran soared and exulted with his joy at Katrina's acceptance. They were engaged! In his mind, it was as if a missing piece of the world had dropped into place, as if he had been granted the confidence of an invulnerable warrior. What did the soldiers matter, or the Ra'zac, or the Empire itself, before love such as theirs? They were nothing but tinder to the blaze.

For all his new bliss, however, his mind was entirely focused on what had become the most important conundrum of his existence: how to assure that Katrina would survive Galbatorix's wrath. He had thought of nothing else since waking. *The best thing would be for Katrina to go to Cawley's*, he decided, staring down the hazy road, *but she would never agree to leave … unless Sloan told her to. I might be able to convince him; I'm sure he wants her out of danger as much as I do*.

As he considered ways to approach the butcher, the clouds thickened again and the rain renewed its assault on the village, arching down in stinging waves. Around Roran, the puddles jumped to life as pellets of water drummed their surfaces, bouncing back up like startled grasshoppers.

When Roran grew hungry, he passed his watch to Larne—Loring's youngest son—and went to find lunch, darting from the shelter of one eave to another. As he rounded a corner, he was surprised to see Albriech on the house's porch, arguing violently with a group of men.

Ridley shouted, "… you're blind—follow the cottonwoods and they'll never see! You took the addle-brain's route."

"Try it if you want," retorted Albriech.

"I will!"

"Then you can tell me how you like the taste of arrows."

"Maybe," said Thane, "we aren't as clubfooted as you are."

Albriech turned on him with a snarl. "Your words are as thick as your wits. I'm not stupid enough to risk my family on the cover of a few leaves that I've never seen before." Thane's eyes bulged and his face turned a deep mottled crimson. "What?" taunted Albriech. "Have you no tongue?"

Thane roared and struck Albriech on the cheek with his fist. Albriech laughed. "Your arm is as weak as a woman's." Then he grabbed Thane's shoulder and threw him off the porch and into the mud, where he lay on his side, stunned.

Holding his spear like a staff, Roran jumped beside Albriech, preventing Ridley and the others from laying hands on him. "No more," growled Roran, furious. "We have other enemies. An assembly can be called and arbitrators will decide whether compensation is due to either Albriech or Thane. But until then, we *can't* fight ourselves."

"Easy for you to say," spat Ridley. "You have no wife or children." Then he helped Thane to his feet and departed with the group of men.

Roran stared hard at Albriech and the purple bruise that was spreading beneath his right eye. "What started it?" he asked.

"I—" Albriech stopped with a grimace and felt his jaw. "I went scouting with Darmmen. The Ra'zac have posted soldiers on several hills. They can see across the Anora and up and down the valley. One or two of us might, *might*, be able to creep past them without notice, but we'll never get the children to Cawley without killing the soldiers, and then we might as well tell the Ra'zac where we're going."

Dread clutched at Roran, flooding like poison through his heart and veins. *What can I do?* Sick with a sense of impending doom, he put an arm around Albriech's shoulders. "Come on; Gertrude should have a look at you."

"No," said Albriech, shrugging him off. "She has more pressing cases than me." He took a preparatory breath—as if he were about to dive into a lake—and lumbered off through the downpour in the direction of the forge.

Roran watched him go, then shook his head and went inside. He found Elain sitting on the floor with a row of children, sharpening a pile of spearheads with files and whetstones. Roran gestured to Elain. Once they were in another room, he told her what had just occurred.

Elain swore harshly—startling him, for he had never heard her use such language—then asked, "Is there cause for Thane to declare a feud?"

"Possibly," admitted Roran. "They both insulted each other, but

Albriech's oaths were the strongest.… However, Thane did strike first. You could declare a feud yourself."

"Nonsense," asserted Elain, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders. "This is a dispute for arbitrators to resolve. If we must pay a fine, so be it, as long as bloodshed is avoided." She headed out the front door, a finished spear in hand.

Troubled, Roran located bread and meat in the kitchen, then helped the children sharpen spearheads. Once Felda, one of the mothers, arrived, Roran left the children in her care and slogged back through Carvahall to the main road.

As he squatted in the mud, a shaft of sunlight burst underneath the clouds and illuminated the folds of rain so each drop flashed with crystalline fire. Roran stared, awestruck, ignoring the water streaming down his face. The rift in the clouds widened until a shelf of massive thunderheads hung over the western three-quarters of Palancar Valley, facing a strip of pure blue sky. Because of the billowy roof above and the angle of the sun, the rain-drenched landscape was lit brilliantly on one side and painted with rich shadows on the other, giving the fields, bushes, trees, river, and mountains the most extraordinary colors. It was as if the entire world had been transformed into a sculpture of burnished metal.

Just then, movement caught Roran's eye, and he looked down to see a soldier standing on the road, his mail shining like ice. The man gaped with amazement at Carvahall's new fortifications, then turned and fled back into the golden mist.

"Soldiers!" shouted Roran, jolting to his feet. He wished that he had his bow, but he had left it inside to protect it from the elements. His only comfort was that the soldiers would have an even harder time keeping their weapons dry.

Men and women ran from their houses, gathered along the trench, and peered out through the wall of overlapping pines. The long branches wept beads of moisture, translucent cabochons that reflected the rows of anxious eyes.

Roran found himself standing beside Sloan. The butcher held one of Fisk's makeshift shields in his left hand, and in his right a cleaver curved like a half-moon. His belt was festooned with at least a dozen knives, all of them large and honed to a razor edge. He and Roran exchanged brisk nods, then refocused on where the soldier had disappeared.

Less than a minute later, the disembodied voice of a Ra'zac slithered out of the mist: "By continuing to defend Carvahall, you proclaim your choice and ssseal your doom. You ssshall die!"

Loring responded: "Show your maggot-riddled faces if you dare, you lily-livered, bandy-legged, snake-eyed *wretches*! We'll crack your skulls

open and fatten our hogs on your blood!”

A dark shape floated toward them, followed by the dull thump of a spear embedding itself in a door an inch from Gedric’s left arm.

“Take cover!” shouted Horst from the middle of the line. Roran knelt behind his shield and peered through a hairline gap between two of the boards. He was just in time, for a half-dozen spears hurtled over the wall of trees and buried themselves among the cowering villagers.

From somewhere in the mist came an agonized scream.

Roran’s heart jumped with a painful flutter. He panted for breath, though he had not moved, and his hands were slick with sweat. He heard the faint sound of shattering glass on the northern edge of Carvahall … then the bellow of an explosion and crashing timbers.

Spinning around, he and Sloan sped through Carvahall, where they found a team of six soldiers dragging away the splintered remains of several trees. Beyond them, pale and wraithlike in the glittering shards of rain, sat the Ra’zac on their black horses. Without slowing, Roran fell upon the first man, jabbing his spear. His first and second stabs were deflected by an upraised arm, then Roran caught the soldier on the hip, and when he stumbled, in his throat.

Sloan howled like an enraged beast, threw his cleaver, and split one of the men’s helms, crushing his skull. Two soldiers charged him with drawn swords. Sloan sidestepped, laughing now, and blocked their attacks with his shield. One soldier swung so hard, his blade stuck in the shield’s rim. Sloan yanked him closer and gored him through the eye with a carving knife from his belt. Drawing a second cleaver, the butcher circled his other opponent with a maniacal grin. “Shall I gut and hamstring you?” he demanded, almost prancing with a terrible, bloody glee.

Roran lost his spear to the next two men he faced. He barely managed to drag out his hammer in time to stop a sword from shearing off his leg. The soldier who had torn the spear from Roran’s grip now cast the weapon at him, aiming for his breast. Roran dropped his hammer, caught the shaft in midair—which astounded him as much as the soldiers—spun it around, and drove the spear through the armor and ribs of the man who had launched it. Left weaponless, Roran was forced to retreat before the remaining soldier. He stumbled over a corpse, cutting his calf on a sword as he fell, and rolled to avoid a two-handed blow from the soldier, scrabbling frantically in the ankle-deep mud for something, *anything* he could use for a weapon. A hilt bruised his fingers, and he ripped it from the muck and slashed at the soldier’s sword hand, severing his thumb.

The man stared dumbly at the glistening stump, then said, “This is what comes from not shielding myself.”

"Aye," agreed Roran, and beheaded him.

The last soldier panicked and fled toward the impassive specters of the Ra'zac while Sloan bombarded him with a stream of insults and foul names. When the soldier finally pierced the shining curtain of rain, Roran watched with a thrill of horror as the two black figures bent down from their steeds on either side of the man and gripped the nape of his neck with twisted hands. The cruel fingers tightened, and the man shrieked desperately and convulsed, then went limp. The Ra'zac placed the corpse behind one of their saddles before turning their horses and riding away.

Roran shuddered and looked at Sloan, who was cleaning his blades. "You fought well." He had never suspected that the butcher contained such ferocity.

Sloan said in a low voice, "They'll never get Katrina. Never, even if I must skin the lot of them, or fight a thousand Urgals and the king to boot. I'd tear the sky itself down and let the Empire drown in its own blood before she suffers so much as a scratch." He clamped his mouth shut then, jammed the last of his knives into his belt, and began dragging the three broken trees back into position.

While he did, Roran rolled the dead soldiers through the trampled mud, away from the fortifications. *Now I have killed five*. At the completion of his labor, he straightened and glanced around, puzzled, for all he heard was silence and the hissing rain. *Why has no one come to help us?*

Wondering what else might have occurred, he returned with Sloan to the scene of the first attack. Two soldiers hung lifelessly on the slick branches of the tree wall, but that was not what held their attention. Horst and the other villagers knelt in a circle around a small body. Roran caught his breath. It was Elmund, son of Delwin. The ten-year-old boy had been struck in his side by a spear. His parents sat in the mud beside him, their faces as blank as stone.

Something has to be done, thought Roran, dropping to his knees and leaning against his spear. Few children survived their first five or six years. But to lose your firstborn son *now*, when everything indicated that he should grow tall and strong to take his father's place in Carvahall—it was enough to crush you. *Katrina … the children … they all have to be protected.*

But where? … Where? … Where? … Where!

DOWN THE RUSHING MERE-WASH

On the first day from Tarnag, Eragon made an effort to learn the names of Ûndin's guards. They were Ama, Tríhga, Hedin, Ekksvar, Shrrgnien—which Eragon found unpronounceable, though he was told it meant Wolfheart—Dûthmér, and Thorv.

Each raft had a small cabin in the center. Eragon preferred to spend his time seated on the edge of the logs, watching the Beor Mountains scroll by. Kingfishers and jackdaws flitted along the clear river, while blue herons stood stiltlike on the marshy bank, which was planked with splotches of light that fell through the boughs of hazel, beech, and willow. Occasionally, a bullfrog would croak from a bed of ferns.

When Orik settled beside him, Eragon said, "It's beautiful."

"That it is." The dwarf quietly lit his pipe, then leaned back and puffed.

Eragon listened to the creak of wood and rope as Tríhga steered the raft with the long paddle at the aft. "Orik, can you tell me why Brom joined the Varden? I know so little about him. For most of my life, he was just the town storyteller."

"He never *joined* the Varden; he helped found it." Orik paused to tap some ashes into the water. "After Galbatorix became king, Brom was the only Rider still alive, outside of the Forsworn."

"But he wasn't a Rider, not then. His dragon was killed in the fighting at Doru Araeba."

"Well, a Rider by training. Brom was the first to organize the friends and allies of the Riders who had been forced into exile. It was he who convinced Hrothgar to allow the Varden to live in Farthen Dûr, and he who obtained the elves' assistance."

They were silent for a while. "Why did Brom relinquish the leadership?" asked Eragon.

Orik smiled wryly. "Perhaps he never wanted it. It was before Hrothgar adopted me, so I saw little of Brom in Tronjheim.… He was always off fighting the Forsworn or engaged in one plot or another."

"Your parents are dead?"

"Aye. The pox took them when I was young, and Hrothgar was kind enough to welcome me into his hall and, since he has no children of his own, to make me his heir."

Eragon thought of his helm, marked with the Ingeitum symbol. *Hrothgar has been kind to me as well.*

When the afternoon twilight arrived, the dwarves hung a round lantern at each corner of the rafts. The lanterns were red, which Eragon remembered was to preserve night vision. He stood by Arya and studied the lanterns' pure, motionless depths. "Do you know how these are made?" he asked.

"It was a spell we gave the dwarves long ago. They use it with great skill."

Eragon reached up and scratched his chin and cheeks, feeling the patches of stubble that had begun to appear. "Could you teach me more magic while we travel?"

She looked at him, her balance perfect on the undulating logs. "It is not my place. A teacher is waiting for you."

"Then tell me this, at least," he said. "What does the name of my sword mean?"

Arya's voice was very soft. "*Misery* is your sword. And so it was until you wielded it."

Eragon stared with aversion at Zar'roc. The more he learned about his weapon, the more malevolent it seemed, as if the blade could cause misfortune of its own free will. *Not only did Morzan kill Riders with it, but Zar'roc's very name is evil*. If Brom had not given it to him, and if not for the fact that Zar'roc never dulled and could not be broken, Eragon would have thrown it into the river at that very moment.

Before it grew any darker, Eragon swam out to Saphira. They flew together for the first time since leaving Tronjheim and soared high above the Az Ragni, where the air was thin and the water below was only a purple streak.

Without the saddle, Eragon gripped Saphira tightly with his knees, feeling her hard scales rub the scars from their first flight.

As Saphira tilted to the left, rising on an updraft, he saw three brown specks launch themselves from the mountainside below and ascend rapidly. At first Eragon took them to be falcons, but as they neared, he realized that the animals were almost twenty feet long, with attenuated tails and leathery wings. In fact, they looked like dragons, though their bodies were smaller, thinner, and more serpentine than Saphira's. Nor did their scales glitter, but were dappled green and brown.

Excited, Eragon pointed them out to Saphira. *Could they be dragons?* he asked.

I don't know. She floated in place, inspecting the newcomers as they spiraled around them. The creatures seemed puzzled by Saphira. They darted toward her, only to hiss and swoop overhead at the last moment.

Eragon grinned and reached out with his mind, trying to touch their

thoughts. As he did, the three recoiled and shrieked, opening their maws like hungry snakes. Their piercing keen was mental as well as physical. It tore through Eragon with a savage strength, seeking to incapacitate him. Saphira felt it too. Continuing the racking cry, the creatures attacked with razor claws.

Hold on, warned Saphira. She folded her left wing and spun halfway around, avoiding two of the animals, then flapped quickly, rising above the other. At the same time, Eragon worked furiously to block the shriek. The instant his mind was clear, he reached for the magic. *Don't kill them*, said Saphira. *I want the experience*.

Though the creatures were more agile than Saphira, she had the advantage of bulk and strength. One of the creatures dove at her. She flipped upside down—falling backward—and kicked the animal in the chest.

The shriek dropped in intensity as her injured foe retreated.

Saphira flared her wings, looping right side up so she faced the other two as they converged on her. She arched her neck, Eragon heard a deep rumble between her ribs, and then a jet of flame roared from her jaws. A molten-blue halo engulfed Saphira's head, flashing through her gemlike scales until she sparkled gloriously and seemed to be lit from within.

The two dragon-beasts squawked in dismay and veered to either side. The mental assault ceased as they sped away, sinking back toward the mountainside.

You almost threw me off, said Eragon, loosening his cramped arms from around her neck.

She looked at him smugly. *Almost, but not quite*.

That's true, he laughed.

Flushed with the thrill of victory, they returned to the rafts. As Saphira landed amid two great fins of water, Orik shouted, "Are you hurt?"

"No," called Eragon. The icy water whirled around his legs as Saphira swam to the side of the raft. "Were they another race unique to the Beors?"

Orik pulled him onto the raft. "We call them Fanghur. They're not as intelligent as dragons and they can't breathe fire, but they are still formidable foes."

"So we discovered." Eragon massaged his temples in an attempt to alleviate the headache the Fanghur's attack had brought on. "Saphira was more than a match for them, however."

Of course, she said.

"It's how they hunt," explained Orik. "They use their minds to immobilize their prey while they kill it."

Saphira flicked water at Eragon with her tail. *It's a good idea. Maybe*

I'll try it next time I go hunting.

He nodded. *It could come in handy in a fight too.*

Arya came to the edge of the raft. "I'm glad you did not kill them. Fanghur are rare enough that those three would have been sorely missed."

"They still manage to eat enough of our herds," growled Thorv from inside the cabin. The dwarf marched out to Eragon, champing irritably under the twisted knots of his beard. "Do not fly anymore while in these Beor Mountains, Shadeslayer. It is difficult enough to keep you unharmed without you and thine dragon fighting wind-vipers."

"We'll stay on the ground until we reach the plains," promised Eragon.

"Good."

When they stopped for the night, the dwarves moored the rafts to aspen trees along the mouth of a small stream. Ama started a fire while Eragon helped Ekksvar pull Snowfire onto land. They picketed the stallion on a strip of grass.

Thorv oversaw the erection of six large tents. Hedin gathered firewood to last until morning, and Dûthmér carried supplies off the second raft and began making dinner. Arya took up watch on the edge of camp, where she was soon joined by Ekksvar, Ama, and Tríhga when they finished their tasks.

When Eragon realized he had nothing to do, he squatted by the fire with Orik and Shrrgnien. As Shrrgnien pulled off his gloves and held his scarred hands over the flames, Eragon noticed that a polished steel stud—perhaps a quarter of an inch long—protruded from each of the dwarf's knuckles, except for on his thumbs.

"What are those?" he asked.

Shrrgnien looked at Orik and laughed. "These are mine Ascûdgamln … mine 'fists of steel.' " Without standing, he twisted and punched the bole of an aspen, leaving four symmetrical holes in the bark. Shrrgnien laughed again. "They are good for hitting things, eh?"

Eragon's curiosity and envy were aroused. "How are they made? I mean, how are the spikes attached to your hands?"

Shrrgnien hesitated, trying to find the right words. "A healer puts you in a deep sleep, so you feel no pain. Then a hole is—is *drilled*, yes? —is drilled down through the joints …" He broke off and spoke quickly to Orik in the dwarf language.

"A metal socket is embedded in each hole," explained Orik. "Magic is used to seal it in place, and when the warrior has fully recovered, various-sized spikes can be threaded into the sockets."

"Yes, see," said Shrrgnien, grinning. He gripped the stud above his left index finger, carefully twisted it free of his knuckle, and then handed it to Eragon.

Eragon smiled as he rolled the sharp lump around his palm. “I wouldn’t mind having ‘fists of steel’ myself.” He returned the stud to Shrrgnien.

“It’s a dangerous operation,” warned Orik. “Few knurlan get Ascûdgamln because you can easily lose the use of your hands if the drill goes too deep.” He raised his fist and showed it to Eragon. “Our bones are thicker than yours. It might not work for a human.”

“I’ll remember that.” Still, Eragon could not help but imagine what it would be like to fight with Ascûdgamln, to be able to strike anything he wanted with impunity, including armored Urgals. He loved the idea.

After eating, Eragon retired to his tent. The fire provided enough light that he could see the silhouette of Saphira nestled alongside the tent, like a figure cut from black paper and pasted against the canvas wall.

Eragon sat with the blankets pulled over his legs and stared at his lap, drowsy but unwilling to sleep quite yet. Unbidden, his mind turned to thoughts of home. He wondered how Roran, Horst, and everyone else from Carvahall was doing, and if the weather in Palancar Valley was warm enough for the farmers to start planting their crops. Longing and sadness suddenly gripped Eragon.

He removed a wood bowl from his pack and, taking his waterskin, filled it to the brim with liquid. Then he focused on an image of Roran and whispered, “Draumr kópa.”

As always, the water went black before brightening to reveal the object being scryed. Eragon saw Roran sitting alone in a candlelit bedroom he recognized from Horst’s house. *Roran must have given up his job in Therinsford*, realized Eragon. His cousin leaned on his knees and clasped his hands, staring at the far wall with an expression that Eragon knew meant Roran was grappling with some difficult problem. Still, Roran seemed well enough, if a bit drawn, which comforted Eragon. After a minute, he released the magic, ending the spell and clearing the surface of the water.

Reassured, Eragon emptied the bowl, then lay down, pulling the blankets up to his chin. He closed his eyes and sank into the warm dusk that separates consciousness and sleep, where reality bends and sways to the wind of thought, and where creativity blossoms in its freedom from boundaries and all things are possible.

Slumber soon took him. Most of his rest was uneventful, but right before he woke, the usual night phantasms were replaced with a vision as clear and vibrant as any waking experience.

He saw a tortured sky, black and crimson with smoke. Crows and eagles swirled high above flights of arrows that arched from one side to another of a great battle. A man sprawled in the clotted mud with a dented helm and

bloody mail—his face concealed behind an upthrown arm.

An armored hand entered Eragon's view. The gauntlet was so near it blotted out half the world with polished steel. Like an inexorable machine, the thumb and last three fingers curled into a fist, leaving the trunk of the index finger to point at the downed man with all the authority of fate itself.

The vision still filled Eragon's mind when he crawled out of the tent. He found Saphira some distance from the camp, gnawing on a furry lump. When he told her what he had seen, she paused in midbite, then jerked her neck and swallowed a strip of meat.

The last time this occurred, she said, *it proved to be a true prediction of events elsewhere. Do you think a battle is in progress in Alagaësia?*

He kicked a loose branch. *I'm not sure.… Brom said you could only scry people, places, and things that you had already seen. Yet I've never seen this place. Nor had I seen Arya when I first dreamt about her in Teirm.*

Perhaps Togira Ikonoka will be able to explain it.

As they prepared to leave, the dwarves seemed much more relaxed now that they were a good distance from Tarnag. When they started poling down the Az Ragni, Ekksvar—who was steering Snowfire's raft—began chanting in his rough bass:

Down the rushing mere-wash
Of Kíl'f's welling blood,
We ride the twisting timbers,
For hearth, clan, and honor.

Under the ernes' sky-vat,
Through the ice-wolves' forest bowls,
We ride the gory wood,
For iron, gold, and diamond.

Let hand-ringer and bearded gaper fill my grip
And battle-leaf guard my stone
As I leave the halls of my fathers
For the empty land beyond.

The other dwarves joined Ekksvar, slipping into Dwarvish as they continued on to other verses. The low throb of their voices accompanied Eragon as he carefully made his way to the head of the raft, where Arya sat cross-legged.

"I had a … vision during my sleep," said Eragon. Arya looked at

him with interest, and he recounted the images he had seen. “If it’s scrying, then—”

“It’s not scrying,” said Arya. She spoke with deliberate slowness, as if to prevent any misunderstanding. “I thought for a long time about how you saw me imprisoned in Gil’ead, and I believe that as I lay unconscious, my spirit was searching for help, wherever I might find it.”

“But why me?”

Arya nodded toward where Saphira undulated through the water. “I grew accustomed to Saphira’s presence during the fifteen years I guarded her egg. I was reaching out for anything that felt familiar when I touched your dreams.”

“Are you really strong enough to contact someone in Teirm from Gil’ead? Especially if you were drugged.”

A ghost of a smile touched Arya’s lips. “I could stand on the very gates of Vroengard and still speak with you as clearly as I am now.” She paused. “If you did not scry me in Teirm, then you could not have scryed this new dream. It must be a premonition. They have been known to occur throughout the sentient races, but especially among magic users.”

Eragon clutched the netting around a bundle of supplies as the raft lurched. “If what I saw *will* come to pass, then how can we change anything that happens? Do our choices matter? What if I threw myself off the raft right now and drowned?”

“But you won’t.” Arya dipped her left forefinger in the river and stared at the single drop that clung to her skin, like a quivering lens. “Once, long ago, the elf Maerzadí had a premonition that he would accidentally kill his son in battle. Rather than live to see it happen, he committed suicide, saving his son, and at the same time proving that the future isn’t set. Short of killing yourself, however, you can do little to change your destiny, since you don’t know what choices will lead you to the particular point of time that you saw.” She flipped her hand and the drop splattered against the log between them. “We know that it’s possible to retrieve information from the future—fortunetellers can often sense the paths a person’s life may take—but we’ve been unable to refine the process to the point where you can choose what, where, or when you want to see.”

Eragon found the entire concept of funneling knowledge through time profoundly disturbing. It raised too many questions about the nature of reality. *Whether fate and destiny really exist, the only thing I can do is enjoy the present and live as honorably as possible*. Yet he could not help asking, “What’s to stop me, though, from scrying one of my memories? I’ve seen everything in them … so I should be able to view them with magic.”

Arya's gaze darted to meet his. "If you value your life, never attempt it. Many years ago, several of our spellweavers devoted themselves to defeating time's enigmas. When they tried to summon up the past, they only succeeded in creating a blurred image on their mirror before the spell consumed their energy and killed them. We made no more experiments on the subject. It is argued that the spell would work if more magicians participated, but no one is willing to accept the risk and the theory remains unproven. Even if one could scry the past, it would be of limited use. And to scry the future, one would have to know exactly what was going to happen and where and when, which defeats the purpose.

"It's a mystery, then, how people can have premonitions while sleeping, how they can do something unconsciously that has defeated our greatest sages. Premonitions may be linked to the very nature and fabric of magic … or they may function in a similar way to the dragons' ancestral memories. We don't know. Many avenues of magic have yet to be explored." She stood in a single fluid movement. "Take care not to lose yourself among them."

DRIFTING

The valley widened throughout the morning as the rafts swept toward a bright gap between two mountains. They reached the opening at midday and found themselves looking out of shadow upon a sunny prairie that faded into the north.

Then the current pushed them beyond the frosted crags and the walls of the world dropped away to reveal a gigantic sky and flat horizon. Almost immediately, the air grew warmer. The Az Ragni curved to the east, edging the foothills of the mountain range on one side and the plains on the other.

The amount of open space seemed to unsettle the dwarves. They muttered among themselves and glanced longingly at the cavernous rift behind them.

Eragon found the sunlight invigorating. It was hard to ever really feel awake when three-quarters of the day was spent in twilight. Behind his raft, Saphira launched herself out of the water and flew up over the prairie until she dwindled to a winking speck in the azure dome above.

What do you see? he asked.

I see vast herds of gazelles to the north and east. To the west, the Hadarac Desert. That is all.

No one else? No Urgals, slavers, or nomads?

We are alone.

That evening, Thorv chose a small cove for their camp. While Dûthmér fixed dinner, Eragon cleared a space beside his tent, then drew Zar'roc and settled into the ready stance Brom had taught him when they first sparred. Eragon knew he was at a disadvantage compared to the elves, and he had no intention of arriving in Ellesméra out of practice.

With excruciating slowness, he looped Zar'roc over his head and brought it back down with both hands, as if to cleave an enemy's helm. He held the pose for a second. Keeping his motion under complete control, he pivoted to the right—twisting Zar'roc's point to parry an imaginary blow—then stopped with rigid arms.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eragon noticed Orik, Arya, and Thorv watching. He ignored them and focused only on the ruby blade in his hands; he held it as if it were a snake that could writhe out of his grip

and bite his arm.

Turning again, he commenced a series of forms, flowing from one to another with disciplined ease as he gradually increased his speed. In his mind, he was no longer in the shadowy cove, but surrounded by a knot of ferocious Urgals and Kull. He ducked and slashed, parried, riposted, jumped to the side, and stabbed in a whirl of activity. He fought with mindless energy, as he had in Farthen Dûr, with no thought for the safety of his own flesh, dashing and tearing aside his imagined enemies.

He spun Zar'roc around—in an attempt to flip the hilt from one palm to another—then dropped the sword as a jagged line of pain bisected his back. He staggered and fell. Above him, he could hear Arya and the dwarves babbling, but all he saw was a constellation of sparkling red haze, like a bloody veil dropped over the world. No sensation existed other than pain. It blotted out thought and reason, leaving only a feral animal that screamed for release.

When Eragon recovered enough to notice his whereabouts, he found that he had been placed inside his tent and wrapped tightly with blankets. Arya sat beside him, while Saphira's head stuck through the entrance flaps.

Was I out long? asked Eragon.

A while. You slept a little at the end. I tried to draw you from your body into mine and shield you from the pain, but I could do little with you unconscious.

Eragon nodded and closed his eyes. His entire body throbbed. Taking a deep breath, he looked up at Arya and quietly asked, "How can I train? … How can I fight, or use magic? … I am a broken vessel." His face felt heavy with age as he spoke.

She answered just as softly: "You can sit and watch. You can listen. You can read. And you can learn."

Despite her words, he heard a hitch of uncertainty, even fear, in her voice. He rolled onto his side to avoid meeting her eyes. It shamed him to appear so helpless before her. "How did the Shade do this to me?"

"I have no answers, Eragon. I am neither the wisest nor the strongest elf. We all do our best, and you cannot be blamed for it. Perhaps time will heal your wound." Arya pressed her fingers to his brow and murmured, "Sé mor'ranr ono finna," then left the tent.

Eragon sat and winced as his cramped back muscles stretched. He stared at his hands without seeing them. *I wonder if Murtagh's scar ever pained him like mine does*.

I don't know, said Saphira.

A dead silence followed. Then: *I'm afraid*.

Why?

Because … He hesitated. *Because nothing I do will prevent another attack. I don't know when or where it will happen, but I do know that it's inevitable. So I wait, and every moment I fear that if I lift something too heavy or stretch in the wrong way, the pain will return. My own body has become the enemy*.

Saphira hummed deep in her throat. *I have no answers either. Life is both pain and pleasure. If this is the price you must pay for the hours you enjoy, is it too much?*

Yes, he snapped. He pulled off the blankets and shoved past her, stumbling into the center of the camp, where Arya and the dwarves sat around a fire. "Is there food left?" asked Eragon.

Dûthmér wordlessly filled a bowl and handed it to him. With a deferential expression, Thorv asked, "Are you better now, Shadeslayer?" He and the other dwarves seemed awed by what they had seen.

"I'm fine."

"You bear a heavy burden, Shadeslayer."

Eragon scowled and abruptly walked to the edge of the tents, where he seated himself in darkness. He could sense Saphira nearby, but she left him in peace. He swore under his breath and jabbed Dûthmér's stew with dull anger.

Just as he took a bite, Orik said from beside him, "You should not treat them so."

Eragon glared at Orik's shadowed face. "What?"

"Thorv and his men were sent to protect you and Saphira. They will die for you if need be, and trust their sacred burial to you. You should remember that."

Eragon bit back a sharp retort and gazed at the black surface of the river—always moving, never stopping—in an attempt to calm his mind. "You're right. I let my temper get away from me."

Orik's teeth gleamed in the night as he smiled. "It's a lesson that every commander must learn. I had it beaten into me by Hrothgar after I threw my boot at a dwarf who left his halberd where someone could step on it."

"Did you hit him?"

"I broke his nose," chuckled Orik.

Despite himself, Eragon laughed as well. "I'll remember not to do that." He held the bowl with both hands to keep them warm.

Eragon heard the jangle of metal as Orik extracted something from a pouch. "Here," said the dwarf, dropping a knot of intertwined gold rings on Eragon's palm. "It's a puzzle we use to test cleverness and dexterity. There are eight bands. If you arrange them properly, they form a single ring. I've found it useful for distracting myself when I'm

troubled."

"Thank you," murmured Eragon, already entranced by the complexity of the gleaming nest.

"You can keep it if you can put it together."

When he returned to his tent, Eragon lay on his stomach and inspected the rings in the dim firelight that seeped past the entrance flaps. Four bands looped through four bands. Each was smooth on the bottom half and an asymmetrical wriggling mass on the top, where it would weave through the other pieces.

As Eragon experimented with various configurations, he quickly became frustrated by a simple fact: it seemed impossible to get the two sets of bands parallel so they would lie flat together.

Absorbed by the challenge, he forgot the terror he had just endured.

Eragon woke right before dawn. Scrubbing the sleep from his eyes, he exited the tent and stretched. His breath turned white in the brisk morning air. He nodded to Shrrgnien, who was keeping guard by the fire, then strolled to the edge of the river and washed his face, blinking from the shock of the cold water.

He located Saphira with a flick of his mind, belted on Zar'roc, and headed toward her through the beech trees that lined the Az Ragni. Before long Eragon's hands and face were slick with dew from a tangled wall of chokecherry bushes that obstructed his way. With an effort, he pushed through the net of branches and escaped onto the silent plains. A round hill rose before him. On its crest—like two ancient statues—stood Saphira and Arya. They faced east, where a molten glow crept into the sky and burnished the prairie amber.

As the clear light struck the two figures, Eragon was reminded of how Saphira had watched the sunrise from his bedpost only a few hours after she hatched. She was like a hawk or falcon with her hard, sparkling eyes under their bony ridges, the fierce arch of her neck, and the lean strength etched into every line of her body. She was a huntress, and endowed with all the savage beauty that the term implied. Arya's angled features and panther grace perfectly matched the dragon beside her. No discrepancy existed between their demeanors as they stood bathed in dawn's first rays.

A tingle of awe and joy shuddered along Eragon's spine. *This* was where he belonged, as a Rider. Of all the things in Alagaësia, he had been lucky enough to be joined with *this*. The wonder of it brought tears to his eyes and a smile of wild exultation that dispelled all his doubts and fears in a surge of pure emotion.

Still smiling, he mounted the hill and took his place by Saphira as they surveyed the new day.

Arya looked at him. Eragon met her gaze, and something lurched

within him. He flushed without knowing why, feeling a sudden connection with her, a sense that she understood him better than anyone other than Saphira. His reaction confused him, for no one had affected him in that manner before.

Throughout the rest of the day, all Eragon had to do was think back on that moment to make himself smile and set his insides churning with a mixture of odd sensations he could not identify. He spent most of his time seated against the raft's cabin, working on Orik's ring and watching the changing landscape.

Around midday they passed the mouth of a valley, and another river melded into the Az Ragni, doubling its size and speed until the shores were over a mile apart. It was all the dwarves could do to keep the rafts from being tossed like flotsam before the inexorable current and to avoid smashing into the trees that occasionally floated by.

A mile after the rivers joined, the Az Ragni turned north and flowed past a lonely cloud-wreathed peak that stood separate from the main body of the Beor range, like a gigantic watchtower built to keep vigil over the plains.

The dwarves bowed to the peak when they saw it, and Orik told Eragon, "There is Moldûn the Proud. He is the last true mountain we shall see on this journey."

When the rafts were moored for the evening, Eragon saw Orik unwrap a long black box inlaid with mother-of-pearl, rubies, and curved lines of silver. Orik flicked a clasp, then raised the lid to reveal an unstrung bow nestled in red velvet. The bow's reflexed limbs were ebony, which formed the background for intricate patterns of vines, flowers, animals, and runes, all executed in the finest gold. It was such a luxurious weapon, Eragon wondered how anyone dared use it.

Orik strung the bow—it was nearly as tall as he was, but still no bigger than a child's bow by Eragon's standards—put the box away, and said, "I'm going to find some fresh meat. I'll be back in an hour." With that he disappeared into the brush. Thorv grunted disapprovingly, but made no move to stop him.

True to his word, Orik returned with a brace of long-necked geese. "I found a flock of them perched in a tree," he said, tossing the birds to Dûthmér.

As Orik retrieved the bejeweled case, Eragon asked, "What kind of wood is your bow made of?"

"Wood?" Orik laughed, shaking his head. "You can't make a bow this short out of wood and cast an arrow more than twenty yards; it breaks, or follows the string after a few shots. No, this is an Urgal horn bow!"

Eragon eyed him suspiciously, sure that the dwarf was trying to fool

him. “Horn isn’t flexible or springy enough to make a bow.”

“Ah,” chortled Orik, “that’s because you have to know how to treat it right. We first learned to do it with Feldûnost horns, but it works just as well with an Urgal’s. It’s done by cutting the horn in half lengthwise, then trimming the outside coil until it’s the right thickness. The strip is boiled flat and sanded into the final shape before being fixed to the belly of an ash stave with glue made from fish scales and the skin from the roof of trout’s mouths. Then the back of the stave is covered with multiple layers of sinew; they give the bow its *snap*. The last step is decoration. The entire process can take almost a decade.”

“I’ve never heard of a bow built like that before,” said Eragon. It made his own weapon seem no more than a crudely hacked branch. “How far does it shoot?”

“See for yourself,” said Orik. He let Eragon take the bow, which he held gingerly, for fear of scuffing its finish. Orik removed an arrow from his quiver and handed it to him. “You’ll owe me an arrow, though.”

Eragon fit shaft to string, aimed over the Az Ragni, and pulled back. The bow’s draw length was less than two feet, but he was surprised to find that its weight far exceeded that of his own bow; he was barely strong enough to hold the string. He released the arrow and it vanished with a *twang*, only to reappear far above the river. Eragon watched with amazement as the arrow landed in a spray of water halfway across the Az Ragni.

He immediately reached through the barrier in his mind so that the magic’s power suffused him and said, “Gath sem oro un lam iet.” After a few seconds, the arrow darted back through the air to land on his outstretched palm. “And there,” he said, “is the arrow I owe you.”

Orik clapped his fist to his chest and then embraced the arrow and bow with obvious delight. “Wonderful! Now I still have an even two dozen. Otherwise, I would have had to wait until Hedarth to replenish my stock.” He deftly unstrung the bow and stored it away, wrapping the case in soft rags to protect it.

Eragon saw Arya watching. He asked her, “Do elves use horn bows as well? You’re so strong, a wood bow would shatter if it was made heavy enough for you.”

“We sing our bows from trees that do not grow.” And then she walked away.

For days, they drifted through fields of spring grass while the Beor Mountains faded into a hazy white wall behind them. The banks were often covered with vast herds of gazelles and small red deer that watched them with liquid eyes.

Now that the Fanghur were no longer a threat, Eragon flew almost constantly with Saphira. It was their first opportunity since before Gil'ead to spend so much time together in the air, and they took full advantage of it. Also, Eragon welcomed the chance to escape the cramped deck of the raft, where he felt awkward and unsettled with Arya so near.

ARYA SVIT-KONA

Eragon and his company followed the Az Ragni until it joined the Edda River, which then drifted into the unknown east. At the juncture between the rivers, they visited the dwarves' trading outpost, Hedarth, and exchanged their rafts for donkeys. Dwarves never used horses on account of their size.

Arya refused the steed offered to her, saying, "I will *not* return to the land of my ancestors on the back of a donkey."

Thorv frowned. "How will you keep pace with us?"

"I will run." And run she did, outstripping Snowfire and the donkeys, only to sit waiting for them at the next hill or copse. Despite her exertions, she displayed no sign of weariness when they stopped for the night, nor any inclination to utter more than a few words between breakfast and supper. With every step, she seemed to grow tenser.

From Hedarth, they trekked north, going up the Edda River toward its point of origin at Eldor Lake.

Du Weldenvarden came into view within three days. The forest first appeared as a hazy ridge on the horizon, then quickly expanded into an emerald sea of ancient oaks, beeches, and maples. From Saphira's back, Eragon saw that the woods reached unbroken to the horizon both north and west, and he knew they extended far beyond that, stretching the entire length of Alagaësia.

To him, the shadows underneath the trees' arching boughs seemed mysterious and enticing, as well as dangerous, for there lived the elves. Hidden somewhere in the dappled heart of Du Weldenvarden lay Ellesméra—where he would complete his training—as well as Osilon, and other elven cities few outsiders had visited since the fall of the Riders. The forest was a perilous place for mortals, Eragon felt, certain to be riddled with strange magic and stranger creatures.

It's like another world, he observed. A pair of butterflies spiraled around each other as they rose from the dark interior of the forest.

I hope, said Saphira, *there will be room for me within the trees on whatever path the elves use. I cannot fly the whole time*.

I'm sure they found ways to accommodate dragons during the time of the Riders.

Mmm.

That night, just as Eragon was about to seek his blankets, Arya appeared by his shoulder, like a spirit materializing out of the air. Her stealth made him jump; he could never understand how she moved so quietly. Before he could ask what she wanted, her mind touched his and she said, *Follow me as silently as you can.*

The contact surprised him as much as the request. They had shared thoughts during the flight to Farthen Dûr—it had been the only way Eragon could speak to her through her self-induced coma—but since Arya's recovery, he had made no attempt to touch her mind again. It was a profoundly personal experience. Whenever he reached out to another person's consciousness, it felt as if a facet of his bare soul rubbed against theirs. It seemed boorish and rude to initiate something so private without an invitation, as well as a betrayal of Arya's trust, slender as it was. Also, Eragon was afraid that such a link would reveal his new and confused feelings for Arya, and he had no desire to be ridiculed for them.

He accompanied her as she slipped out from the ring of tents, carefully evaded Tríhga, who had taken the first watch, and passed beyond the dwarves' hearing. Within him, Saphira kept a close watch on his progress, ready to leap to his side if need be.

Arya squatted on a moss-eaten log and wrapped her arms around her knees without looking at him. "There are things you must know before we reach Ceris and Ellesméra so that you do not shame yourself or me through your ignorance."

"Such as?" He crouched opposite her, curious.

Arya hesitated. "During my years as Islanzadí's ambassador, it was my observation that humans and dwarves are quite similar. You share many of the same beliefs and passions. More than one human has lived comfortably among the dwarves because he or she can understand their culture, as they understand yours. You both love, lust, hate, fight, and create in much the same manner. Your friendship with Orik and your acceptance into Dûrgrimst Ingeitum are examples of this." Eragon nodded, although their differences seemed greater to him than that. "Elves, though, are not like other races."

"You speak as though you weren't one," he said, echoing her words from Farthen Dûr.

"I have lived with the Varden for enough years to become accustomed to their traditions," replied Arya in a brittle tone.

"Ah … So then do you mean to say that elves don't have the same emotions as dwarves and humans? I find that hard to believe. All living things have the same basic needs and desires."

"That is not what I mean to say!" Eragon recoiled, then frowned and studied her. It was unusual for her to be so brusque. Arya closed her eyes and placed her fingers on her temples, taking a long breath.

“Because elves live for so many years, we consider courtesy to be the highest social virtue. You cannot afford to give offense when a grudge can be held for decades or centuries. Courtesy is the only way to prevent such hostility from accumulating. It doesn’t always succeed, but we adhere to our rituals rigorously, for they protect us from extremes. Nor are elves fecund, so it is vital that we avoid conflict among ourselves. If we shared the same rate of crime as you or the dwarves, we would soon be extinct.

“There is a proper way to greet the sentinels in Ceris, certain patterns and forms that you must observe when presented to Queen Islanzadí, and a hundred different manners in which to greet those around you, if it’s not better to just remain quiet.”

“With all your customs,” Eragon risked saying, “it seems as though you’ve only made it easier to offend people.”

A smile flickered across her lips. “Perhaps. You know as well as I that you will be judged by the highest standards. If you make a mistake, the elves will think you did it on purpose. And only harm will come if they discover that it was born of ignorance. Far better to be thought rude and capable than rude and incapable, else you risk being manipulated like The Serpent in a match of Runes. Our politics move in cycles that are both subtle and lengthy. What you see or hear of an elf one day may only be a slight move in a strategy that reaches back millennia, and may have no bearing on how that elf will behave tomorrow. It is a game that we all play but few control, a game that you are about to enter.

“Now perhaps you realize why I say elves are not like other races. The dwarves are also long-lived, yet they are more prolific than us and do not share our restraint or our taste for intrigue. And humans …” She let her voice fade into a tactful silence.

“Humans,” said Eragon, “do the best they can with what they are given.”

“Even so.”

“Why don’t you tell Orik all this as well? He’ll be staying in Ellesméra, same as me.”

An edge crept into Arya’s voice. “He is already somewhat familiar with our etiquette. However, as a Rider, you would do well to appear better educated than he.”

Eragon accepted her rebuke without protest. “What must I learn?”

So Arya began to tutor him and, through him, Saphira in the niceties of elven society. First she explained that when one elf meets another, they stop and touch their first two fingers to their lips to indicate that “we shall not distort the truth during our conversation.” This is followed by the phrase “Atra esterní ono thelduin” to which one replies “Atra du evarínya ono varda.”

"And," said Arya, "if you are being especially formal, a third response is made: 'Un atra mor'ranr lífa unin hjarta onr,' which means, 'And may peace live in your heart.' These lines were adopted from a blessing that was made by a dragon when our pact with them was finalized. It goes:

Atra esterní ono thelduin,
Mor'ranr lífa unin hjarta onr,
Un du evarínya ono varda.

"Or: 'May good fortune rule over you, peace live in your heart, and the stars watch over you.' "

"How do you know who is supposed to speak first?"

"If you greet someone with greater status than yourself or if you wish to honor a subordinate, then speak first. If you greet someone with less status than yourself, speak last. But if you are uncertain of your position, give your counterpart a chance to speak, and if they are silent, speak first. Such is the rule."

Does it apply to me as well? asked Saphira.

Arya plucked a dry leaf from the ground and crumpled it between her fingers. Behind her, the camp faded into shadow as the dwarves banked the fire, dampening the flames with a layer of dirt so that the coals and embers would survive until morning. "As a dragon, none are higher than you in our culture. Not even the queen would claim authority over you. You may do and say as you wish. We do not expect dragons to be bound by our laws."

Next she showed Eragon how to twist his right hand and place it over his sternum in a curious gesture. "This," she said, "you will use when you meet Islanzadí. By it you indicate that you offer her your loyalty and obedience."

"Is it binding, like my oath of fealty to Nasuada?"

"No, only a courtesy, and a small one at that."

Eragon struggled to remember the sundry modes of address that Arya instructed them in. The salutations varied from man to woman, adults to children, boys to girls, as well as by rank and prestige. It was a daunting list, but one that Eragon knew he had to memorize perfectly.

When he had absorbed all he could, Arya stood and dusted her hands. "So long as you do not forget, you'll do well enough." She turned to leave.

"Wait," said Eragon. He reached out to stop her, then snatched back his hand before she noticed his presumption. She looked over her shoulder with a query in her dark eyes, and his stomach clenched as

he tried to find a way to voice his thoughts. Despite his best efforts, he ended up just saying, “Are you well, Arya? … You’ve seemed distracted and out of sorts ever since we left Hedarth.”

As Arya’s face hardened into a blank mask, he winced inwardly, knowing that he had chosen the wrong approach, although he could not fathom why the question should offend her.

“When we are in Du Weldenvarden,” she informed him, “I expect that you will not speak to me in such a familiar way, unless you wish to cause affront.” She stalked away.

Run after her! exclaimed Saphira.

What?

We can’t afford to have her angry with you. Go apologize.

His pride rebelled. *No! It’s her fault, not mine*.

Go apologize, Eragon, or I’ll fill your tent with carrion. It was no idle threat.

How?

Saphira thought for a second, then told him what to do. Without arguing, he jumped to his feet and darted in front of Arya, forcing her to stop. She regarded him with a haughty expression.

He touched his fingers to his lips and said, “Arya Svit-kona,” using the honorific he had just learned for a woman of great wisdom. “I spoke badly, and for that I cry your pardon. Saphira and I were concerned for your welfare. After all you’ve done for us, it seemed the least we could do was offer our help in return, if you need it.”

Finally, Arya relented and said, “Your concern is appreciated. And I too spoke badly.” She looked down. In the dark, the outline of her limbs and torso was painfully rigid. “You ask what troubles me, Eragon? Do you truly wish to know? Then I will tell you.” Her voice was as soft as thistledown floating on the wind. “I am afraid.”

Dumbfounded, Eragon made no response, and she stepped past, leaving him alone in the night.

CERIS

On the morning of the fourth day, when Eragon rode alongside Shrrgnien, the dwarf said, “So tell me, do men really have ten toes, as is said? For truly I have never traveled beyond our borders before.”

“Of course we have ten toes!” said Eragon, astonished. He shifted in Snowfire’s saddle, lifted his foot, removed his right boot and sock, and wiggled his toes under Shrrgnien’s amazed eyes. “Don’t you?”

Shrrgnien shook his head. “Nay, we have seven on each foot. It is how Helzvog made us. Five is too few and six is the wrong number, but seven … seven is just right.” He glanced at Eragon’s foot again, then spurred his donkey ahead and began speaking animatedly to Ama and Hedin, who eventually handed him several silver coins.

I think, said Eragon as he pulled the boot back on, *that I was just the source of a bet.* For some reason, Saphira found that immensely amusing.

As dusk fell and the full moon rose, the Edda River drew ever closer to the fringe of Du Weldenvarden. They rode down a narrow trail through tangled dogwood and rosebushes in full bloom, which filled the evening air with the flowers’ warm scent.

Eager anticipation swelled within Eragon as he gazed into the dark forest, knowing they had already entered the elves’ domain and were close to Ceris. He leaned forward in Snowfire’s saddle, the reins pulled tight between his hands. Saphira’s excitement was as great as his own; she ranged overhead, flicking her tail back and forth with impatience.

Eragon felt as if they had wandered into a dream. *It doesn’t seem real*, he said.

Aye. Here the legends of old still bestride the earth.

At last they came upon a small meadow set between the river and forest. “Stop here,” said Arya in a low voice. She walked forward until she stood alone in the midst of the lush grass, then cried in the ancient language, “Come forth, my brethren! You have nothing to fear. ’Tis I, Arya of Ellesméra. My companions are friends and allies; they mean us no harm.” She added other words as well, ones alien to Eragon.

For several minutes, the only sound was the river rushing behind them, until from underneath the still leaves came a line of Elvish, so quick and fleeting that Eragon missed the meaning. Arya responded: “I do.”

With a rustle, two elves stood on the edge of the forest and two ran lightly out on the boughs of a gnarled oak. Those on the ground bore long spears with white blades, while the others held bows. All were garbed in tunics the color of moss and bark underneath flowing cloaks clasped at the shoulder with ivory brooches. One had tresses as black as Arya's. Three had hair like starlight.

The elves dropped from the trees and embraced Arya, laughing in their clear, pure voices. They joined hands and danced in a circle around her like children, singing merrily as they spun through the grass.

Eragon watched in amazement. Arya had never given him reason to suspect that elves liked to—or even *could*—laugh. It was a wondrous sound, like flutes and harps trilling with delight at their own music. He wished that he could listen to it forever.

Then Saphira drifted over the river and settled beside Eragon. At her approach, the elves cried out in alarm and aimed their weapons toward her. Arya spoke quickly in soothing tones, motioning first at Saphira, then at Eragon. When she paused for breath, Eragon drew back the glove on his right hand, tilted his palm so that the gedwëy ignasia caught the moonlight, and said, as he once had to Arya so long ago, "Eka fricai un Shur'tugal." I am a Rider and friend. Remembering his lesson from yesterday, he touched his lips, adding, "Atra esterní ono thelduin."

The elves lowered their weapons as their angled faces lit up with radiant joy. They pressed their forefingers to their lips and bowed to Saphira and him, murmuring their reply in the ancient language.

Then they rose, pointed at the dwarves, and laughed as if at a hidden joke. Drifting back into the forest, they waved their hands and called, "Come, come!"

Eragon followed Arya with Saphira and the dwarves, who were grumbling among themselves. As they passed between the trees, the canopy overhead plunged them into velvet darkness, except where fragments of moonlight gleamed through chinks in the shell of overlapping leaves. Eragon could hear the elves whispering and laughing all around, though he could not see them. Occasionally, they would call directions when he or the dwarves blundered.

Ahead, a fire glowed through the trees, sending shadows racing like sprites across the leafy ground. As Eragon entered the radius of light, he saw three small huts clustered together around the base of a large oak. High in the tree was a roofed platform where a watchman could observe the river and forest. A pole had been lashed between two of the huts: from it hung bundles of drying plants.

The four elves vanished into the huts, then returned with their arms piled high with fruits and vegetables—but no meat—and began

preparing a meal for their guests. They hummed as they worked, flitting from one tune to another as the fancy took them. When Orik asked their names, the dark-haired elf pointed to himself and said, "I am Lifaen of House Rílvenar. And my companions are Edurna, Celdin, and Narí."

Eragon sat beside Saphira, happy for an opportunity to rest and to watch the elves. Though all four were male, their faces resembled Arya's, with delicate lips, thin noses, and large slanted eyes that shone under their brows. The rest of their bodies matched, with narrow shoulders and slender arms and legs. Each was more fair and noble than any human Eragon had seen, albeit in a rarefied, exotic manner.

Who ever thought I would get to visit the elves' homeland? Eragon asked himself. He grinned and leaned against the corner of a hut, drowsy with the fire's warmth. Above him, Saphira's dancing blue eyes tracked the elves with unwavering precision.

More magic is in this race, she finally remarked, *than either humans or dwarves. They do not feel as if they come from the earth or the stone, but rather from another realm, half in, half out, like reflections seen through water.*

They certainly are graceful, he said. The elves moved like dancers, their every action smooth and lithe.

Brom had told Eragon that it was rude for someone to speak with their mind to a Rider's dragon without permission, and the elves adhered to that custom, voicing aloud their comments to Saphira, who would then answer the elves directly. Saphira usually refrained from touching the thoughts of humans and dwarves and allowed Eragon to relay her words, since few members of those races had the training to guard their minds if they wished for privacy. It also seemed an imposition to use such an intimate form of contact for casual exchanges. The elves had no such inhibitions, though; they welcomed Saphira into their minds, reveling in her presence.

At last the food was ready and served on carved plates that felt like dense bone, although wood grain wandered through the flowers and vines decorating the rim. Eragon was also supplied with a flagon of gooseberry wine—made of the same unusual material—with a sculpted dragon wrapped around its stem.

As they ate, Lifaen produced a set of reed pipes and began to play a flowing melody, his fingers running along the various holes. Soon the tallest silver-haired elf, Narí, raised his voice and sang:

O!

The day is done; the stars are bright;

The leaves are still; the moon is white!
Laugh at woe and laugh at foe,
Menoa's scion now is safe this night!

A forest child we lost to strife;
A sylvan daughter caught by life!
Freed of fear and freed of flame,
She tore a Rider from the shadows rife!

Again the dragons rise on wing,
And we avenge their suffering!
Strong of blade and strong of arm,
The time is ripe for us to kill a king!

O!

The wind is soft; the river deep;
The trees are tall; the birds do sleep!
Laugh at woe and laugh at foe,
The hour has arrived for joy to reap!

When Narí finished, Eragon released his pent-up breath. He had never heard such a voice before; it felt as if the elf had revealed his essence, his very soul. "That was beautiful, Narí-vodhr."

"A rough composition, Argetlam," demurred Narí. "But I thank you, nevertheless."

Thorv grunted. "Very pretty, Master Elf. However, there are matters more serious than reciting verse that we must attend to. Are we to accompany Eragon farther?"

"No," said Arya quickly, drawing looks from the other elves. "You may return home in the morning. We will assure that Eragon reaches Ellesméra."

Thorv dipped his head. "Then our task is complete."

As Eragon lay on the bedding the elves had arranged for him, he strained his ears to catch Arya's speech, which drifted from one of the huts. Though she used many unfamiliar words in the ancient language, he deduced that she was explaining to their hosts how she had lost Saphira's egg and the events since. A long silence followed after she stopped, then an elf said, "It is good that you have returned, Arya Dröttningu. Islanzadí was sorely wounded by grief when you were captured and the egg was stolen, and by Urgals no less! She was

—and is—sick at heart."

"Hush, Edurna … hush," chided another. "Dvergar are small, but they have sharp ears, and I am sure these will report to Hrothgar."

Then their voices dropped and Eragon could discern no more from the murmur of voices, which melded into the whisper of leaves as he drifted to sleep, the elf's song repeating endlessly through his dreams.

The scent of flowers was heavy in the air when Eragon woke to behold a sun-drenched Du Weldenvarden. Above him arched a mottled panoply of drifting leaves, supported by the thick trunks that buried themselves in the dry, bare ground. Only moss, lichen, and a few low shrubs survived in the pervasive green shade. The scarcity of underbrush made it possible to see for great distances between the knotted pillars and to walk about freely beneath the dappled ceiling.

Rolling to his feet, Eragon found Thorv and his guards packed and ready to leave. Orik's donkey was tied behind Ekksvar's steed. Eragon approached Thorv and said, "Thank you, all of you, for protecting me and Saphira. Please convey our gratitude to Ûndin."

Thorv pressed his fist to his chest. "I will carry your words." He hesitated and looked back at the huts. "Elves are a queer race, full of light and dark. In the morning, they drink with you; in the evening, they stab you. Keep thine back to a wall, Shadeslayer. Capricious, they are."

"I will remember that."

"Mmm." Thorv gestured toward the river. "They plan to travel up Eldor Lake in boats. What will you do with thine horse? We could return him to Tarnag with us, and from there, to Tronjheim."

"Boats!" cried Eragon with dismay. He had always planned to bring Snowfire to Ellesméra. It was convenient to have a horse whenever Saphira was away, or in places too confined for her bulk. He fingered the sparse bristles along his jaw. "That is a kind offer. Will you make sure Snowfire is well cared for? I couldn't bear it if anything were to happen to him."

"On mine honor," pledged Thorv, "you will return to find him fat and sleek."

Eragon fetched Snowfire and transferred the stallion, his saddle, and his grooming supplies into Thorv's care. He bade each of the warriors farewell, then he, Saphira, and Orik watched the dwarves ride back along the trail they had arrived on.

Returning to the huts, Eragon and the remainder of his party followed the elves to a thicket on the edge of the Edda River. There, docked on either side of a boulder, were two white canoes with vines carved along their sides.

Eragon boarded the nearest boat and stowed his pack beneath his

feet. He was amazed by how light the craft was; he could have lifted it with a single hand. Even more astounding, the hulls appeared to be composed of birch-bark panels melded into a seamless whole. Curious, he touched the side. The bark was hard and taut, like stretched parchment, and cool from its contact with the water. He rapped it with a knuckle. The fibrous shell reverberated like a muted drum.

"Are all your boats made this way?" he asked.

"All except the very largest," answered Narí, seating himself at the prow of Eragon's vessel. "For those, we sing the finest cedar and oak into shape."

Before Eragon could ask what he meant, Orik joined their canoe while Arya and Lifaen appropriated the second one. Arya turned to Edurna and Celdin—who stood on the bank—and said, "Guard this way so that none may follow us, and tell no one of our presence. The queen must be the first to know. I will send reinforcements as soon as we reach Sílthrim."

"Arya Dröttningu."

"May the stars watch over you!" she answered.

Bending forward, Narí and Lifaen drew spiked poles ten feet long from inside the boats and began propelling the vessels upstream. Saphira slid into the water behind them and clawed her way along the riverbed until they were level. When Eragon looked at her, she winked lazily, then submerged, forcing the river to swell into a mound over her jagged back. The elves laughed as she did so and made many compliments about her size and strength.

After an hour, they reached Eldor Lake, which was rough with small, jagged waves. Birds and flies swarmed by a wall of trees edging the western shore, while the eastern shore sloped up into the plains. On that side meandered hundreds of deer.

Once they escaped the river's current, Narí and Lifaen stowed their poles, then distributed leaf-bladed paddles. Orik and Arya already knew how to steer a boat, but Narí had to explain the process to Eragon. "Whichever side you paddle on, we turn in the opposite direction," said the elf. "So if I paddle on the right and Orik paddles on the left, then you must paddle first on one side, then the other, else we will drift off course." In the daylight, Narí's hair shimmered like the finest wire, each strand a fiery line.

Eragon soon mastered the ability, and as the motion became habitual, his mind was freed to daydream. Thus, he floated up the cool lake, lost in the fantastic worlds hidden behind his eyes. When he paused to rest his arms, he once again pulled Orik's puzzle ring from his belt and struggled to arrange the obstinate gold bands into the correct pattern.

Narí noticed what he was doing. "May I see that ring?"

Eragon passed it to the elf, who turned his back. For a few moments, Eragon and Orik maneuvered the canoe alone as Narí picked at the entwined bands. Then, with a pleased exclamation, Narí raised his hand, and the completed ring flashed on his middle finger. “A delightful riddle,” said Narí. He slipped off the ring and shook it, so that it was in its original state when he returned it to Eragon.

“How did you solve it?” demanded Eragon, dismayed and envious that Narí had been able to master the puzzle so easily. “Wait … Don’t tell me. I want to figure it out on my own.”

“Of course,” said Narí, smiling.

WOUNDS OF THE PAST

For three and a half days, the citizens of Carvahall discussed the latest attack, the tragedy of young Elmund's death, and what could possibly be done to escape their thrice-blasted situation. The debate raged with bitter fury through every room of every home. In the space of a word, friends turned against friends, husbands against wives, children against parents, only to reconcile moments later in their frantic attempt to discover a means of survival.

Some said that since Carvahall was doomed anyway, they might as well kill the Ra'zac and remaining soldiers so as to at least have their vengeance. Others said that if Carvahall really was doomed, then the only logical course was to surrender and trust themselves to the king's mercy, even if it did mean torture and death for Roran and enslavement for everyone else. And still others sided with neither opinion, but rather descended into a sullen black anger directed at everyone who had brought about this calamity. Many did their best to hide their panic in the depths of a tankard.

The Ra'zac themselves had apparently realized that with eleven soldiers dead they no longer had a large enough force to attack Carvahall, and thus had retreated farther down the road, where they were content to post sentinels across Palancar Valley and wait. "Wait for flea-bitten troops from Ceunon or Gil'ead, if you ask me," Loring said at one meeting. Roran listened to that and more, kept his own council, and silently judged the various schemes. They all seemed dangerously risky.

Roran still had not told Sloan that he and Katrina were engaged. He knew it was foolish to wait, but he feared how the butcher would react when he learned that Roran and Katrina had flouted tradition and, in doing so, undermined Sloan's authority. Besides, there was plenty of work to divert Roran's attention; he convinced himself that strengthening the fortifications around Carvahall was his most important task at the moment.

Getting people to help was easier than Roran anticipated. After the last fight, the villagers were more apt to listen and to obey him—that is, those who did not blame him for causing their predicament. He was mystified by his new authority, until he realized that it was the result of the awe, respect, and perhaps even fear his kills had elicited. They called him Stronghammer. Roran Stronghammer.

The name pleased him.

As night engulfed the valley, Roran leaned against a corner of Horst's dining room, his eyes closed. Conversation flowed from the men and women seated around the candlelit table. Kiselt was in the middle of explaining the state of Carvahall's supplies. "We won't starve," he concluded, "but if we can't tend to our fields and our flocks soon, we might as well cut our own throats before next winter. It would be a kinder fate."

Horst scowled. "Dog tripe!"

"Dog tripe or not," said Gertrude, "I doubt we'll have a chance to find out. We outnumbered the soldiers ten to one when they arrived. They lost eleven men; we lost twelve, and I'm caring for another nine wounded. What happens, Horst, when they outnumber *us* ten to one?"

"We will give the bards a reason to remember our names," retorted the smith. Gertrude shook her head sadly.

Loring banged a fist on the table. "And I say it's our turn to strike, before we *are* outnumbered. All we need are a few men, shields, and spears, and we can wipe out their *infestation*. It could be done tonight!"

Roran shifted restlessly. He had heard all this before, and like before, Loring's proposal ignited an argument that consumed the group. After an hour, the debate still showed no sign of being resolved, nor had any new ideas been presented, except for Thane's suggestion that Gedric should go tan his own hide, which nearly resulted in a fistfight.

Finally, when the conversation lulled, Roran limped to the table as quickly as his injured calf would allow. "I have something to say." For him it was the equivalent of stepping on a long thorn and then yanking it out without stopping to consider the pain; it had to be done, and the faster the better.

All eyes—hard, soft, angry, kind, indifferent, and curious—turned to him, and Roran took a deep breath. "Indecision will kill us just as surely as a sword or an arrow." Orval rolled his eyes, but the rest still listened. "I don't know if we should attack or flee—"

"Where?" snorted Kiselt.

"—but I do know one thing: our children, our mothers, and our infirm must be protected from danger. The Ra'zac have barred us from Cawley and the other farms down the valley. So what? We know this land better than any in Alagaësia, and there is a place … there is a place where our loved ones will be safe: the Spine."

Roran winced as a barrage of outraged voices assaulted him. Sloan was the loudest, shouting, "I'll be hanged before I set foot in those cursed mountains!"

"Roran," said Horst, overriding the commotion. "You of all people

should know that the Spine is too dangerous—it's where Eragon found the stone that brought the Ra'zac! The mountains are cold, and filled with wolves, bears, and other monsters. Why even mention them?"

To keep Katrina safe! Roran wanted to scream. Instead, he said, "Because no matter how many soldiers the Ra'zac summon, they will never dare enter the Spine. Not after Galbatorix lost half his army in it."

"That was a long time ago," said Morn doubtfully.

Roran jumped on his statement. "And the stories have grown all the more frightening in the telling! A trail already exists to the top of Igualda Falls. All we have to do is send the children and others up there. They'll only be on the fringe of the mountains, but they'll still be safe. If Carvahall is taken, they can wait until the soldiers leave, then find refuge in Therinsford."

"It is too dangerous," growled Sloan. The butcher gripped the edge of the table so hard that the tips of his fingers turned white. "The cold, the beasts. No sane man would send his family among those."

"But …" Roran faltered, put off-balance by Sloan's response. Though he knew the butcher hated the Spine more than most—because his wife had plummeted to her death from the cliffs beside Igualda Falls—he had hoped that Sloan's rabid desire to protect Katrina would be strong enough to overcome his aversion. Roran now understood he would have to win over Sloan just like everyone else. Adopting a placating tone, Roran said, "It's not that bad. The snow is already melting off the peaks. It's no colder in the Spine than it was down here a few months ago. And I doubt that wolves or bears would bother such a large group."

Sloan grimaced, twisting his lips up over his teeth, and shook his head. "You will find nothing but death in the Spine."

The others seemed to agree, which only strengthened Roran's determination, for he was convinced that Katrina would die unless he could sway them. He scanned the long oval of faces, searching for a sympathetic expression. "Delwin, I know it's cruel of me to say it, but if Elmund hadn't been in Carvahall, he would still be alive. Surely you must agree that this is the right thing to do! You have an opportunity to save other parents from your suffering."

No one responded. "And Birgit!" Roran dragged himself toward her, clutching the backs of chairs to keep himself from falling. "Do you want Nolfavrell to share his father's fate? He has to leave. Can't you see, that is the only way he'll be safe.…" Though Roran did his best to fight it, he could feel tears flood his eyes. "It's for the children!" he shouted angrily.

The room was silent as Roran stared at the wood beneath his hands, struggling to control himself. Delwin was the first to stir. "I will never

leave Carvahall so long as my son's killers remain here. However," he paused, then continued with painful slowness, "I cannot deny the truth of your words; the children must be protected."

"As I said from the beginning," declared Tara.

Then Baldor spoke: "Roran is right. We can't allow ourselves to be blinded by fear. Most of us have climbed to the top of the falls at one time or another. It's safe enough."

"I too," Birgit finally added, "must agree."

Horst nodded. "I would rather not do it, but considering the circumstances.… I don't think we have any other choice." After a minute, the various men and women began to reluctantly acquiesce to the proposal.

"Nonsense!" exploded Sloan. He stood and stabbed an accusing finger at Roran. "How will they get enough food to wait for weeks on end? They can't carry it. How will they stay warm? If they light fires, they'll be seen! How, how, how? If they don't starve, they'll freeze. If they don't freeze, they'll be eaten. If they're not eaten … Who knows? They may fall!"

Roran spread his hands. "If we all help, they will have plenty of food. Fire won't be a problem if they move farther back into the forest, which they must anyway, since there isn't room to camp right by the falls."

"Excuses! Justifications!"

"What would you have us do, Sloan?" asked Morn, eyeing him with curiosity.

Sloan laughed bitterly. "Not this."

"Then what?"

"It doesn't matter. Only this is the wrong choice."

"You don't have to participate," pointed out Horst.

"Nor will I," said the butcher. "Proceed if you want, but neither I nor my blood shall enter the Spine while I still have marrow in my bones." He grabbed his cap and left with a venomous glare at Roran, who returned the scowl in kind.

As Roran saw it, Sloan was endangering Katrina through his own pigheaded stubbornness. *If he can't bring himself to accept the Spine as a place of refuge*, decided Roran, *then he's become my enemy and I have to take matters into my own hands*.

Horst leaned forward on his elbows and interlaced his thick fingers. "So … If we are going to use Roran's plan, what preparations will be needed?" The group exchanged wary glances, then gradually began to discuss the topic.

Roran waited until he was convinced that he had achieved his goal before slipping out of the dining room. Loping through the dusky village, he searched for Sloan along the inner perimeter of the tree

wall. Eventually, he spotted the butcher hunched underneath a torch, his shield clasped around his knees. Roran spun around on one foot and ran to Sloan's shop, where he hurried to the kitchen in the back.

Katrina paused in the middle of setting their table and stared at him with amazement. "Roran! Why are you here? Did you tell Father?"

"No." He came forward and took her arm, savoring the touch. Just being in the same room with her filled him with joy. "I have a great favor to ask of you. It's been decided to send the children and a few others into the Spine above Igualda Falls." Katrina gasped. "I want you to accompany them."

With a shocked expression, Katrina pulled free of his grasp and turned to the open fireplace, where she hugged herself and stared at the bed of throbbing embers. For a long time, she said nothing. Then: "Father forbade me to go near the falls after Mother died. Albem's farm is the closest I've been to the Spine in over ten years." She shivered, and her voice grew accusing. "How can you suggest that I abandon both you and my father? This is my home as much as yours. And why should I leave when Elain, Tara, and Birgit will remain?"

"Katrina, please." He tentatively put his hands on her shoulders. "The Ra'zac are here for me, and I would not have you harmed because of that. As long as you're in danger, I can't concentrate on what has to be done: defending Carvahall."

"Who would respect me for fleeing like a coward?" She lifted her chin. "I would be ashamed to stand before the women of Carvahall and call myself your wife."

"Coward? There is no cowardice in guarding and protecting the children in the Spine. If anything, it requires greater courage to enter the mountains than to stay."

"What horror is this?" whispered Katrina. She twisted in his arms, eyes shining and mouth set firmly. "The man who would be my husband no longer wants me by his side."

He shook his head. "That's not true. I—"

"It *is* true! What if you are killed while I'm gone?"

"Don't say—"

"No! Carvahall has little hope of survival, and if we must die, I would rather die together than huddle in the Spine without life or heart. Let those with children tend to their own. As will I." A tear rolled down her cheek.

Gratitude and wonder surged through Roran at the strength of her devotion. He looked deep into her eyes. "It is for that love that I would have you go. I know how you feel. I know that this is the hardest sacrifice either of us could make, and I ask it of you now."

Katrina shuddered, her entire body rigid, her white hands clenched around her muslin sash. "If I do this," she said with a shaking voice,

“you must promise me, here and now, that you will never make such a request again. You must promise that even if we faced Galbatorix himself and only one of us could escape, you would not ask me to leave.”

Roran looked at her helplessly. “I can’t.”

“Then how can you expect me to do what you won’t!” she cried. “That is my price, and neither gold nor jewels nor pretty words can replace your oath. If you don’t care enough for me to make your own sacrifice, Roran *Stronghammer*, then be gone and I never wish to see your face again!”

I cannot lose her. Though it pained him almost beyond endurance, he bowed his head and said, “You have my word.”

Katrina nodded and sank into a chair—her back stiff and upright—and blotted her tears on the cuff of her sleeve. In a quiet voice, she said, “Father will hate me for going.”

“How will you tell him?”

“I won’t,” she said defiantly. “He would never let me enter the Spine, but he has to realize that this is my decision. Anyway, he won’t dare pursue me into the mountains; he fears them more than death itself.”

“He may fear losing you even more.”

“We shall see. If—when—the time comes to return, I expect you to have already spoken to him about our engagement. That should give him enough time to reconcile himself to the fact.”

Roran found himself nodding in agreement, all the while thinking that they would be lucky if events worked out so well.

Wounds of the Present

When dawn arrived, Roran woke and lay staring at the whitewashed ceiling while he listened to the slow rasp of his own breathing. After a minute, he rolled off the bed, dressed, and proceeded to the kitchen, where he procured a chunk of bread, smeared it with soft cheese, then stepped out onto the front porch to eat and admire the sunrise.

His tranquility was soon disrupted when a herd of unruly children dashed through the garden of a nearby house, shrieking with delight at their game of Catch-the-Cat, followed by a number of adults intent on snaring their respective charges. Roran watched the cacophonous parade vanish around a corner, then placed the last of the bread in his mouth and returned to the kitchen, which had filled with the rest of the household.

Elain greeted him. "Good morning, Roran." She pushed open the window shutters and gazed up at the sky. "It looks like it may rain again."

"The more the better," asserted Horst. "It'll help keep us hidden while we climb Narnmor Mountain."

"Us?" inquired Roran. He sat at the table beside Albriech, who was rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Horst nodded. "Sloan was right about the food and supplies; we have to help carry them up the falls, or else there won't be enough."

"Will there still be men to defend Carvahall?"

"Of course, of course."

Once they all had breakfast, Roran helped Baldor and Albriech wrap spare food, blankets, and supplies into three large bundles that they slung across their shoulders and hauled to the north end of the village. Roran's calf pained him, but not unbearably. Along the way, they met the three brothers Darmmen, Larne, and Hamund, who were similarly burdened.

Just inside the trench that circumnavigated the houses, Roran and his companions found a large gathering of children, parents, and grandparents all busy organizing for the expedition. Several families had volunteered their donkeys to carry goods and the younger children; the animals were picketed in an impatient, braying line that

added to the overall confusion.

Roran set his bundle on the ground and scanned the group. He saw Svart—Ivor's uncle and, at nearly sixty, the oldest man in Carvahall—seated on a bale of clothes, teasing a baby with the tip of his long white beard; Nolfavrell, who was guarded over by Birgit; Felda, Nolla, Calitha, and a number of other mothers with worried expressions; and a great many reluctant people, both men and women. Roran also saw Katrina among the crowd. She glanced up from a knot she was tying on a pack and smiled at him, then returned to her task.

Since no one seemed to be in charge, Roran did his best to sort out the chaos by overseeing the arranging and packaging of the various supplies. He discovered a shortage of waterskins, but when he asked for more, he ended up with thirteen too many. Delays such as those consumed the early-morning hours.

In the middle of discussing with Loring the possible need for extra shoes, Roran stopped as he noticed Sloan standing at the entrance to an alleyway.

The butcher surveyed the mass of activity before him. Contempt cut into the lines along his downturned mouth. His sneer hardened into enraged incredulity as he spotted Katrina, who had shouldered her pack, removing any possibility that she was there only to help. A vein throbbed down the middle of Sloan's forehead.

Roran hurried toward Katrina, but Sloan reached her first. He grabbed the top of the pack and shook it violently, shouting, "Who made you do this?" Katrina said something about the children and tried to pull free, but Sloan yanked at the pack—twisting her arms as the straps slid off her shoulders—and threw it on the ground so that the contents scattered. Still shouting, Sloan grabbed Katrina's arm and began to drag her away. She dug in her heels and fought, her copper hair swirling over her face like a dust storm.

Furious, Roran threw himself at Sloan and tore him from Katrina, shoving the butcher in the chest so that he stumbled backward several yards. "Stop! I'm the one who wanted her to go."

Sloan glared at Roran and snarled, "You have no right!"

"I have every right." Roran looked at the ring of spectators who had gathered around and then declared so that all could hear: "Katrina and I are engaged to be married, and I would not have my future wife treated so!" For the first time that day, the villagers fell completely silent; even the donkeys were quiet.

Surprise and a deep, inconsolable pain sprang onto Sloan's vulnerable face, along with the glimmer of tears. For a moment, Roran felt sympathy for him, then a series of contortions distorted Sloan's visage, each more extreme than the last, until his skin turned beet red. He cursed and said, "You two-faced coward! How could you look me

in the eye and speak to me like an honest man while, at the same time, courting my daughter without permission? I dealt with you in good faith, and here I find you plundering my house while my back is turned."

"I had hoped to do this properly," said Roran, "but events have conspired against me. It was never my intention to cause you grief. Even though this hasn't gone the way either of us wanted, I still want your blessing, if you are willing."

"I would rather have a maggot-riddled pig for a son than you! You have no farm. You have no family. And you will have naught to do with my daughter!" The butcher cursed again. "And she'll have naught to do with the Spine!"

Sloan reached for Katrina, but Roran blocked the way, his face as hard as his clenched fists. Only a handsbreadth apart, they stared directly at each other, trembling from the strength of their emotions. Sloan's red-rimmed eyes shone with manic intensity.

"Katrina, come here," Sloan commanded.

Roran withdrew from Sloan—so that the three of them formed a triangle—and looked at Katrina. Tears streamed down her face as she glanced between him and her father. She stepped forward, hesitated, then with a long, anguished cry, tore at her hair in a frenzy of indecision.

"Katrina!" exclaimed Sloan with a burr of fear.

"Katrina," murmured Roran.

At the sound of his voice, Katrina's tears ceased and she stood straight and tall with a calm expression. She said, "I'm sorry, Father, but I have decided to marry Roran," and stepped to his side.

Sloan turned bone white. He bit his lip so hard that a bead of ruby blood appeared. "You can't leave me! You're my daughter!" He lunged at her with crooked hands. In that instant, Roran bellowed and struck the butcher with all his strength, knocking him sprawling in the dirt before the entire village.

Sloan rose slowly, his face and neck flushed with humiliation. When he saw Katrina again, the butcher seemed to crumple inward, losing height and stature until Roran felt as if he were looking at a specter of the original man. In a low whisper, he said, "It is always so; those closest to the heart cause the most pain. Thou will have no dowry from me, snake, nor your mother's inheritance." Weeping bitterly, Sloan turned and fled toward his shop.

Katrina leaned against Roran, and he put an arm around her. Together they clung to each other as people crowded against them offering condolences, advice, congratulations, and disapproval. Despite the commotion, Roran was aware of nothing but the woman whom he held, and who held him.

Just then, Elain bustled up as fast as her pregnancy would allow. “Oh, you poor dear!” she cried, and embraced Katrina, drawing her from Roran’s arms. “Is it true you are engaged?” Katrina nodded and smiled, then erupted into hysterical tears against Elain’s shoulder. “There now, there now.” Elain cradled Katrina gently, petting her and trying to soothe her, but without avail—every time Roran thought she was about to recover, Katrina began to cry with renewed intensity. Finally, Elain peered over Katrina’s quaking shoulder and said, “I’m taking her back to the house.”

“I’ll come.”

“No, you won’t,” retorted Elain. “She needs time to calm down, and you have work to do. Do you want my advice?” Roran nodded dumbly. “Stay away until evening. I guarantee that she will be as right as rain by then. She can join the others tomorrow.” Without waiting for his response, Elain escorted the sobbing Katrina away from the wall of sharpened trees.

Roran stood with his hands hanging limply by his sides, feeling dazed and helpless. *What have we done?* He regretted that he had not revealed their engagement to Sloan sooner. He regretted that he and Sloan could not work together to shield Katrina from the Empire. And he regretted that Katrina had been forced to relinquish her only family for him. He was now doubly responsible for her welfare. They had no choice *but* to get married. *I’ve made a terrible mess of this*. He sighed and clenched his fist, wincing as his bruised knuckles stretched.

“How are you?” asked Baldor, coming alongside him.

Roran forced a smile. “It didn’t turn out quite how I hoped. Sloan’s beyond reason when it comes to the Spine.”

“And Katrina.”

“That too. I—” Roran fell silent as Loring stopped before them.

“That was a blasted *fool* thing to do!” growled the shoemaker, wrinkling his nose. Then he stuck out his chin, grinned, and bared his stumps of teeth. “But I ’ope you and the girl have the best of luck.” He shook his head. “Heh, you’re going to need it, Stronghammer!”

“We’re all going to need it,” snapped Thane as he walked past.

Loring waved a hand. “Bah, sourpuss. Listen, Roran; I’ve lived in Carvahall for many, many years, and in my experience, it’s better that this happened *now*, instead of when we’re all warm and cozy.”

Baldor nodded, but Roran asked, “Why so?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Normally, you and Katrina would be the meat of gossip for the next nine months.” Loring put a finger on the side of his nose. “Ah, but this way, you’ll soon be forgotten amid everything else that’s going on, and then the two of you might even have some peace.”

Roran frowned. “I’d rather be talked about than have those

desecrators camped on the road."

"So would we all. Still, it's something to be grateful for, and we all need something to be grateful for—'specially once you're married!" Loring cackled and pointed at Roran. "Your face just turned purple, boy!"

Roran grunted and set about gathering Katrina's possessions off the ground. As he did, he was interrupted by comments from whoever happened to be nearby, none of which helped to settle his nerves. "Rotgut," he muttered to himself after a particularly invidious remark.

Although the expedition into the Spine was delayed by the unusual scene the villagers had just witnessed, it was only slightly after midmorning when the caravan of people and donkeys began to ascend the bare trail scratched into the side of Narnmor Mountain to the crest of the Igualda Falls. It was a steep climb and had to be taken slowly, on account of the children and the size of the burdens everyone carried.

Roran spent most of his time caught behind Calitha—Thane's wife—and her five children. He did not mind, as it gave him an opportunity to indulge his injured calf and to consider recent events at length. He was disturbed by his confrontation with Sloan. *At least*, he consoled himself, *Katrina won't remain in Carvahall much longer*. For Roran was convinced, in his heart of hearts, that the village would soon be defeated. It was a sobering, yet unavoidable, realization.

He paused to rest three-quarters of the way up the mountain and leaned against a tree as he admired the elevated view of Palancar Valley. He tried to spot the Ra'zac's camp—which he knew was just to the left of the Anora River and the road south—but was unable to discern even a wisp of smoke.

Roran heard the roar of the Igualda Falls long before they came into sight. The falls appeared for all the world like a great snowy mane that billowed and drifted off Narnmor's craggy head to the valley floor a half mile below. The massive stream curved in several directions as it fell, the result of different layers of wind.

Past the slate ledge where the Anora River became airborne, down a glen filled with thimbleberries, and then finally into a large clearing guarded on one side by a pile of boulders, Roran found that those at the head of the procession had already begun setting up camp. The forest rang with the children's shouts and cries.

Removing his pack, Roran untied an ax from the top, then set about clearing the underbrush from the site along with several other men. When they finished, they began chopping down enough trees to encircle the camp. The aroma of pine sap filled the air. Roran worked

quickly, the wood chips flying in unison with his rhythmic swings.

By the time the fortifications were complete, the camp had already been erected with seventeen wool tents, four small cookfires, and glum expressions from people and donkeys alike. No one wanted to leave, and no one wanted to stay.

Roran surveyed the assortment of boys and old men clutching spears, and thought, *Too much experience and too little. The grandfathers know how to deal with bears and the like, but will the grandsons have the strength to actually do it?* Then he noticed the hard glint in the women's eyes and realized that while they might hold a babe or be busy tending a scraped arm, their own shields and spears were never far from reach. Roran smiled. *Perhaps … perhaps we still have hope*.

He saw Nolfavrell sitting alone on a log—staring back toward Palancar Valley—and joined the boy, who looked at him seriously. "Are you leaving soon?" asked Nolfavrell. Roran nodded, impressed by his poise and determination. "You will do your best, won't you, to kill the Ra'zac and avenge my father? I would do it, except that Mama says I must guard my brothers and sisters."

"I'll bring you their heads myself, if I can," promised Roran.

The boy's chin trembled. "That is good!"

"Nolfavrell …" Roran paused as he searched for the right words. "You are the only one here, besides me, who has killed a man. It doesn't mean that we are better or worse than anyone else, but it means that I can trust you to fight well if you are attacked. When Katrina comes here tomorrow, will you make sure that she's well protected?"

Nolfavrell's chest swelled with pride. "I'll guard her wherever she goes!" Then he looked regretful. "That is … when I don't have to look after—"

Roran understood. "Oh, your family comes first. But maybe Katrina can stay in the tent with your brothers and sisters."

"Yes," said Nolfavrell slowly. "Yes, I think that would work. You can rely on me."

"Thank you." Roran clapped him on the shoulder. He could have asked an older and more capable person, but the adults were too busy with their own responsibilities to defend Katrina as he hoped. Nolfavrell, however, would have the opportunity and inclination to assure that she remained safe. *He can hold my place while we are apart*. Roran stood as Birgit approached.

Eyeing him flatly, she said, "Come, it is time." Then she hugged her son and continued toward the falls with Roran and the other villagers who were returning to Carvahall. Behind them, everyone in the small camp clustered against the felled trees and stared forlornly out through their wooden bars.

His Enemy's Face

As Roran proceeded about his work throughout the rest of the day, he felt Carvahall's emptiness deep inside. It was as if part of himself had been extracted and hidden in the Spine. And with the children gone, the village now felt like an armed camp. The change seemed to have made everyone grim and grave.

When the sun finally sank into the waiting teeth of the Spine, Roran climbed the hill to Horst's house. He stopped before the front door and placed a hand on the knob, but remained there, unable to enter. *Why does this frighten me as much as fighting?*

In the end, he forsook the front door entirely and went to the side of the house, where he slipped into the kitchen and, to his dismay, saw Elain knitting on one side of the table, speaking to Katrina, who was opposite her. They both turned toward him, and Roran blurted, "Are … are you all right?"

Katrina came to his side. "I'm fine." She smiled softly. "It just was a terrible shock when Father … when …" She ducked her head for a moment. "Elain has been wonderfully kind to me. She agreed to lend me Baldor's room for the night."

"I'm glad you are better," said Roran. He hugged her, trying to convey all of his love and adoration through that simple touch.

Elain wrapped up her knitting. "Come now. The sun has set, and it's time you were off to bed, Katrina."

Roran reluctantly let go of Katrina, who kissed him on the cheek and said, "I'll see you in the morning."

He started to follow her out, but stopped when Elain said with a barbed tone, "Roran." Her delicate face was hard and stern.

"Yes?"

Elain waited until they heard the creak of stairs that indicated Katrina was out of earshot. "I hope that you meant every promise you gave that girl, because if you didn't, I'll call an assembly and have you exiled within a week."

Roran was dumbfounded. "Of course I meant them. I love her."

"Katrina just surrendered everything she owned or cared about for you." Elain stared up at him with unwavering eyes. "I've seen men who throw their affection at young maids, like grain tossed at chickens. The maids sigh and weep and believe that they are special, yet for the man, it's only a trifling amusement. You have always been

honorable, Roran, but one's loins can turn even the most sensible person into a prancing booby or a sly, wicked fox. Are you one? For Katrina requires neither a fool, a trickster, nor even love; what she requires above all else is a man who will provide for her. If you abandon her, she will be the meanest person in Carvahall, forced to live off her friends, our first and only beggar. By the blood in my veins, I won't let that happen."

"Nor would I," protested Roran. "I would have to be heartless, or worse, to do so."

Elain jerked her chin. "Exactly. Don't forget that you intend to marry a woman who has lost both her dowry and her mother's inheritance. Do you understand what it means for Katrina to lose her inheritance? She has no silver, no linens, no lace, nor any of the things needed for a well-run home. Such items are all we own, passed from mother to daughter since the day we first settled Alagaësia. They determine our worth. A woman without her inheritance is like … is like—"

"Is like a man without a farm or a trade," said Roran.

"Just so. It was cruel of Sloan to deny Katrina her inheritance, but that can't be helped now. Both you and she have no money or resources. Life is difficult enough without that added hardship. You'll be starting from nothing and with nothing. Does the prospect frighten you or seem unbearable? So I ask you once again—and don't lie or the two of you will regret it for the rest of your lives—will you care for her without grudge or resentment?"

"Yes."

Elain sighed and filled two earthen cups with cider from a jug hanging among the rafters. She handed one to Roran as she seated herself back at the table. "Then I suggest that you devote yourself to replacing Katrina's home and inheritance so that she and any daughters you may have can stand without shame among the wives of Carvahall."

Roran sipped the cool cider. "If we live that long."

"Aye." She brushed back a strand of her blond hair and shook her head. "You've chosen a hard path, Roran."

"I had to make sure that Katrina would leave Carvahall."

Elain lifted an eyebrow. "So that was it. Well, I won't argue about it, but why on earth didn't you speak to Sloan about your engagement before this morning? When Horst asked my father, he gave our family twelve sheep, a sow, and eight pairs of wrought-iron candlesticks before he even knew if my parents would agree. That's how it should be done. Surely you could have thought of a better strategy than striking your father-in-law-to-be."

A painful laugh escaped Roran. "I could have, but it never seemed

the right time with all the attacks."

"The Ra'zac haven't attacked for almost six days now."

He scowled. "No, but … it was … Oh, I don't know!" He banged his fist on the table with frustration.

Elain put down her cup and wrapped her tiny hands around his. "If you can mend this rift between you and Sloan *now*, before years of resentment accumulate, your life with Katrina will be much, much easier. Tomorrow morning you should go to his house and beg his forgiveness."

"I won't beg! Not to him."

"Roran, listen to me. It's worth a month of begging to have peace in your family. I know from experience; strife does naught but make you miserable."

"Sloan hates the Spine. He'll have nothing to do with me."

"You have to try, though," said Elain earnestly. "Even if he spurns your apology, at least you can't be blamed for not making the effort. If you love Katrina, then swallow your pride and do what's right for her. Don't make her suffer for your mistake." She finished her cider, used a tin hat to snuff the candles, and left Roran sitting alone in the dark.

Several minutes elapsed before Roran could bring himself to stir. He stretched out an arm and traced along the counter's edge until he felt the doorway, then proceeded upstairs, all the while running the tips of his fingers over the carved walls to keep his balance. In his room, he disrobed and threw himself lengthwise on the bed.

Wrapping his arms around his wool-stuffed pillow, Roran listened to the faint sounds that drifted through the house at night: the scrabble of a mouse in the attic and its intermittent squeaks, the groan of wood beams cooling in the night, the whisper and caress of wind at the lintel of his window, and … and the rustle of slippers in the hall outside his room.

He watched as the latch above the doorknob was pulled free of its hook, then the door inched forward with a rasp of protest. It paused. A dark form slipped inside, the door closed, and Roran felt a curtain of hair brush his face along with lips like rose petals. He sighed.

Katrina.

A thunderclap tore Roran from sleep.

Light flared on his face as he struggled to regain awareness, like a diver desperate to reach the surface. He opened his eyes and saw a jagged hole blasted through his door. Six soldiers rushed through the yawning cleft, followed by the two Ra'zac, who seemed to fill the room with their ghastly presence. A sword was pressed against Roran's neck. Beside him, Katrina screamed and pulled the blankets around her.

"Up," ordered the Ra'zac. Roran cautiously got to his feet. His heart felt like it was about to explode in his chest. "Tie his handsss and bring him."

As a soldier approached Roran with rope, Katrina screamed again and jumped on the men, biting and clawing furiously. Her sharp nails furrowed their faces, drawing streams of blood that blinded the cursing soldiers.

Roran dropped to one knee and grabbed his hammer from the floor, then planted his feet, swinging the hammer over his head and roaring like a bear. The soldiers threw themselves at him in an attempt to subdue him through sheer numbers, but to no avail: Katrina was in danger, and he was invincible. Shields crumpled beneath his blows, brigandines and mail split under his merciless weapon, and helmets caved in. Two men were wounded, and three fell to rise no more.

The clang and clamor had roused the household; Roran dimly heard Horst and his sons shouting in the hall. The Ra'zac hissed to one another, then scuttled forward and grasped Katrina with inhuman strength, lifting her off the floor as they fled the room.

"Roran!" she shrieked.

Summoning his energy, Roran bowled past the two remaining men. He stumbled into the hall and saw the Ra'zac climbing out a window. Roran dashed toward them and struck at the last Ra'zac, just as it was about to descend below the windowsill. Jerking upward, the Ra'zac caught Roran's wrist in midair and chittered with delight, blowing its fetid breath onto his face. "Yesss! You are the one we want!"

Roran tried to twist free, but the Ra'zac did not budge. With his free hand, Roran buffeted the creature's head and shoulders—which were as hard as iron. Desperate and enraged, he seized the edge of the Ra'zac's hood and wrenched it back, exposing its features.

A hideous, tortured face screamed at him. The skin was shiny black, like a beetle carapace. The head was bald. Each lidless eye was the size of his fist and gleamed like an orb of polished hematite; no iris or pupil existed. In place of a nose, mouth, and chin, a thick beak hooked to a sharp point that clacked over a barbed purple tongue.

Roran yelled and jammed his heels against the sides of the window frame, struggling to free himself from the monstrosity, but the Ra'zac inexorably drew him out of the house. He could see Katrina on the ground, still screaming and fighting.

Just as Roran's knees buckled, Horst appeared by his side and wrapped a knotted arm around his chest, locking him in place. "Someone get a spear!" shouted the smith. He snarled, veins bulging on his neck from the strain of holding Roran. "It'll take more than this demon spawn to best us!"

The Ra'zac gave a final yank, then, when it failed to dislodge Roran,

cocked its head and said, “You are *oursss*!” It lunged forward with blinding speed, and Roran howled as he felt the Ra’zac’s beak close on his right shoulder, snipping through the front of the muscle. His wrist cracked at the same time. With a malicious cackle, the Ra’zac released him and fell backward into the night.

Horst and Roran sprawled against each other in the hallway. “They have Katrina,” groaned Roran. His vision flickered and went black around the edges as he pushed himself upright on his left arm—his right hung useless. Albriech and Baldor emerged from his room, splattered with gore. Only corpses remained behind them. *Now I have killed eight.* Roran retrieved his hammer and staggered down the hall, finding his way blocked by Elain in her white sleeping shift.

She looked at him with wide eyes, then took his arm and pushed him down onto a wood chest set against the wall. “You have to see Gertrude.”

“But—”

“You’ll pass out if this bleeding isn’t stopped.”

He looked down at his right side; it was drenched in crimson. “We have to rescue Katrina before”—he clenched his teeth as the pain surged—“before they do anything to her.”

“He’s right; we can’t wait,” said Horst, looming over them. “Bind him up as best you can, then we’ll go.” Elain pursed her lips and hurried to the linen closet. She returned with several rags, which she wrapped tightly around Roran’s torn shoulder and his fractured wrist. Meanwhile, Albriech and Baldor scavenged armor and swords from the soldiers. Horst contented himself with just a spear.

Elain put her hands on Horst’s chest and said, “Be careful.” She looked at her sons. “All of you.”

“We’ll be fine, Mother,” promised Albriech. She forced a smile and kissed them on the cheek.

They left the house and ran to the edge of Carvahall, where they found that the wall of trees had been pulled open and the watchman, Byrd, slain. Baldor knelt and examined the body, then said with a choked voice, “He was stabbed from behind.” Roran barely heard him through the pounding in his ears. Dizzy, he leaned against a house and panted for breath.

“Ho! Who goes?”

From their stations along Carvahall’s perimeter, the other watchmen congregated around their murdered compatriot, forming a huddle of shuttered lanterns. In hushed tones, Horst described the attack and Katrina’s plight. “Who will help us?” he asked. After a quick discussion, five men agreed to accompany them; the rest would remain to guard the breach in the wall and rouse the villagers.

Pushing himself off the house, Roran trotted to the head of the

group as it slipped through the fields and down the valley toward the Ra'zac's camp. Every step was agony, yet it did not matter; nothing mattered except Katrina. He stumbled once and Horst wordlessly caught him.

Half a mile from Carvahall, Ivor spotted a sentry on a hillock, which compelled them to make a wide detour. A few hundred yards beyond, the ruddy glow of torches became visible. Roran raised his good arm to slow their advance, then began to dodge and crawl through the tangled grass, startling a jackrabbit. The men followed Roran's lead as he worked his way to the edge of a grove of cattails, where he stopped and parted the curtain of stalks to observe the thirteen remaining soldiers.

Where is she?

In contrast to when they had first arrived, the soldiers appeared sullen and haggard, their weapons nicked and their armor dented. Most of them wore bandages that were rusty with splotches of dried blood. The men were clumped together, facing the two Ra'zac—both of whom were now hooded—across a low fire.

One man was shouting: "… over half of us killed by a bunch of inbred, cockle-brained woodrats that can't tell a pike from a poleax or find the point of a sword even if it's lodged in their gut, because *you* don't have half the sense my banner boy does! I don't care if Galbatorix himself licks your boots clean, we won't do a thing until we have a new commander." The men nodded. "One who's *human*."

"Really?" demanded the Ra'zac softly.

"We've had enough taking orders from hunchbacks like you, with all your clicking and teapot whistling—makes us sick! And I don't know what you did with Sardson, but if you stay another night, we'll put steel in you and find out if you bleed like us. You can leave the girl, though, she'll be—"

The man did not get a chance to continue, for the largest Ra'zac jumped across the fire and landed on his shoulders, like a giant crow. Screaming, the soldier collapsed under the weight. He tried to draw his sword, but the Ra'zac pecked twice at his neck with its hidden beak, and he was still.

"We have to fight that?" muttered Ivor behind Roran.

The soldiers remained frozen with shock as the two Ra'zac lapped from the neck of the corpse. When the black creatures rose, they rubbed their knobby hands together, as if they were washing, and said, "Yesss. We will go. Stay if you wisssh; reinforsssements are only daysss away." The Ra'zac threw back their heads and began to shriek at the sky, the wail becoming increasingly shrill until it passed from hearing.

Roran looked up as well. At first he saw nothing, but then a

nameless terror gripped him as two barbed shadows appeared high over the Spine, eclipsing the stars. They advanced quickly, growing larger and larger until they obscured half the sky with their ominous presence. A foul wind rushed across the land, bringing with it a sulfurous miasma that made Roran cough and gag.

The soldiers were likewise afflicted; their curses echoed as they pressed sleeves and scarves over their noses.

Above them, the shadows paused and then began to drift downward, enclosing the camp in a dome of menacing darkness. The sickly torches flickered and threatened to extinguish themselves, yet they still provided sufficient light to reveal the two beasts descending among the tents.

Their bodies were naked and hairless—like newborn mice—with leathery gray skin pulled tight across their corded chests and bellies. In form they resembled starved dogs, except that their hind legs bulged with enough muscle to crush a boulder. A narrow crest extended from the back of each of their attenuated heads, opposite a long, straight, ebony beak made for spearing prey, and cold, bulbous eyes identical to the Ra'zac's. From their shoulders and backs sprang huge wings that made the air moan under their weight.

Flinging themselves to the ground, the soldiers cowered and hid their faces from the monsters. A terrible, alien intelligence emanated from the creatures, bespeaking a race far older and far more powerful than humans. Roran was suddenly afraid that his mission might fail. Behind him, Horst whispered to the men, urging them to hold their ground and remain hidden, else they would be slain.

The Ra'zac bowed to the beasts, then slipped into a tent and returned carrying Katrina—who was bound with ropes—and leading Sloan. The butcher walked freely.

Roran stared, unable to comprehend how Sloan had been captured. *His house isn't anywhere near Horst's*. Then it struck him. "He betrayed us," said Roran with wonder. His fist slowly tightened on his hammer as the true horror of the situation exploded within him. *"He killed Byrd and he betrayed us!"* Tears of rage streamed down his face.

"Roran," murmured Horst, crouching beside him. "We can't attack now; they'd slaughter us. Roran … do you hear me?"

He heard but a whisper in the distance as he watched the smaller Ra'zac jump onto one beast above the shoulders, then catch Katrina as the other Ra'zac tossed her up. Sloan seemed upset and frightened now. He began arguing with the Ra'zac, shaking his head and pointing at the ground. Finally, the Ra'zac struck him across the mouth, knocking him unconscious. Mounting the second beast, with the butcher slung over its shoulder, the largest Ra'zac declared, "We will return once it isss sssafe again. Kill the boy, and your livesss are

forfeit.” Then the steeds flexed their massive thighs and leaped into the sky, once again shadows upon the field of stars.

No words or emotions were left to Roran. He was utterly destroyed. All that remained was to kill the soldiers. He stood and raised his hammer in preparation to charge, but as he stepped forward, his head throbbed in unison with his wounded shoulder, the ground vanished in a burst of light, and he toppled into oblivion.

Arrow to the Heart

Every day since leaving the outpost of Ceris was a hazy dream of warm afternoons spent paddling up Eldor Lake and then the Gaena River. All around them, water gurgled through the tunnel of verdant pines that wound ever deeper into Du Weldenvarden.

Eragon found traveling with the elves delightful. Narí and Lifaen were perpetually smiling, laughing, and singing songs, especially when Saphira was around. They rarely looked elsewhere or spoke of another subject but her in her presence.

However, the elves were not human, no matter the similarity of appearance. They moved too quickly, too fluidly, for creatures born of simple flesh and blood. And when they spoke, they often used roundabout expressions and aphorisms that left Eragon more confused than when they began. In between their bursts of merriment, Lifaen and Narí would remain silent for hours, observing their surroundings with a glow of peaceful rapture on their faces. If Eragon or Orik attempted to talk with them during their contemplation, they would receive only a word or two in response.

It made Eragon appreciate how direct and forthright Arya was by comparison. In fact, she seemed uneasy around Lifaen and Narí, as if she were no longer sure how to behave with her own kind.

From the prow of the canoe, Lifaen looked over his shoulder and said, “Tell me, Eragon-finiarel.… What do your people sing about in these dark days? I remember the epics and lays I heard in Ilirea—sagas of your proud kings and earls—but it was long, long ago and the memories are like withered flowers in my mind. What new works have your people created?” Eragon frowned as he tried to recall the names of stories Brom had recited. When Lifaen heard them, he shook his head sorrowfully and said, “So much has been lost. No court ballads survive, and, if you speak truly, nor does most of your history or art, except for fanciful tales Galbatorix has allowed to thrive.”

“Brom once told us about the fall of the Riders,” said Eragon defensively. An image of a deer bounding over rotting logs flashed behind his eyes from Saphira, who was off hunting.

“Ah, a brave man.” For a minute, Lifaen paddled silently. “We too sing about the Fall … but rarely. Most of us were alive when Vrael entered the void, and we still grieve for our burned cities—the red lilies of Éwayëna, the crystals of Luthivíra—and for our slain families.

Time cannot dull the pain of those wounds, not if a thousand thousand years pass and the sun itself dies, leaving the world to float in eternal night."

Orik grunted in the back. "As it is with the dwarves. Remember, elf, we lost an entire clan to Galbatorix."

"And we lost our king, Evandar."

"I never heard that," said Eragon, surprised.

Lifaen nodded as he guided them around a submerged rock. "Few have. Brom could have told you about it; he was there when the fatal blow was struck. Before Vrael's death, the elves faced Galbatorix on the plains of Ilirea in our final attempt to defeat him. There Evandar —"

"Where is Ilirea?" asked Eragon.

"It's Urû'baen, boy," said Orik. "Used to be an elf city."

Unperturbed by the interruption, Lifaen continued: "As you say, Ilirea was one of our cities. We abandoned it during our war with the dragons, and then, centuries later, humans adopted it as their capital after King Palancar was exiled."

Eragon said, "King Palancar? Who was he? Is that how Palancar Valley got its name?"

This time the elf turned and looked at him with amusement. "You have as many questions as leaves on a tree, Argetlam."

"Brom was of the same opinion."

Lifaen smiled, then paused, as if to gather his thoughts. "When your ancestors arrived in Alagaësia eight hundred years ago, they roamed far across it, seeking a suitable place to live. Eventually, they settled in Palancar Valley—though it was not called such then—as it was one of the few defendable locations that we or the dwarves had not claimed. There your king, Palancar, began to build a mighty state.

"In an attempt to expand his borders, he declared war against us, though we had offered no provocation. Three times he attacked, and three times we prevailed. Our strength frightened Palancar's nobles and they pled with their liege for peace. He ignored their counsel. Then the lords approached us with a treaty, which we signed without the king's knowledge.

"With our help, Palancar was usurped and banished, but he, his family, and their vassals refused to leave the valley. Since we had no wish to murder them, we constructed the tower of Ristvak'baen so the Riders could watch over Palancar and ensure he would never again rise to power or attack anyone else in Alagaësia.

"Before long Palancar was killed by a son who did not wish to wait for nature to take its course. Thereafter, family politics consisted of assassination, betrayal, and other depravities, reducing Palancar's house to a shadow of its former grandeur. However, his descendants

never left, and the blood of kings still runs in Therinsford and Carvahall."

"I see," said Eragon.

Lifaen lifted one dark eyebrow. "Do you? It has more significance than you may think. It was this event that convinced Anurin—Vrael's predecessor as head Rider—to allow humans to become Riders, in order to prevent similar disputes."

Orik emitted a bark of laughter. "That must have caused some argument."

"It was an unpopular decision," admitted Lifaen. "Even now some question the wisdom of it. It caused such a disagreement between Anurin and Queen Dellanir that Anurin seceded from our government and established the Riders on Vroengard as an independent entity."

"But if the Riders were separated from your government, then how could they keep the peace, as they were supposed to?" asked Eragon.

"They couldn't," said Lifaen. "Not until Queen Dellanir saw the wisdom of having the Riders free of any lord or king and restored their access to Du Weldenvarden. Still, it never pleased her that any authority could supersede her own."

Eragon frowned. "Wasn't that the whole point, though?"

"Yes … and no. The Riders were supposed to guard against the failings of the different governments and races, yet who watched the watchers? It was that very problem that caused the Fall. No one existed who could descry the flaws within the Riders' own system, for they were above scrutiny, and thus, they perished."

Eragon stroked the water—first on one side and then the other—while he considered Lifaen's words. His paddle fluttered in his hands as it cut diagonally across the current. "Who succeeded Dellanir as king or queen?"

"Evandar did. He took the knotted throne five hundred years ago—when Dellanir abdicated in order to study the mysteries of magic—and held it until his death. Now his mate, Islanzadí, rules us."

"That's—" Eragon stopped with his mouth open. He was going to say *impossible*, but then realized how ridiculous the statement would sound. Instead, he asked, "Are elves immortal?"

In a soft voice, Lifaen said, "Once we were like you, bright, fleeting, and as ephemeral as the morning dew. Now our lives stretch endlessly through the dusty years. Aye, we are immortal, although we are still vulnerable to injuries of the flesh."

"You *became* immortal? How?" The elf refused to elaborate, though Eragon pressed him for details. Finally, Eragon asked, "How old is Arya?"

Lifaen turned his glittering eyes on him, probing Eragon with disconcerting acuteness. "Arya? What is your interest in her?"

"I …" Eragon faltered, suddenly unsure of his intentions. His attraction to Arya was complicated by the fact that she was an elf, and that her age, whatever it might be, was so much greater than his own. *She must view me as a child.* "I don't know," he said honestly. "But she saved both my life and Saphira's, and I'm curious to know more about her."

"I feel ashamed," said Lifaen, pronouncing each word carefully, "for asking such a question. Among our kind, it is rude to pry into one's affairs.… Only, I must say, and I believe that Orik agrees with me, that you would do well to guard your heart, Argetlam. Now is not the time to lose it, nor would it be well placed in this instance."

"Aye," grunted Orik.

Heat suffused Eragon as blood rushed to his face, like hot tallow melting through him. Before he could utter a retort, Saphira entered his mind and said, *And now is the time to guard your tongue. They mean well. Don't insult them.*

He took a deep breath and tried to let his embarrassment drain away. *Do you agree with them?*

I believe, Eragon, that you are full of love and that you are looking for one who will reciprocate your affection. No shame exists in that.

He struggled to digest her words, then finally said, *Will you be back soon?*

I'm on my way now.

Returning his attention to his surroundings, Eragon found that both the elf and the dwarf were watching him. "I understand your concern … and I'd still like my question answered."

Lifaen hesitated briefly. "Arya is quite young. She was born a year before the destruction of the Riders."

A hundred! Though he had expected such a figure, Eragon was still shocked. He concealed it behind a blank face, thinking, *She could have great-grandchildren older than me!* He brooded on the subject for several minutes and then, to distract himself, said, "You mentioned that humans discovered Alagaësia eight hundred years ago. Yet Brom said that we arrived three centuries after the Riders were formed, which was thousands of years ago."

"Two thousand, seven hundred, and four years, by our reckoning," declared Orik. "Brom was right, if you consider a single ship with twenty warriors the 'arrival' of humans in Alagaësia. They landed in the south, where Surda is now. We met while they were exploring and exchanged gifts, but then they departed and we didn't see another human for almost two millennia, or until King Palancar arrived with a fleet in tow. The humans had completely forgotten us by then, except for vague stories about hairy men-of-the-mountains that preyed on children in the night. Bah!"

“Do you know where Palancar came from?” asked Eragon.

Orik frowned and gnawed the tip of his mustache, then shook his head. “Our histories only say that his homeland was far to the south, beyond the Beors, and that his exodus was the result of war and famine.”

Excited by an idea, Eragon blurted, “So there might be countries elsewhere that could help us against Galbatorix.”

“Possibly,” said Orik. “But they would be difficult to find, even on dragonback, and I doubt that you’d speak the same language. Who would want to help us, though? The Varden have little to offer another country, and it’s hard enough to get an army from Farthen Dûr to Urû’baen, much less bring forces from hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away.”

“We could not spare you anyway,” said Lifaen to Eragon.

“I still—” Eragon broke off as Saphira soared over the river, followed by a furious crowd of sparrows and blackbirds intent on driving her away from their nests. At the same time, a chorus of squeaks and chatters burst from the armies of squirrels hidden among the branches.

Lifaen beamed and cried, “Isn’t she glorious? See how her scales catch the light! No treasure in the world can match this sight.” Similar exclamations floated across the river from Narí.

“Bloody unbearable, that’s what it is,” muttered Orik into his beard. Eragon hid a smile, though he agreed with the dwarf. The elves never seemed to tire of praising Saphira.

Nothing’s wrong with a few compliments, said Saphira. She landed with a gigantic splash and submerged her head to escape a diving sparrow.

Of course not, said Eragon.

Saphira eyed him from underwater. *Was that sarcasm?*

He chuckled and let it pass. Glancing at the other boat, Eragon watched Arya paddle, her back perfectly straight, her face inscrutable as she floated through webs of mottled light beneath the mossy trees. She seemed so dark and somber, it made him want to comfort her. “Lifaen,” he asked softly so that Orik would not hear, “why is Arya so … unhappy? You and—”

Lifaen’s shoulders stiffened underneath his russet tunic and he whispered, so low that Eragon could barely hear, “We are honored to serve Arya Dröttningu. She has suffered more than you can imagine for our people. We celebrate out of joy for what she has achieved with Saphira, and we weep in our dreams for her sacrifice … and her loss. Her sorrows are her own, though, and I cannot reveal them without her permission.”

As Eragon sat by their nightly campfire, petting a swatch of moss that felt like rabbit fur, he heard a commotion deeper in the forest. Exchanging glances with Saphira and Orik, he crept toward the sound, drawing Zar'roc.

Eragon stopped at the lip of a small ravine and looked across to the other side, where a gyrfalcon with a broken wing thrashed in a bed of snowberries. The raptor froze when it saw him, then opened its beak and uttered a piercing screech.

What a terrible fate, to be unable to fly, said Saphira.

When Arya arrived, she eyed the gyrfalcon, then strung her bow and, with unerring aim, shot it through the breast. At first Eragon thought that she had done it for food, but she made no move to retrieve either the bird or her arrow.

"Why?" he asked.

With a hard expression, Arya unstrung her bow. "It was too injured for me to heal and would have died tonight or tomorrow. Such is the nature of things. I saved it hours of suffering."

Saphira lowered her head and touched Arya on the shoulder with her snout, then returned to their camp, her tail scraping bark off the trees. As Eragon started to follow, he felt Orik tug his sleeve and bent down to hear the dwarf say in an undertone, "Never ask an elf for help; they might decide that you're better off dead, eh?"

THE DAGSHELGR INVOCATION

Though he was tired from the previous day, Eragon forced himself to rise before dawn in an attempt to catch one of the elves asleep. It had become a game with him to discover when the elves got up—or if they slept at all—as he had yet to see any of them with their eyes closed. Today was no exception.

"Good morning," said Narí and Lifaen from above him. Eragon craned back his head and saw that they each stood on the bough of a pine tree, over fifty feet in the air. Jumping from branch to branch with feline grace, the elves dropped to the ground alongside him.

"We have been keeping watch," explained Lifaen.

"For what?"

Arya stepped around a tree and said, "For my fears. Du Weldenvarden has many mysteries and dangers, especially for a Rider. We have lived here for thousands of years, and old spells still linger in unexpected places; magic permeates the air, the water, and the earth. In places it has affected the animals. Sometimes strange creatures are found roaming the forest, and not all of them friendly."

"Are they—" Eragon stopped as his gedwëy ignasia tingled. The silver hammer on the necklace Gannel had given him grew hot on his chest, and he felt the amulet's spell draw upon his strength.

Someone was trying to scry him.

Is it Galbatorix? he wondered, frightened. He clutched the necklace and pulled it out of his tunic, ready to yank it off should he become too weak. From the other side of the camp, Saphira rushed to his side, bolstering him with her own reserves of energy.

A moment later, the heat leached out of the hammer, leaving it cold against Eragon's skin. He bounced it on his palm, then tucked it back under his clothes, whereupon Saphira said, *Our enemies are searching for us.*

Enemies? Could not it be someone in Du Vrangr Gata?

I think Hrothgar would have told Nasuada that he ordered Gannel to enchant you this necklace.… She might have even come up with the idea in the first place.

Arya frowned when Eragon explained what had occurred. "This makes it all the more important we reach Ellesméra quickly so your training can resume. Events in Alagaësia move apace, and I fear you won't have adequate time for your studies."

Eragon wanted to discuss it further, but lost the opportunity in the rush to leave camp. Once the canoes were loaded and the fire tamped out, they continued to forge up the Gaena River.

They had only been on the water for an hour when Eragon noticed that the river was growing wider and deeper. A few minutes later, they came upon a waterfall that filled Du Weldenvarden with its throbbing rumble. The cataract was about a hundred feet tall, and streamed down a stone face with an overhang that made it impossible to climb. "How do we get past that?" He could already feel cool spray on his face.

Lifaen pointed at the left shore, some distance from the falls, where a trail had been worn up the steep ridge. "We have to portage our canoes and supplies for half a league before the river clears."

The five of them untied the bundles wedged between the seats of the canoes and divided the supplies into piles that they stuffed into their packs. "Ugh," said Eragon, hefting his load. It was twice as heavy as what he usually carried when traveling on foot.

I could fly it upstream for you … all of it, offered Saphira, crawling onto the muddy bank and shaking herself dry.

When Eragon repeated her suggestion, Lifaen looked horrified. "We would never dream of using a dragon as a beast of burden. It would dishonor you, Saphira—and Eragon as Shur'tugal—and it would shame our hospitality."

Saphira snorted, and a plume of flame erupted from her nostrils, vaporizing the surface of the river and creating a cloud of steam. *This is nonsense*. Reaching past Eragon with one scaly leg, she hooked her talons through the packs' shoulder straps, then took off over their heads. *Catch me if you can!*

A peal of clear laughter broke the silence, like the trill of a mockingbird. Amazed, Eragon turned and looked at Arya. It was the first time he had ever heard her laugh; he loved the sound. She smiled at Lifaen. "You have much to learn if you presume to tell a dragon what she may or may not do."

"But the dishonor—"

"It is no dishonor if Saphira does it of her free will," asserted Arya. "Now, let us go before we waste any more time."

Hoping that the strain would not trigger the pain in his back, Eragon picked up his canoe with Lifaen and fit it over his shoulders. He was forced to rely on the elf to guide him along the trail, as he could only see the ground beneath his feet.

An hour later, they had topped the ridge and hiked beyond the dangerous white water to where the Gaena River was once again calm and glassy. Waiting for them was Saphira, who was busy catching fish in the shallows, jabbing her triangular head into the water like a

heron.

Arya called her over and said to both her and Eragon, “Beyond the next curve lies Ardwen Lake and, upon its western shore, Sílthrim, one of our greatest cities. Past that, a vast expanse of forest still separates us from Ellesméra. We will encounter many elves close to Sílthrim. However, I don’t want either of you to be seen until we speak with Queen Islanzadí.”

Why? asked Saphira, echoing Eragon’s thoughts.

In her musical accent, Arya answered: “Your presence represents a great and terrible change for our kingdom, and such shifts are dangerous unless handled with care. The queen must be the first to meet with you. Only she has the authority and wisdom to oversee this transition.”

“You speak highly of her,” commented Eragon.

At his words, Narí and Lifaen stopped and watched Arya with guarded eyes. Her face went blank, then she drew herself up proudly.

“She has led us well.… Eragon, I know you carry a hooded cape from Tronjheim. Until we are free of possible observers, will you wear it and keep your head covered so that none can see your rounded ears and know that you are human?” He nodded. “And, Saphira, you must hide during the day and catch up with us at night. Ajihad told me that is what you did in the Empire.”

And I hated every moment of it, she growled.

“It’s only for today and tomorrow. After that we will be far enough away from Sílthrim that we won’t have to worry about encountering anyone of consequence,” promised Arya.

Saphira turned her azure eyes on Eragon. *When we escaped the Empire, I swore that I would always stay close enough to protect you. Every time I leave, bad things happen: Yazuac, Daret, Dras-Leona, the slavers.*

Not in Teirm.

You know what I mean! I’m especially loath to leave since you can’t defend yourself with your crippled back.

I trust that Arya and the others will keep me safe. Don’t you?

Saphira hesitated. *I trust Arya.* She twisted away and padded up the riverbank, sat for a minute, then returned. *Very well.* She broadcast her acceptance to Arya, adding, *But I won’t wait any longer than tomorrow night, even if you’re in the middle of Sílthrim at the time.*

“I understand,” said Arya. “You will still have to be careful when flying after dark, as elves can see clearly on all but the blackest nights. If you are sighted by chance, you could be attacked by magic.”

Wonderful, commented Saphira.

While Orik and the elves repacked the boats, Eragon and Saphira explored the dim forest, searching for a suitable hiding place. They

settled on a dry hollow rimmed by crumbling rocks and blanketed with a bed of pine needles that were pleasantly soft underfoot. Saphira curled up on the ground and nodded her head. *Go now. I will be fine.*

Eragon hugged her neck—careful to avoid her sharp spines—and then reluctantly departed, glancing backward. At the river, he donned his cape before they resumed their journey.

The air was motionless when Ardwen Lake came into view, and as a result, the vast mantle of water was smooth and flat, a perfect mirror for the trees and clouds. The illusion was so flawless, Eragon felt as if he were looking through a window at another world and that if they continued forward, the canoes would fall endlessly into the reflected sky. He shivered at the thought.

In the hazy distance, numerous white birch-bark boats darted like water striders along both shores, propelled to incredible speeds by the elves' strength. Eragon ducked his head and tugged on the edge of his hood to ensure that it covered his face.

His link with Saphira grew ever more tenuous the farther apart they became, until only a wisp of thought connected them. By evening he could no longer feel her presence, even if he strained his mind to its limits. All of a sudden, Du Weldenvarden seemed much more lonely and desolate.

As the gloom deepened, a cluster of white lights—placed at every conceivable height among the trees—sprang into existence a mile ahead. The sparks glowed with the silver radiance of the full moon, eerie and mysterious in the night.

"There lies Sílthrim," said Lifaen.

With a faint splash, a dark boat passed them from the opposite direction, accompanied by a murmur of "Kvetha Fricai" from the elf steering.

Arya brought her canoe alongside Eragon's. "We will stop here tonight."

They made camp a ways from Ardwen Lake, where the ground was dry enough to sleep on. The ferocious droves of mosquitoes forced Arya to cast a protective spell so that they could eat dinner in relative comfort.

Afterward, the five of them sat around the fire, staring at the gold flames. Eragon leaned his head against a tree and watched a meteor streak across the sky. His eyelids were about to sink shut when a woman's voice drifted through the woods from Sílthrim, a faint susurration that brushed the inside of his ear like a down feather. He frowned and straightened, trying to better hear the tenuous whisper.

Like a thread of smoke that thickens as a newborn fire blazes to life, so the voice rose in strength until the forest sighed with a teasing, twisting melody that leaped and fell with wild abandon. More voices

joined the unearthly song, embroidering the original theme with a hundred variations. The air itself seemed to shimmer with the fabric of the tempestuous music.

The fey strains sent jolts of elation and fear down Eragon's spine; they clouded his senses, drawing him into the velvet night. Seduced by the haunting notes, he jumped to his feet, ready to dash through the forest until he found the source of the voices, ready to dance among the trees and moss, anything so that he could join the elves' revels. But before he could move, Arya caught his arm and yanked him around to face her.

"Eragon! Clear your mind!" He struggled in a futile attempt to break her grip. "Eyddr eyreya onr!" Empty your ears! Everything fell silent then, as if he had gone deaf. He stopped fighting and looked around, wondering what had just occurred. On the other side of the fire, Lifaen and Narí wrestled noiselessly with Orik.

Eragon watched Arya's mouth move as she spoke, then sound returned to the world with a *pop*, though he could no longer hear the music. "What …?" he asked, dazed.

"Gerr'off me," growled Orik. Lifaen and Narí lifted their hands and backed away.

"Your pardon, Orik-vodhr," said Lifaen.

Arya gazed toward Sílthrim. "I miscounted the days; I didn't want to be anywhere near a city during Dagshelgr. Our saturnalias, our celebrations, are perilous for mortals. We sing in the ancient language, and the lyrics weave spells of passion and longing that are difficult to resist, even for us."

Narí stirred restlessly. "We should be at a grove."

"We should," agreed Arya, "but we will do our duty and wait."

Shaken, Eragon sat closer to the fire, wishing for Saphira; he was sure she could have protected his mind from the music's influence. "What is the point of Dagshelgr?" he asked.

Arya joined him on the ground, crossing her long legs. "It is to keep the forest healthy and fertile. Every spring we sing for the trees, we sing for the plants, and we sing for the animals. Without us, Du Weldenvarden would be half its size." As if to emphasize her point, birds, deer, squirrels—red and gray—striped badgers, foxes, rabbits, wolves, frogs, toads, tortoises, and every other nearby animal forsook their hiding and began to rush madly about with a cacophony of yelps and cries. "They are searching for mates," explained Arya. "All across Du Weldenvarden, in each of our cities, elves are singing this song. The more who participate, the stronger the spell, and the greater Du Weldenvarden will be this year."

Eragon snatched back his hand as a trio of hedgehogs trundled past his thigh. The entire forest yammered with noise. *I've stepped into*

fairyland, he thought, hugging himself.

Orik came around the fire and raised his voice above the clamor: "By my beard and my ax, I'll not be controlled against my will by magic. If it happens again, Arya, I swear on Helzvog's stone girdle that I'll return to Farthen Dûr and you will have the wrath of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum to deal with."

"It was not my intention for you to experience Dagshelgr," said Arya. "I apologize for my mistake. However, though I am shielding you from this spell, you cannot escape magic in Du Weldenvarden; it permeates everything."

"So long as it doesn't befoul my mind." Orik shook his head and fingered the haft of his ax while eyeing the shadowy beasts that lumbered in the gloom beyond the pool of firelight.

No one slept that night. Eragon and Orik remained awake because of the frightful din and the animals that kept crashing by their tents, the elves because they still listened to the song. Lifaen and Narí took to pacing in endless circles, while Arya stared toward Sílthrim with a hungry expression, her tawny skin drawn thin and taut over her cheekbones.

Four hours into the riot of sound and motion, Saphira dove out of the sky, her eyes sparkling with a queer aspect. She shivered and arched her neck, panting between her open jaws. *The forest*, she said, *is alive. And I am alive. My blood burns like never before. It burns as yours burns when you think of Arya. I … understand!*

Eragon put his hand on her shoulder, feeling the tremors that racked her frame; her sides vibrated as she hummed along with the music. She gripped the ground with her ivory claws, her muscles coiled and clenched in a supreme effort to remain motionless. The tip of her tail twitched like she was about to pounce.

Arya stood and joined Eragon on the opposite side of Saphira. The elf also put a hand on Saphira's shoulder, and the three of them faced the darkness, united into a living chain.

When dawn broke, the first thing Eragon noticed was that all the trees now had buds of bright green needles at the ends of their branches. He bent and examined the snowberries at his feet and found that every plant, large or small, had acquired new growth during the night. The forest vibrated with the ripeness of its colors; everything was lush and fresh and clean. The air smelled like it had just rained.

Saphira shook herself beside Eragon and said, *The fever has passed; I am myself again. Such things I felt … It was as if the world were being born anew and I was helping to create it with the fire in my limbs.*

How are you? On the inside, I mean.

I will need some time to understand what I experienced.

Since the music had ceased, Arya removed her spell from Eragon and Orik. She said, "Lifaen. Narí. Go to Sílthrim and get horses for the five of us. We cannot walk all the way from here to Ellesméra. Also, alert Captain Damítha that Ceris requires reinforcements."

Narí bowed. "And what shall we say when she asks why we have deserted our post?"

"Tell her that that which she once hoped for—and feared—has occurred; the wyrm has bitten its own tail. She will understand."

The two elves departed for Sílthrim after the boats were emptied of supplies. Three hours later, Eragon heard a stick snap and looked up to see them returning through the forest on proud white stallions, leading four other identical horses. The magnificent beasts moved among the trees with uncanny stealth, their coats shimmering in the emerald twilight. None of them wore saddles or harnesses.

"Blöthr, blöthr," murmured Lifaen, and his steed halted, pawing the ground with its dark hooves.

"Are all your horses as noble as these?" asked Eragon. He cautiously approached one, amazed by its beauty. The animals were only a few inches taller than ponies, which made it easy for them to navigate among the closely placed trunks. They did not seem frightened by Saphira.

"Not all," laughed Narí, tossing his silver hair, "but most. We have bred them for many centuries."

"How am I supposed to ride?"

Arya said, "An elf horse responds instantly to commands in the ancient language; tell it where you wish to go and it will take you. However, do not mistreat them with blows or harsh words, for they are not our slaves, but our friends and partners. They bear you only so long as they consent to; it is a great privilege to ride one. I was only able to save Saphira's egg from Durza because our horses sensed that something was amiss and stopped us from riding into his ambush.… They won't let you fall unless you deliberately throw yourself off, and they are skilled in choosing the safest, quickest path through treacherous ground. The dwarves' Feldûnost are like that."

"Right you are," grunted Orik. "A Feldûnost can run you up a cliff and down without a single bruise. But how can we carry food and whatnot without saddles? I won't ride while wearing a full pack."

Lifaen tossed a pile of leather bags at Orik's feet and indicated the sixth horse. "Nor will you have to."

It took half an hour to arrange their supplies in the bags and heap them into a lumpy mound on the horse's back. Afterward, Narí told Eragon and Orik the words they could use to direct the horses: "*Gánga fram* to go forward, *blöthr* to stop, *hlaupa* if needs you must run, and

gánga aptr to go back. You can give more precise instructions if you know more of the ancient language." He led Eragon to a horse and said, "This is Folkvír. Hold out your hand."

Eragon did, and the stallion snorted, flaring his nostrils. Folkvír sniffed Eragon's palm, then touched it with his muzzle and allowed Eragon to stroke his thick neck. "Good," said Narí, appearing satisfied. The elf had Orik do the same with the next horse.

As Eragon mounted Folkvír, Saphira drew closer. He looked up at her, noting how troubled she still seemed from the night. *One more day*, he said.

Eragon … She paused. *I thought of something while I was under the influence of the elves' spell, something that I have always considered of little consequence, but now looms within me like a mountain of black dread: Every creature, no matter how pure or monstrous, has a mate of their own kind. Yet I have none*. She shuddered and closed her eyes. *In this regard, I am alone*.

Her statements reminded Eragon that she was barely more than eight months old. On most occasions, her youth did not show—due to the influence of her hereditary instincts and memories—but, in this arena, she was even more inexperienced than he was with his feeble stabs at romance in Carvahall and Tronjheim. Pity welled inside Eragon, but he suppressed it before it could seep across their mental link. Saphira would have only contempt for the emotion: it could neither solve her problem nor make her feel better. Instead, he said, *Galbatorix still has two dragon eggs. During our first audience with Hrothgar, you mentioned that you would like to rescue them. If we can—*

Saphira snorted bitterly. *It could take years, and even if we did retrieve the eggs, I have no guarantee that they would hatch, nor that they would be male, nor that we would be fit mates. Fate has abandoned my race to extinction*. She lashed her tail with frustration, breaking a sapling in two. She seemed perilously close to tears.

What can I say? he asked, disturbed by her distress. *You can't give up hope. You still have a chance to find a mate, but you have to be patient. Even if Galbatorix's eggs don't work, dragons must exist elsewhere in the world, just like humans, elves, and Urgals do. The moment we are free of our obligations, I'll help you search for them. All right?*

All right, she sniffed. She craned back her head and released a puff of white smoke that dispersed among the branches overhead. *I should know better than to let my emotions get the best of me*.

Nonsense. You would have to be made of stone not to feel this way. It's perfectly normal.… But promise you won't dwell on it while you're alone.

She fixed one giant sapphire eye on him. *I won't.* He turned warm inside as he felt her gratitude for his reassurances and companionship. Leaning out from Folkvír, he put a hand on her rough cheek and held

it there for a moment. *Go on, little one*, she murmured. *I will see you later*.

Eragon hated to leave her in such a state. He reluctantly entered the forest with Orik and the elves, heading west toward the heart of Du Weldenvarden. After an hour spent pondering Saphira's plight, he mentioned it to Arya.

Faint lines creased Arya's forehead as she frowned. "It is one of Galbatorix's greatest crimes. I do not know if a solution exists, but we can hope. We must hope."

The Pinewood City

Eragon had been in Du Weldenvarden for so long that he had begun to long for clearings, fields, or even a mountain, instead of the endless tree trunks and meager underbrush. His flights with Saphira provided no respite as they only revealed hills of prickly green that rolled unbroken into the distance like a verdant sea.

Oftentimes, the branches were so thick overhead, it was impossible to tell from what direction the sun rose and set. That, combined with the repetitive scenery, made Eragon hopelessly lost, no matter how many times Arya or Lifaen troubled to show him the points of the compass. If not for the elves, he knew that he could wander in Du Weldenvarden for the rest of his life without ever finding his way free.

When it rained, the clouds and the forest canopy plunged them into profound darkness, as if they were entombed deep underground. The falling water would collect on the black pine needles above, then trickle through and pour a hundred feet or more down onto their heads, like a thousand little waterfalls. At such times, Arya would summon a glowing orb of green magic that floated over her right hand and provided the only light in the cavernous forest. They would stop and huddle underneath a tree until the storm abated, but even then water cached in the myriad branches would, at the slightest provocation, shower them with droplets for hours afterward.

As they rode deeper into the heart of Du Weldenvarden, the trees grew thicker and taller, as well as farther apart to accommodate the increased span of their branches. The trunks—bare brown shafts that towered up into the overarching ribbed ceiling, which was smudged and obscured by shadow—were over three hundred feet tall, higher than any tree in the Spine or the Beors. Eragon paced out the girth of one tree and measured it at seventy feet.

He mentioned this to Arya, and she nodded, saying, “It means that we are near Ellesméra.” She reached out and rested her hand lightly on the gnarled root beside her, as if touching, with consummate delicacy, the shoulder of a friend or lover. “These trees are among the oldest living creatures in Alagaësia. Elves have loved them since first we saw Du Weldenvarden, and we have done everything within our power to help them flourish.” A faint blade of light pierced the dusty emerald branches overhead and limned her arm and face with liquid gold, dazzlingly bright against the murky background. “We have

traveled far together, Eragon, but now you are about to enter my world. Tread softly, for the earth and air are heavy with memories and naught is as it seems.… Do not fly with Saphira today, as we have already triggered certain wards that protect Ellesméra. It would be unwise to stray from the path."

Eragon bowed his head and retreated to Saphira, who lay curled on a bed of moss, amusing herself by releasing plumes of smoke from her nostrils and watching them roil out of sight. Without preamble, she said, *There is plenty of room for me on the ground now. I will have no difficulty*.

Good. He mounted Folkvír and followed Orik and the elves farther into the empty, silent forest. Saphira crawled beside him. She and the white horses gleamed in the somber half light.

Eragon paused, overcome by the solemn beauty of his surroundings. Everything had a feeling of wintry age, as if nothing had changed under the thatched needles for a thousand years and nothing ever would; time itself seemed to have fallen into a slumber from which it would never wake.

In late afternoon, the gloom lifted to reveal an elf standing before them, sheathed in a brilliant ray of light that slanted down from the ceiling. He was garbed in flowing robes, with a circlet of silver upon his brow. His face was old, noble, and serene.

"Eragon," murmured Arya. "Show him your palm and your ring."

Baring his right hand, Eragon raised it so that first Brom's ring and then the gedwëy ignasia was visible. The elf smiled, closed his eyes, and spread his arms in a gesture of welcome. He held the posture.

"The way is clear," said Arya. At a soft command, her steed moved forward. They rode around the elf—like water parting at the base of a weathered boulder—and when they had all passed, he straightened, clasped his hands, and vanished as the light that illuminated him ceased to exist.

Who is he? asked Saphira.

Arya said, "He is Gilderien the Wise, Prince of House Miolandra, wielder of the White Flame of Vándil, and guardian of Ellesméra since the days of Du Fyrn Skulblaka, our war with the dragons. None may enter the city unless he permits it."

A quarter of a mile beyond, the forest thinned and breaks appeared within the canopy, allowing planks of mottled sunlight to bar the way. Then they passed underneath two burled trees that leaned against each other and stopped at the edge of an empty glade.

The ground was strewn with dense patches of flowers. From pink roses to bluebells and lilies, spring's fleeting treasure was heaped about like piles of rubies, sapphires, and opals. Their intoxicating aromas attracted hordes of bumblebees. To the right, a stream

chuckled behind a row of bushes, while a pair of squirrels chased each other around a rock.

At first it looked to Eragon like a place where deer might bed for the night. But as he continued to stare, he began to pick out paths hidden among the brush and trees; soft warm light where normally there would be auburn shadows; an odd pattern in the shapes of the twigs and branches and flowers, so subtle that it nearly escaped detection—clues that what he saw was not entirely natural. He blinked, and his vision suddenly shifted as if a lens had been placed over his eyes, resolving everything into recognizable shapes. Those were paths, aye. And those were flowers, aye. But what he had taken to be clusters of lumpy, twisted trees were in fact graceful buildings that grew directly out of the pines.

One tree bulged at the base to form a two-story house before sinking its roots into the loam. Both stories were hexagonal, although the upper level was half as small as the first, which gave the house a tiered appearance. The roofs and walls were made of webbed sheets of wood draped over six thick ridges. Moss and yellow lichen bearded the eaves and hung over jeweled windows set into each side. The front door was a mysterious black silhouette recessed under an archway wrought with symbols.

Another house was nestled between three pines, which were joined to it through a series of curved branches. Reinforced by those flying buttresses, the house rose five levels, light and airy. Beside it sat a bower woven out of willow and dogwood and hung with flameless lanterns disguised as galls.

Each unique building enhanced and complemented its surroundings, blending seamlessly with the rest of the forest until it was impossible to tell where artifice ended and nature resumed. The two were in perfect balance. Instead of mastering their environment, the elves had chosen to accept the world as it was and adapt themselves to it.

The inhabitants of Ellesméra eventually revealed themselves as a flicker of movement at the fringe of Eragon's sight, no more than needles stirring in the breeze. Then he caught glimpses of hands, a pale face, a sandaled foot, an upraised arm. One by one, the wary elves stepped into view, their almond eyes fixed upon Saphira, Arya, and Eragon.

The women wore their hair unbound. It rippled down their backs in waves of silver and sable braided with fresh blossoms, like a garden waterfall. They all possessed a delicate, ethereal beauty that belied their unbreakable strength; to Eragon, they seemed flawless. The men were just as striking, with high cheekbones, finely sculpted noses, and heavy eyelids. Both sexes were garbed in rustic tunics of green and brown, fringed with dusky colors of orange, russet, and gold.

The Fair Folk indeed, thought Eragon. He touched his lips in greeting.

As one, the elves bowed from the waist. Then they smiled and laughed with unrestrained happiness. From within their midst, a woman sang:

Gala O Wyrda brunhvitr,
Abr Berundal vandr-fódhr,
Burthro laufsblädar ekar undir,
Eom kona dauthleikr …

Eragon clapped his hands over his ears, fearing that the melody was a spell like the one he had heard at Sílthrim, but Arya shook her head and lifted his hands. “It is not magic.” Then she spoke to her horse, saying, “Gánga.” The stallion nickered and trotted away. “Release your steeds as well. We have no further need of them and they deserve to rest in our stables.”

The song waxed stronger as Arya proceeded along a cobblestone path set with bits of green tourmaline, which looped among the hollyhocks and the houses and the trees before finally crossing a stream. The elves danced around their party as they walked, flitting here and there as the fancy struck them, laughing, and occasionally leaping up onto a branch to run over their heads. They praised Saphira with names like “Longclaws” and “Daughter of Air and Fire” and “Strong One.”

Eragon smiled, delighted and enchanted. *I could live here*, he thought with a sense of peace. Tucked away in Du Weldenvarden, as much outdoors as in, safe from the rest of the world … Yes, he liked Ellesméra very much indeed, more than any of the dwarf cities. He pointed to a dwelling situated within a pine tree and asked Arya, “How is that done?”

“We sing to the forest in the old tongue and give it our strength to grow in the shape that we desire. All our buildings and tools are made in that manner.”

The path ended at a net of roots that formed steps, like bare pools of earth. They climbed to a door embedded within a wall of saplings. Eragon’s heart quickened as the door swung open, seemingly of its own accord, and revealed a hall of trees. Hundreds of branches melded together to form the honeycombed ceiling. Below, twelve chairs were arrayed along each wall.

In them reposed four-and-twenty elf lords and ladies.

Wise and handsome were they, with smooth faces unmarked by age and keen eyes that gleamed with excitement. They leaned forward,

gripping the arms of their chairs, and stared at Eragon's group with open wonder and hope. Unlike the other elves, they had swords belted at their waists—hilts studded with beryls and garnets—and circlets that adorned their brows.

And at the head of the assembly stood a white pavilion that sheltered a throne of knotted roots. Queen Islanzadí sat upon it. She was as beautiful as an autumn sunset, proud and imperious, with two dark eyebrows slanted like upraised wings, lips as bright and red as holly berries, and midnight hair bound under a diamond diadem. Her tunic was crimson. Round her hips hung a girdle of braided gold. And clasped at the hollow of her neck was a velvet cloak that fell to the ground in languid folds. Despite her imposing countenance, the queen seemed fragile, as if she concealed a great pain.

By her left hand was a curved rod with a chased crosspiece. A brilliant-white raven perched on it, shuffling impatiently from foot to foot. He cocked his head and surveyed Eragon with uncanny intelligence, then gave a long, low croak and shrieked, *"Wyrda!"* Eragon shivered from the force of that single cracked word.

The door closed behind the six of them as they entered the hall and approached the queen. Arya knelt on the moss-covered ground and bowed first, then Eragon, Orik, Lifaen, and Narí. Even Saphira, who had never bowed to anyone, not even Ajihad or Hrothgar, lowered her head.

Islanzadí stood and descended from the throne, her cloak trailing behind her. She stopped before Arya, placed trembling hands on her shoulders, and said in a rich vibrato, "Rise." Arya did, and the queen scrutinized her face with increasing intensity, until it seemed as if she were trying to decipher an obscure text.

At last Islanzadí cried out and embraced Arya, saying, "O my daughter, I have wronged you!"

Queen Islanzadí

Eragon knelt before the queen of the elves and her councilors in a fantastic room made from the boles of living trees in a near-mythic land, and the only thing that filled his mind was shock. *Arya is a princess!* It was fitting in a way—she had always possessed an air of command—but he bitterly regretted the fact, for it placed another barrier between them when he would have torn them all away. The knowledge filled his mouth with the taste of ashes. He remembered Angela's prophecy that he would love one of noble birth … and her warning that she could not see if it would end for good or for ill.

He could feel Saphira's own surprise, then her amusement. She said, *It appears that we have been traveling in the presence of royalty without knowing it.*

Why didn't she tell us?

Perhaps it would have placed her in greater danger.

"Islanzadí Dröttning," said Arya formally.

The queen withdrew as if she had been stung and then repeated in the ancient language, "O my daughter, I have wronged you." She covered her face. "Ever since you disappeared, I've barely slept or eaten. I was haunted by your fate, and feared that I would never see you again. Banning you from my presence was the greatest mistake I have ever made.… Can you forgive me?"

The gathered elves stirred with amazement.

Arya's response was long in coming, but at last she said, "For seventy years, I have lived and loved, fought and killed without ever speaking to you, my mother. Our lives are long, but even so, that is no small span."

Islanzadí drew herself upright, lifting her chin. A tremor ran her length. "I cannot undo the past, Arya, no matter how much I might desire to."

"And I cannot forget what I endured."

"Nor should you." Islanzadí clasped her daughter's hands. "Arya, I love you. You are my only family. Go if you must, but unless you wish to renounce me, I would be reconciled with you."

For a terrible moment, it seemed as if Arya would not answer, or worse, would reject the offer. Eragon saw her hesitate and quickly look at her audience. Then she lowered her eyes and said, "No, Mother. I could not leave." Islanzadí smiled uncertainly and embraced

her daughter again. This time Arya returned the gesture, and smiles broke out among the assembled elves.

The white raven hopped on his stand, cackling, “And on the door was graven evermore, what now became the family lore, *Let us never do but to adore!*”

“Hush, Blagden,” said Islanzadí to the raven. “Keep your doggerel to yourself.” Breaking free, the queen turned to Eragon and Saphira. “You must excuse me for being discourteous and ignoring you, our most important guests.”

Eragon touched his lips and then twisted his right hand over his sternum, as Arya had taught him. “Islanzadí Dröttning. Atra esterní ono thelduin.” He had no doubt that he was supposed to speak first.

Islanzadí’s dark eyes widened. “Atra du evarínya ono varda.”

“Un atra mor’ranr lífa unin hjarta onr,” replied Eragon, completing the ritual. He could tell that the elves were caught off guard by his knowledge of their customs. In his mind, he listened as Saphira repeated his greeting to the queen.

When she finished, Islanzadí asked, “Dragon, what is your name?”

Saphira.

A flash of recognition appeared in the queen’s expression, but she made no comment on it. “Welcome to Ellesméra, Saphira. And yours, Rider?”

“Eragon Shadeslayer, Your Majesty.” This time an audible stir rippled among the elves seated behind them; even Islanzadí appeared startled.

“You carry a powerful name,” she said softly, “one that we rarely bestow upon our children.… Welcome to Ellesméra, Eragon Shadeslayer. We have waited long for you.” She moved on to Orik, greeted him, then returned to her throne and draped her velvet cloak over her arm. “I assume by your presence here, Eragon, so soon after Saphira’s egg was captured, and by the ring on your hand and the sword on your hip, that Brom is dead and that your training with him was incomplete. I wish to hear your full story, including how Brom fell and how you came to meet my daughter, or how she met you, as it may be. Then I will hear of your mission here, dwarf, and of your adventures, Arya, since your ambush in Du Weldenvarden.”

Eragon had narrated his experiences before, so he had no trouble reiterating them now for the queen. The few occasions where his memory faltered, Saphira was able to provide an accurate description of events. In several places, he simply left the telling to her. When they finished, Eragon retrieved Nasuada’s scroll from his pack and presented it to Islanzadí.

She took the roll of parchment, broke the red wax seal, and, upon completing the missive, sighed and briefly closed her eyes. “I see now

the true depth of my folly. My grief would have ended so much sooner if I had not withdrawn our warriors and ignored Ajihad's messengers after learning that Arya had been ambushed. I should have never blamed the Varden for her death. For one so old, I am still far too foolish.…"

A long silence followed, as no one dared to agree or disagree. Summoning his courage, Eragon said, "Since Arya has returned alive, will you agree to help the Varden, like before? Nasuada cannot succeed otherwise, and I am pledged to her cause."

"My quarrel with the Varden is as dust in the wind," said Islanzadí. "Fear not; we will assist them as we once did, and more, because of you and their victory over the Urgals." She leaned forward on one arm. "Will you give me Brom's ring, Eragon?" Without hesitation, he pulled it off his finger and offered it to the queen, who plucked it from his palm with her slim fingers. "You should not have worn this, Eragon, as it was not meant for you. However, because of the aid you have rendered the Varden and my family, I now name you Elf Friend and bestow this ring, Aren, upon you, so that all elves, wherever you go, will know that you are to be trusted and helped."

Eragon thanked her and returned the ring to his finger, acutely aware of the queen's gaze, which remained upon him with disturbing perception, studying and analyzing. He felt as if she knew everything that he might say or do. She said, "Such tidings as yours, we have not heard the like of in Du Weldenvarden for many a year. We are accustomed to a slower way of life here than the rest of Alagaësia, and it troubles me that so much could occur so swiftly without word of it reaching my ear."

"And what of my training?" Eragon snatched a furtive glance at the seated elves, wondering if any of them could be Togira Ikonoka, the being who had reached into his mind and freed him of Durza's foul influence after the battle in Farthen Dûr—and who had also encouraged Eragon to travel to Ellesméra.

"It will begin in the fullness of time. Yet I fear that instructing you is futile so long as your infirmity persists. Unless you can overcome the Shade's magic, you will be reduced to no more than a figurehead. You may still be useful, but only as a shadow of the hope that we have nurtured for over a century." Islanzadí spoke without reproach, yet her words struck Eragon like hammer blows. He knew that she was right. "Your situation is not your fault, and it pains me to voice such things, but you must understand the gravity of your disability.… I am sorry."

Then Islanzadí addressed Orik: "It has been long since one of your race entered our halls, dwarf. Eragon-finiarel has explained your presence, but do you have aught to add?"

“Only royal greetings from my king, Hrothgar, and a plea, now unneeded, for you to resume contact with the Varden. Beyond that, I am here to see that the pact that Brom forged between you and the humans is honored.”

“We keep our promises whether we utter them in this language or in the ancient language. I accept Hrothgar’s greetings and return them in kind.” Finally, as Eragon was sure she had longed to do since they first arrived, Islanzadí looked at Arya and asked, “Now, daughter, what befell you?”

Arya began to speak in a slow monotone, first of her capture and then of her long imprisonment and torture in Gil’ead. Saphira and Eragon had deliberately avoided the details of her abuse, but Arya herself seemed to have no difficulty recounting what she had been subjected to. Her emotionless descriptions roused the same rage within Eragon as when he first saw her wounds. The elves remained completely silent throughout Arya’s tale, although they gripped their swords and their faces hardened into razor lines of cold anger. A single tear rolled down Islanzadí’s cheek.

Afterward, a lithe elf lord paced along the mossy sward between the chairs. “I know that I speak for us all, Arya Dröttningu, when I say that my heart burns with sorrow for your ordeal. It is a crime beyond apology, mitigation, or reparation, and Galbatorix must be punished for it. Also, we are in your debt for keeping the locations of our cities hidden from the Shade. Few of us could have withstood him for so long.”

“Thank you, Däthedr-vor.”

Now Islanzadí spoke, and her voice rang like a bell among the trees. “Enough. Our guests wait tired on their feet, and we have spoken of evil things for far too long. I will not have this occasion marred by lingering on past injuries.” A glorious smile brightened her expression. “My daughter has returned, a dragon and her Rider have appeared, and I will see us celebrate in the proper fashion!” She stood, tall and magnificent in her crimson tunic, and clapped her hands. At the sound, the chairs and pavilion were showered with hundreds of lilies and roses that appeared twenty feet above their heads and drifted down like colorful snowflakes, suffusing the air with their heady fragrance.

She didn’t use the ancient language, observed Eragon.

He noticed that, while everyone was occupied by the flowers, Islanzadí touched Arya gently on the shoulder and murmured, almost too softly to hear, “You never would have suffered so if you had taken my counsel. I was right to oppose your decision to accept the yawë.”

“It was my decision to make.”

The queen paused, then nodded and extended her arm. “Blagden.”

With a flutter of wings, the raven flew from his perch and landed on her left shoulder. The entire assembly bowed as Islanzadí proceeded to the end of the hall and threw open the door to the hundreds of elves outside, whereupon she made a brief declaration in the ancient language that Eragon did not understand. The elves burst into cheers and began to rush about.

"What did she say?" whispered Eragon to Narí.

Narí smiled. "To break open our finest casks and light the cookfires, for tonight shall be a night of feast and song. Come!" He grabbed Eragon's hand and pulled him after the queen as she threaded her way between the shaggy pines and through banks of cool ferns. During their time indoors, the sun had dropped low in the sky, drenching the forest with an amber light that clung to the trees and plants like a layer of glistering oil.

You do realize, don't you, said Saphira, *that the king Lifaen mentioned, Evandar, must be Arya's father?*

Eragon almost stumbled. *You're right.… And that means he was killed by either Galbatorix or the Forsworn.*

Circles within circles.

They stopped on the crest of a small hill, where a team of elves had set out a long trestle table and chairs. All around them, the forest hummed with activity. As evening approached, the cheery glow of fires appeared scattered throughout Ellesméra, including a bonfire near the table.

Someone handed Eragon a goblet made of the same odd wood that he had noticed in Ceris. He drank the cup's clear liqueur and gasped as it blazed down his throat. It tasted like mulled cider mixed with mead. The potion made the tips of his fingers and ears tingle and gave him a marvelous sense of clarity. "What is this?" he asked Narí.

Narí laughed. "Faelnirv? We distill it from crushed elderberries and spun moonbeams. If he needs must, a strong man can travel for three days on naught else."

Saphira, you have to taste this. She sniffed the goblet, then opened her mouth and allowed him to pour the rest of the faelnirv down her throat. Her eyes widened and her tail twitched.

Now that's a treat! Is there more?

Before Eragon could reply, Orik stomped over to them. "Daughter to the queen," he grumbled, shaking his head. "I wish that I could tell Hrothgar and Nasuada. They'd want to know."

Islanzadí seated herself in a high-backed chair and clapped her hands once again. From within the city came a quartet of elves bearing musical instruments. Two had harps of cherrywood, the third a set of reed pipes, and the fourth nothing but her voice, which she immediately put to use with a playful song that danced about their

ears.

Eragon caught only every third word or so, but what he did understand made him grin. It was the story of a stag who could not drink at a pond because a magpie kept harassing him.

As Eragon listened, his gaze wandered and alighted upon a small girl prowling behind the queen. When he looked again, he saw that her shaggy hair was not silver, like many of the elves, but bleached white with age, and that her face was creased and lined like a dry, withered apple. She was no elf, nor dwarf, nor—Eragon felt—even human. She smiled at him, and he glimpsed rows of sharp teeth.

When the singer finished, and the pipes and lutes filled the silence, Eragon found himself approached by scores of elves who wished to meet him and—more importantly, he sensed—Saphira.

The elves presented themselves by bowing softly and touching their lips with their first and middle fingers, to which Eragon responded in kind, along with endless repetitions of their greeting in the ancient language. They plied Eragon with polite questions about his exploits, but they reserved the bulk of their conversation for Saphira.

At first Eragon was content to let Saphira talk, since this was the first place where anyone was interested in having a discussion just with her. But he soon grew annoyed at being ignored; he had become used to having people listen when he spoke. He grinned ruefully, dismayed that he had come to rely on people's attention so much since he had joined the Varden, and forced himself to relax and enjoy the celebration.

Before long the scent of food permeated the glade and elves appeared carrying platters piled with delicacies. Aside from loaves of warm bread and stacks of small, round honeycakes, the dishes were made entirely of fruit, vegetables, and berries. The berries predominated; they were in everything from blueberry soup to raspberry sauce to thimbleberry jelly. A bowl of sliced apples dripped with syrup and sprinkled with wild strawberries sat beside a mushroom pie stuffed with spinach, thyme, and currants.

No meat was to be found, not even fish or fowl, which still puzzled Eragon. In Carvahall and elsewhere in the Empire, meat was a symbol of status and luxury. The more gold you had, the more often you could afford steak and veal. Even the minor nobility ate meat with every meal. To do otherwise would indicate a deficit in their coffers. And yet the elves did not subscribe to this philosophy, despite their obvious wealth and the ease with which they could hunt with magic.

The elves rushed to the table with an enthusiasm that surprised Eragon. Soon all were seated: Islanzadí at the head of the table with Blagden, the raven; Däthedr to her left; Arya and Eragon by her right hand; Orik across from them; and then all the rest of the elves,

including Narí and Lifaen. No chair was at the far end of the table, only a huge carved plate for Saphira.

As the meal progressed, everything dissolved around Eragon into a blur of talk and mirth. He was so caught up in the festivities, he lost track of time, aware of only the laughter and the foreign words swirling over his head and the warm glow left in his stomach by the faelnirv. The elusive harp music sighed and whispered at the edges of his hearing and sent shivers of excitement down his side. Occasionally, he found himself distracted by the lazy slit-eyed stare of the woman-child, which she kept focused on him with single-minded intensity, even when eating.

During a lull in the conversation, Eragon turned toward Arya, who had uttered no more than a dozen words. He said nothing, only looked and wondered who she really was.

Arya stirred. "Not even Ajihad knew."

"What?"

"Outside of Du Weldenvarden, I told no one of my identity. Brom was aware of it—he first met me here—but he kept it a secret at my request."

Eragon wondered if she was explaining to him out of a sense of duty or because she felt guilty for deceiving him and Saphira. "Brom once said that what elves *didn't* say was often more important that what they did."

"He understood us well."

"Why, though? Did it matter if anyone knew?"

This time Arya hesitated. "When I left Ellesméra, I had no desire to be reminded of my position. Nor did it seem relevant to my task with the Varden and dwarves. It had nothing to do with who I became … with who I am." She glanced at the queen.

"You could have told Saphira and me."

Arya seemed to bridle at the reproach in his voice. "I had no reason to suspect that my standing with Islanzadí had improved, and telling you that would have changed nothing. My thoughts are my own, Eragon." He flushed at her implied meaning: Why should *she*—who was a diplomat, a princess, an elf, and older than both his father and grandfather, whoever they were—confide in him, a sixteen-year-old human?

"At least," he muttered, "you made up with your mother."

She smiled oddly. "Did I have a choice?"

At that moment, Blagden jumped from Islanzadí's shoulder and strutted down the middle of the table, bobbing his head left and right in a mocking bow. He stopped before Saphira, uttered a hoarse cough, and then croaked:

Dragons, like wagons,
Have tongues.
Dragons, like flagons,
Have necks.
But while two hold beer,
The other eats deer!

The elves froze with mortified expressions while they waited for Saphira's reaction. After a long silence, Saphira looked up from her quince pie and released a puff of smoke that enveloped Blagden. *And little birds too*, she said, projecting her thoughts so that everyone could hear. The elves finally laughed as Blagden staggered back, cawing indignantly and flapping his wings to clear the air.

"I must apologize for Blagden's wretched verses," said Islanzadí. "He has ever had a saucy tongue, despite our attempts to tame it."

Apology accepted, said Saphira calmly, and returned to her pie.

"Where does he come from?" Eragon asked, eager to return to more cordial footing with Arya but also genuinely curious.

"Blagden," said Arya, "once saved my father's life. Evandar was fighting an Urgal when he stumbled and lost his sword. Before the Urgal could strike, a raven flew at him and pecked out his eyes. No one knows why the bird did it, but the distraction allowed Evandar to regain his balance and so win the battle. My father was always generous, so he thanked the raven by blessing him with spells for intelligence and long life. However, the magic had two effects that he did not foresee: Blagden lost all color in his feathers and he gained the ability to predict certain events."

"He can see into the future?" asked Eragon, startled.

"See? No. But perhaps he can sense what is to come. In any case, he always speaks in riddles, most of which are a fair bit of nonsense. Just remember that if Blagden ever comes to you and tells you something that is not a joke or a pun, you would do well to heed his words."

Once the meal had concluded, Islanzadí stood—causing a flurry of activity as everyone hastened to do likewise—and said, "It is late, I am tired, and I would return to my bower. Accompany me, Saphira and Eragon, and I will show you where you may sleep tonight." The queen motioned with one hand to Arya, then left the table. Arya followed.

As Eragon stepped around the table with Saphira, he paused by the woman-child, caught by her feral eyes. All the elements of her appearance, from her eyes to her shaggy hair to her white fangs, triggered Eragon's memory. "You're a werecat, aren't you?" She blinked once and then bared her teeth in a dangerous smile. "I met one of your kin, Solembum, in Teirm and in Farthen Dûr."

Her grin widened. "Aye. A good one he is. Humans bore me, but *he*

finds it amusing to travel with the witch Angela." Then her gaze switched to Saphira and she uttered a throaty half-growl, half-purr of appreciation.

What is your name? asked Saphira.

"Names be powerful things in the heart of Du Weldenvarden, dragon, yes they are. However … among the elves, I am known as The Watcher and as Quickpaw and as The Dream Dancer, but you may know me as Maud." She tossed her mane of stiff white bangs. "You'd better catch up with the queen, younglings; she does not take lightly to fools or laggards."

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Maud," said Eragon. He bowed, and Saphira inclined her head. Eragon glanced at Orik, wondering where the dwarf would be taken, and then pursued Islanzadí.

They overtook the queen just as she reached the base of a tree. The trunk was ridged by a delicate staircase that spiraled up to a series of globular rooms cupped and suspended in the tree's crown by a spray of branches.

Islanzadí lifted an elegant hand and pointed at the eyrie. "You needs must fly there, Saphira. Our stairs were not grown with dragons in mind." Then she spoke to Eragon: "This is where the leader of the Dragon Riders would dwell while in Ellesméra. I give it to you now, for you are the rightful heir to that title.… It is your inheritance." Before Eragon could thank her, the queen swept past and departed with Arya, who held his gaze for a long moment before vanishing deeper into the city.

Shall we see what accommodations they've provided us with? asked Saphira. She jumped into the air and sailed around the tree in a tight circle, balancing on one wing tip, perpendicular to the ground.

As Eragon took the first step, he saw that Islanzadí had spoken true; the stairs were one with the tree. The bark beneath his feet was smooth and flat from the many elves who had traversed it, but it was still part of the trunk, as were the twisting cobweb banisters by his side and the curved railing that slid under his right hand.

Because the stairs had been designed with the elves' strength in mind, they were steeper than Eragon was used to, and his calves and thighs soon began to burn. He was breathing so hard when he reached the top—after climbing through a trapdoor in the floor of one of the rooms—he had to put his hands on his knees and bend over to pant. Once recovered, he straightened and examined his surroundings.

He stood in a circular vestibule with a pedestal in the center, out of which spiraled a sculpture of two pale hands and forearms that twined around each other without touching. Three screen doors led from the vestibule—one to an austere dining room that might hold ten people at the most, one to a closet with an empty hollow in the floor that

Eragon could think of no discernible use for, and the last to a bedroom overlooking, and open to, the wide expanse of Du Weldenvarden.

Taking a lantern from its hook in the ceiling, Eragon entered the bedroom, creating a host of shadows that jumped and swirled like madcap dancers. A teardrop gap large enough for a dragon pierced the outer wall. Inside the room was a bed, situated so that he could watch the sky and the moon while lying on his back; a fireplace made of gray wood that felt as hard and cold as steel when he touched it, as if the timber had been compressed to unsurpassed density; and a huge low-rimmed bowl set in the floor and lined with soft blankets where Saphira could sleep.

Even as he watched, she swooped down and landed on the edge of the opening, her scales twinkling like a constellation of blue stars. Behind her, the last rays of the sun streaked across the forest, painting the various ridges and hills with a hazy amber that made the needles glow like hot iron and chased the shadows back toward the violet horizon. From their height, the city appeared as a series of gaps in the voluminous canopy, islands of calm in a restless ocean. Ellesméra's true scope was now revealed; it extended for several miles to the west and to the north.

I respect the Riders even more if this is how Vrael normally lived, said Eragon. *It's much simpler than I expected*. The entire structure rocked slightly in response to a breath of wind.

Saphira sniffed her blankets. *We have yet to see Vroengard*, she cautioned, although he sensed that she agreed with him.

As Eragon closed the screen to the bedroom, he saw something in the corner that he had missed during his first inspection: a spiral staircase that wound up a dark wood chimney. Thrusting the lantern before him, he cautiously ascended, one step at a time. After about twenty feet, he emerged in a study furnished with a writing desk—stocked with quills, ink, and paper, but no parchment—and another padded roost for a dragon to curl up on. The far wall also had an opening to fly through.

Saphira, come see this.

How? she asked.

Through the outside. Eragon winced as layers of bark splintered and cracked under Saphira's claws while she crawled out of the bedroom and up the side of the compound to the study. *Satisfied?* he asked when she arrived. Saphira raked him with her sapphire eyes, then proceeded to scrutinize the walls and furniture.

I wonder, she said, *how you are supposed to stay warm when the rooms are open to the elements?*

I don't know. Eragon examined the walls on either side of the breach, running his hands over abstract patterns that had been coaxed

from the tree by the elves' songs. He stopped when he felt a vertical ridge embedded in the bark. He tugged on it, and a diaphanous membrane unspooled from within the wall. Pulling it across the portal, he found a second groove to hold the hem of the cloth. As soon as it was fastened, the air thickened and became noticeably hotter. *There's your answer*, he said. He released the cloth and it lashed back and forth as it rewound itself.

When they returned to the bedroom, Eragon unpacked while Saphira coiled upon her dais. He carefully arranged his shield, bracers, greaves, coif, and helm, then stripped off his tunic and removed his shirt of leather-backed mail. He sat bare-chested on the bed and studied the oiled links, struck by their similarity to Saphira's scales.

We made it, he said, bemused.

A long journey … but yes, we made it. We're lucky that misfortune did not strike upon the road.

He nodded. *Now we'll find out if it was worth it. Sometimes I wonder if our time would have been better spent helping the Varden.*

Eragon! You know that we need further instruction. Brom would have wanted it. Besides, Ellesméra and Islanzadí were certainly worth coming all this way to see.

Maybe. Finally, he asked, *What do you make of all this?*

Saphira parted her jaws slightly to show her teeth. *I don't know. The elves keep more secrets than even Brom, and they can do things with magic that I never thought possible. I have no idea what methods they use to grow their trees into such shapes, nor how Islanzadí summoned those flowers. It is beyond my ken.*

Eragon was relieved that he was not the only one who felt overwhelmed. *And Arya?*

What about her?

You know, who she really is.

She hasn't changed, only your perception of her. Saphira chuckled deep in her throat, where it sounded like stones grinding against each other, and rested her head on her two front feet.

The stars were bright in the sky now, and the soft hoots of owls drifted through Ellesméra. All the world was calm and silent as it slumbered away the liquid night.

Eragon clambered underneath his downy sheets and reached to shutter the lantern, then stopped, his hand an inch from the latch. Here he was in the elves' capital, over a hundred feet in the air, lying in what used to be Vrael's bed.

The thought was too much for him.

Rolling upright, he grabbed the lantern with one hand, Zar'roc with the other, and surprised Saphira by crawling onto her dais and snuggling against her warm side. She hummed and dropped a velvet

wing over him as he extinguished the light and closed his eyes.

Together they slept long and deep in Ellesméra.

OUT OF THE PAST

Eragon woke at dawn well rested. He tapped Saphira's ribs, and she lifted her wing. Running his hands through his hair, he walked to the room's precipice and leaned against one side, bark rough against his shoulder. Below, the forest sparkled like a field of diamonds as each tree reflected the morning light with a thousand thousand drops of dew.

He jumped with surprise as Saphira dove past him, twisting like an auger toward the canopy before she pulled up and circled through the sky, roaring with joy. *Morning, little one*. He smiled, happy that she was happy.

He opened the screen to their bedroom, where he found two trays of food—mostly fruit—that had been placed by the lintel during the night. By the trays was a bundle of clothes with a paper note pinned to it. Eragon had difficulty deciphering the flowing script, since he had not read for over a month and had forgotten some of the letters, but at last he understood that it said:

> *Greetings, Saphira Bjartskular and Eragon Shadeslayer.*
>
> *I, Bellaen of House Miolandra, do humble myself and apologize to you, Saphira, for this unsatisfactory meal. Elves do not hunt, and no meat is to be had in Ellesméra, nor in any of our cities. If you wish, you can do as the dragons of old were wont, and catch what you may in Du Weldenvarden. We only ask that you leave your kills in the forest so that our air and water remain untainted by blood.*
>
> *Eragon, these clothes are for you. They were woven by Niduen of Islanzadí's house and are her gift to you.*
>
> *May good fortune rule over you,*
> *Peace live in your heart,*
> *And the stars watch over you.*
>
> *Bellaen du Hljödhr*

When Eragon told Saphira the message, she said, *It does not matter; I won't need to eat for a while after yesterday's meal*. However, she did snap up a few seed cakes. *Just so that I don't appear rude*, she explained.

After Eragon finished breakfast, he hauled the bundle of clothes onto his bed and carefully unfolded them, finding two full-length tunics of russet trimmed with thimbleberry green, a set of creamy

leggings to wrap his calves in, and three pairs of socks so soft, they felt like liquid when he pulled them through his hands. The quality of the fabric shamed the weaving of the women of Carvahall as well as the dwarf clothes he wore now.

Eragon was grateful for the new raiment. His own tunic and breeches were sadly travel-worn from their weeks exposed to the rain and sun since Farthen Dûr. Stripping, he donned one of the luxurious tunics, savoring its downy texture.

He had just laced on his boots when someone knocked on the screen to the bedroom. "Come in," he said, reaching for Zar'roc.

Orik poked his head inside, then cautiously entered, testing the floor with his feet. He eyed the ceiling. "Give me a cave any day instead of a bird's nest like this. How fared your night, Eragon? Saphira?"

"Well enough. And yours?" said Eragon.

"I slept like a rock." The dwarf chuckled at his own jest, then his chin sank into his beard and he fingered the head of his ax. "I see you've eaten, so I'll ask you to accompany me. Arya, the queen, and a host of other elves await you at the base of the tree." He fixed Eragon with a testy gaze. "Something is going on that they haven't told us about. I'm not sure what they want from you, but it's important. Islanzadí's as tense as a cornered wolf … I thought I'd warn you beforehand."

Eragon thanked him, then the two of them descended by way of the stairs, while Saphira glided to earth. They were met on the ground by Islanzadí arrayed in a mantle of ruffled swan feathers, which were like winter snow heaped upon a cardinal's breast. She greeted them and said, "Follow me."

Her wending course took the group to the edge of Ellesméra, where the buildings were few and the paths were faint from disuse. At the base of a wooded knoll, Islanzadí stopped and said in a terrible voice, "Before we go any farther, the three of you must swear in the ancient language that you will never speak to outsiders of what you are about to see, not without permission from me, my daughter, or whoever may succeed us to the throne."

"Why should I gag myself?" demanded Orik.

Why indeed? asked Saphira. *Do you not trust us?*

"It is not a matter of trust, but of safety. We must protect this knowledge at all costs—it's our greatest advantage over Galbatorix—and if you are bound by the ancient language, you will never willingly reveal our secret. You came to supervise Eragon's training, Orik-vodhr. Unless you give me your word, you may as well return to Farthen Dûr."

At last Orik said, "I believe that you mean no harm to dwarves or to

the Varden, else I would never agree. And I hold you to the honor of your hall and clan that this isn't a ploy to deceive us. Tell me what to say."

While the queen tutored Orik in the correct pronunciation of the desired phrase, Eragon asked Saphira, *Should I do it?*

Do we have a choice? Eragon remembered that Arya had asked the same question yesterday, and he began to have an inkling of what she had meant: the queen left no room to maneuver.

When Orik finished, Islanzadí looked expectantly at Eragon. He hesitated, then delivered the oath, as did Saphira. "Thank you," said Islanzadí. "Now we may proceed."

At the top of the knoll, the trees were replaced by a bed of red clover that ran several yards to the edge of a stone cliff. The cliff extended a league in either direction and dropped a thousand feet to the forest below, which pooled outward until it merged with the sky. It felt as if they stood on the edge of the world, staring across an endless expanse of forest.

I know this place, realized Eragon, remembering his vision of Togira Ikonoka.

Thud. The air shivered from the strength of the concussion. *Thud*. Another dull blow made Eragon's teeth chatter. *Thud*. He jammed his fingers in his ears, trying to protect them from the painful spikes in pressure. The elves stood motionless. *Thud*. The clover bent under a sudden gust of wind.

Thud. From below the edge of the cliff rose a huge gold dragon with a Rider on its back.

CONVICTION

Roran glared at Horst.

They were in Baldor's room. Roran was propped upright in bed, listening as the smith said, "What did you expect me to do? We couldn't attack once you fainted. Besides, the men were in no state to fight. Can't blame them either. I nearly bit off my tongue when I saw those monsters." Horst shook his wild mane of hair. "We've been dragged into one of the old tales, Roran, and I don't like it one bit." Roran retained his stony expression. "Look, you can kill the soldiers if you want, but you have to get your strength back first. You'll have plenty of volunteers; people trust you in battle, especially after you defeated the soldiers here last night." When Roran remained silent, Horst sighed, patted him on his good shoulder, and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Roran did not even blink. So far in his life, he had only truly cared about three things: his family, his home in Palancar Valley, and Katrina. His family had been annihilated last year. His farm had been smashed and burned, though the land remained, which was all that really mattered.

But now Katrina was gone.

A choked sob escaped past the iron lump in his throat. He was faced with a quandary that tore at his very essence: the only way to rescue Katrina would be to somehow pursue the Ra'zac and leave Palancar Valley, yet he could not abandon Carvahall to the soldiers. Nor could he forget Katrina.

My heart or my home, he thought bitterly. They were worthless without each other. If he killed the soldiers it would only prevent the Ra'zac—and perhaps Katrina—from returning. Anyway, the slaughter would be pointless if reinforcements were nearby, for their arrival would surely signal Carvahall's demise.

Roran clenched his teeth as a fresh burst of pain emanated from his bound shoulder. He closed his eyes. *I hope Sloan gets eaten like Quimby*. No fate could be too terrible for that traitor. Roran cursed him with the blackest oaths he knew.

Even if I were free to leave Carvahall, how could I find the Ra'zac? Who would know where they live? Who would dare inform on Galbatorix's servants? Despair rolled over him as he wrestled with the problem. He imagined himself in one of the great cities of the Empire, searching

aimlessly among dirty buildings and hordes of strangers for a hint, a glimpse, a taste of his love.

It was hopeless.

A river of tears followed as he doubled over, groaning from the strength of his agony and fear. He rocked back and forth, blind to anything but the desolation of the world.

An endless amount of time reduced Roran's sobs to weak gasps of protest. He wiped his eyes and forced himself to take a long, shuddering breath. He winced. His lungs felt like they were filled with shards of glass.

I have to think, he told himself.

He leaned against the wall and—through the sheer strength of his will—began to gradually subdue each of his unruly emotions, wrestling them into submission to the one thing that could save him from insanity: reason. His neck and shoulders trembled from the violence of his efforts.

Once he regained control, Roran carefully arranged his thoughts, like a master craftsman organizing his tools into precise rows. *There must be a solution hidden amid my knowledge, if only I'm creative enough*.

He could not track the Ra'zac through the air. That much was clear. Someone would have to tell him where to find them, and of all the people he could ask, the Varden probably knew the most. However, they would be just as hard to find as the desecrators, and he could not waste time searching for them. *Although* … A small voice in his head reminded him of the rumors he had heard from trappers and traders that Surda secretly supported the Varden.

Surda. The country lay at the bottom of the Empire, or so Roran had been told, as he had never seen a map of Alagaësia. Under ideal conditions, it would take several weeks to reach on horse, longer if he had to evade soldiers. Of course, the swiftest mode of transportation would be to sail south along the coast, but that would mean having to travel all the way to the Toark River and then to Teirm to find a ship. It would take far too long. And he still might be apprehended by soldiers.

"If, could, would, *might*," he muttered, repeatedly clenching his left hand. North of Teirm, the only port he knew of was Narda, but to reach it, he would have to cross the entire width of the Spine—a feat unheard of, even for the trappers.

Roran swore quietly. The conjecture was pointless. *I should be trying to save Carvahall, not desert it*. The problem was, he had already determined that the village and all who remained in it were doomed. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes again. *All who remain …*

What … what if everyone in Carvahall accompanied me to Narda and

then to Surda? He would achieve both his desires simultaneously.

The audacity of the idea stunned him.

It was heresy, blasphemy, to think that he could convince the farmers to abandon their fields and the merchants their shops … and yet … and yet what was the alternative but slavery or death? The Varden were the only group that would harbor fugitives of the Empire, and Roran was sure that the rebels would be delighted to have a village's worth of recruits, especially ones who had proved themselves in battle. Also, by bringing the villagers to them, he would earn the Varden's confidence, so that they would trust him with the location of the Ra'zac. *Maybe they can explain why Galbatorix is so desperate to capture me.*

If the plan were to succeed, though, it would have to be implemented before the new troops reached Carvahall, which left only a few days—if that—to arrange the departure of some three hundred people. The logistics were frightening to consider.

Roran knew that mere reason could not persuade anyone to leave; it would require messianic zeal to stir people's emotions, to make them *feel* in the depths of their hearts the need to relinquish the trappings of their identities and lives. Nor would it be enough to simply instill fear —for he knew that fear often made those in peril fight harder. Rather, he had to instill a sense of purpose and destiny, to make the villagers believe, as he did, that joining the Varden and resisting Galbatorix's tyranny was the noblest action in the world.

It required passion that could not be intimidated by hardship, deterred by suffering, or quenched by death.

In his mind, Roran saw Katrina standing before him, pale and ghostly with solemn amber eyes. He remembered the heat of her skin, the mulled scent of her hair, and what it felt like to be with her under the cover of darkness. Then in a long line behind her appeared his family, friends, and everyone he had known in Carvahall, both dead and alive. *If not for Eragon … and me … the Ra'zac would have never come here. I must rescue the village from the Empire as surely as I must rescue Katrina from those desecrators.*

Drawing upon the strength of his vision, Roran rose from bed, causing his maimed shoulder to burn and sting. He staggered and leaned against a wall. *Will I ever regain the use of my right arm?* He waited for the pain to subside. When it did not, he bared his teeth, shoved himself upright, and marched from the room.

Elain was folding towels in the hallway. She cried out with amazement. "Roran! What are you—"

"Come," he growled, lurching past.

With a worried expression, Baldor stepped out of a doorway. "Roran, you shouldn't be walking around. You lost too much blood.

I'll help—"

"Come."

Roran heard them follow as he descended the curved stairs toward the entrance of the house, where Horst and Albriech stood talking. They looked up with astonishment.

"Come."

He ignored the babble of questions, opened the front door, and stepped into the evening's faded light. Above, an imposing plume of clouds was laced with gold and purple.

Leading the small group, Roran stomped to the edge of Carvahall—repeating his monosyllabic message whenever he passed a man or woman—pulled a torch mounted on a pole from the grasping mud, wheeled about, and retraced his path to the center of town. There he stabbed the pole between his feet, then raised his left arm and roared, *"COME!"*

The village rang with his voice. He continued the summons as people drifted from the houses and shadowed alleyways and began to gather around him. Many were curious, others sympathetic, some awed, and some angry. Again and again, Roran's chant echoed in the valley. Loring arrived with his sons in tow. From the opposite direction came Birgit, Delwin, and Fisk with his wife, Isold. Morn and Tara left the tavern together and joined the crush of spectators.

When most of Carvahall stood before him, Roran fell silent, tightening his left fist until his fingernails cut into his palm. *Katrina*. Raising his hand, he opened it and showed everyone the crimson tears that dripped down his arm. "This," he said, "is my pain. Look well, for it will be yours unless we defeat the curse wanton fate has set upon us. Your friends and family will be bound in chains, destined for slavery in foreign lands, or slain before your eyes, hewn open by soldiers' merciless blades. Galbatorix will sow our land with salt so that it lies forever fallow. This I have seen. This I know." He paced like a caged wolf, glowering and swinging his head. He had their attention. Now he had to stoke them into a frenzy to match his own.

"My father was killed by the desecrators. My cousin has fled. My farm was razed. And my bride-to-be was kidnapped by her own father, who murdered Byrd and betrayed us all! Quimby eaten, the hay barn burned along with Fisk's and Delwin's houses. Parr, Wyglif, Ged, Bardrick, Farold, Hale, Garner, Kelby, Melkolf, Albem, and Elmund: all slain. Many of you have been injured, like me, so that you can no longer support your family. Isn't it enough that we toil every day of our lives to eke a living from the earth, subjected to the whims of nature? Isn't it enough that we are forced to pay Galbatorix's iron taxes, without also having to endure these senseless torments?" Roran laughed maniacally, howling at the sky and hearing the madness in

his own voice. No one stirred in the crowd.

"I know now the true nature of the Empire and of Galbatorix; they are *evil*. Galbatorix is an unnatural blight on the world. He destroyed the Riders and the greatest peace and prosperity we ever had. His servants are foul demons birthed in some ancient pit. But is Galbatorix content to grind us beneath his heel? No! He seeks to poison all of Alagaësia, to suffocate us with his cloak of misery. Our children and their descendants shall live in the shadow of his darkness until the end of time, reduced to slaves, worms, *vermin* for him to torture at his pleasure. Unless …"

Roran stared into the villagers' wide eyes, conscious of his control over them. No one had ever dared say what he was about to. He let his voice rasp low in his throat: "Unless we have the courage to resist evil.

"We've fought the soldiers and the Ra'zac, but it means nothing if we die alone and forgotten—or are carted away as chattel. We cannot stay here, and I won't allow Galbatorix to obliterate everything that's worth living for. I would rather have my eyes plucked out and my hands chopped off than see him triumph! I choose to fight! I choose to step from my grave and let my enemies bury themselves in it!

"I choose to leave Carvahall.

"I will cross the Spine and take a ship from Narda down to Surda, where I will join the Varden, who have struggled for decades to free us of this oppression." The villagers looked shocked at the idea. "But I do not wish to go alone. Come with me. Come with me and seize this chance to forge a better life for yourselves. Throw off the shackles that bind you here." Roran pointed at his listeners, moving his finger from one target to the next. "A hundred years from now, what names shall drop from the bards' lips? Horst … Birgit … Kiselt … Thane; they will recite our sagas. They will sing "The Epic of Carvahall," for we were the only village brave enough to defy the Empire."

Tears of pride flooded Roran's eyes. "What could be more noble than cleansing Galbatorix's stain from Alagaësia? No more would we live in fear of having our farms destroyed, or being killed and eaten. The grain we harvest would be ours to keep, save for any extra that we might send as a gift to the rightful king. The rivers and streams would run thick with gold. We would be safe and happy and fat!

"It is our destiny."

Roran held his hand before his face and slowly closed his fingers over the bleeding wounds. He stood hunched over his injured arm—crucified by the scores of gazes—and waited for a response to his speech. None came. At last he realized that they *wanted* him to continue; they wanted to hear more about the cause and the future he had portrayed.

Katrina.

Then as darkness gathered around the radius of his torch, Roran drew himself upright and resumed speaking. He hid nothing, only labored to make them understand his thoughts and feelings, so they too could share the sense of purpose that drove him. “Our age is at an end. We must step forward and cast our lot with the Varden if we and our children are to live free.” He spoke with rage and honeyed tones in equal amount, but always with a fervid conviction that kept his audience entranced.

When his store of images was exhausted, Roran looked into the faces of his friends and neighbors and said, “I march in two days. Accompany me if you wish, but I go regardless.” He bowed his head and stepped out of the light.

Overhead, the waning moon glowed behind a lens of clouds. A slight breeze wafted through Carvahall. An iron weather vane creaked on a roof as it swung in the direction of the current.

From within the crowd, Birgit picked her way into the light, clutching the folds of her dress to avoid tripping. With a subdued expression, she adjusted her shawl. “Today we saw an …” She stopped, shook her head, and laughed in an embarrassed way. “I find it hard to speak after Roran. I don’t like his plan, but I believe that it’s necessary, although for a different reason: I would hunt down the Ra’zac and avenge my husband’s death. I will go with him. And I will take my children.” She too stepped away from the torch.

A silent minute passed, then Delwin and his wife, Lenna, advanced with their arms around each other. Lenna looked at Birgit and said, “I understand your need, Sister. We want our vengeance as well, but more than that, we want the rest of our children to be safe. For that reason, we too will go.” Several women whose husbands had been slain came forward and agreed with her.

The villagers murmured among themselves, then fell silent and motionless. No one else seemed willing to address the subject; it was too momentous. Roran understood. He was still trying to digest the implications himself.

Finally, Horst strode to the torch and stared with a drawn face into the flame. “It’s no good talking any more.… We need time to think. Every man must decide for himself. Tomorrow … tomorrow will be another day. Perhaps things will be clearer then.” He shook his head and lifted the torch, then inverted it and extinguished it against the ground, leaving everyone to find their way home in the moonlight.

Roran joined Albriech and Baldor, who walked behind their parents at a discreet distance, giving them privacy to talk. Neither of the brothers would look at Roran. Unsettled by their lack of expression, Roran asked, “Do you think anyone else will go? Was I good enough?”

Albriech emitted a bark of laughter. “Good enough!”

“Roran,” said Baldor in an odd voice, “you could have convinced an Urgal to become a farmer tonight.”

“No!”

“When you finished, I was ready to grab my spear and dash into the Spine after you. I wouldn’t have been alone either. The question isn’t who *will* leave, it’s who *won’t*. What you said … I’ve never heard anything like it before.”

Roran frowned. His goal had been to persuade people to accept his plan, not to get them to follow him personally. *If that’s what it takes*, he thought with a shrug. Still, the prospect had caught him unawares. At an earlier time, it would have disturbed him, but now he was just thankful for anything that could help him to rescue Katrina and save the villagers.

Baldor leaned toward his brother. “Father would lose most of his tools.” Albriech nodded solemnly.

Roran knew that smiths made whatever implement was required by the task at hand, and that these custom tools formed a legacy that was bequeathed from father to son, or from master to journeyman. One measure of a smith’s wealth and skill was the number of tools he owned. For Horst to surrender his would be … *Would be no harder than what anyone else has to do*, thought Roran. He only regretted that it would entail depriving Albriech and Baldor of their rightful inheritance.

When they reached the house, Roran retreated to Baldor’s room and lay in bed. Through the walls, he could still hear the faint sound of Horst and Elain talking. He fell asleep imagining similar discussions taking place throughout Carvahall, deciding his—and their—fate.

REPERCUSSIONS

The morning after his speech, Roran looked out his window and saw twelve men leaving Carvahall, heading toward Igualda Falls. He yawned and limped downstairs to the kitchen.

Horst sat alone at the table, twisting a mug of ale in his hands. "Morning," he said.

Roran grunted, tore a heel of bread off the loaf on the counter, then seated himself at the opposite end of the table. As he ate, he noted Horst's bloodshot eyes and unkempt beard. Roran guessed that the smith had been awake the entire night. "Do you know why a group is going up—"

"Have to talk with their families," said Horst abruptly. "They've been running into the Spine since dawn." He put the mug down with a *crack*. "You have no idea what you did, Roran, by asking us to leave. The whole village is in turmoil. You backed us into a corner with only one way out: your way. Some people hate you for it. Of course a fair number of them already hated you for bringing this upon us."

The bread in Roran's mouth tasted like sawdust as resentment flared inside him. *Eragon was the one who brought back the stone, not me*. "And the others?"

Horst sipped his ale and grimaced. "The others adore you. I never thought I would see the day when Garrow's son would stir my heart with words, but you did it, boy, you did it." He swung a gnarled hand over his head. "All this? I built it for Elain and my sons. It took me seven years to finish! See that beam over the door right there? I broke three toes getting that into place. And you know what? I'm going to give it up because of what you said last night."

Roran remained silent; it was what he wanted. Leaving Carvahall was the right thing to do, and since he had committed himself to that course, he saw no reason to torment himself with guilt and regret. *The decision is made. I will accept the outcome without complaint, no matter how dire, for this is our only escape from the Empire*.

"But," said Horst, and leaned forward on one elbow, his black eyes burning beneath his brow, "just you remember that if reality falls short of the airy dreams you conjured, there'll be debts to pay. Give people a hope and then take it away, and they'll destroy you."

The prospect was of no concern to Roran. *If we make it to Surda, we will be greeted as heroes by the rebels. If we don't, our deaths will fulfill all*

debts. When it was clear that the smith had finished, Roran asked, "Where is Elain?"

Horst scowled at the change of topic. "Out back." He stood and straightened his tunic over his heavy shoulders. "I have to go clear out the smithy and decide what tools I'm going to take. I'll hide or destroy the rest. The Empire won't benefit from *my* work."

"I'll help." Roran pushed back his chair.

"No," said Horst roughly. "This is a task I can only do with Albriech and Baldor. That forge has been my entire life, and theirs.… You wouldn't be much help with that arm of yours anyway. Stay here. Elain can use you."

After the smith left, Roran opened the side door and found Elain talking with Gertrude by the large pile of firewood Horst maintained year-round. The healer went up to Roran and put a hand on his forehead. "Ah, I was afraid that you might have a fever after yesterday's excitement. Your family heals at the most extraordinary rate. I could barely believe my eyes when Eragon started walking about after having his legs skinned and spending two days in bed." Roran stiffened at the mention of his cousin, but she did not seem to notice. "Let's see how your shoulder is doing, shall we?"

Roran bowed his neck so that Gertrude could reach behind him and untie the knot to the wool sling. When it was undone, he carefully lowered his right forearm—which was immobilized in a splint—until his arm was straight. Gertrude slid her fingers under the poultice packed on his wound and peeled it off.

"Oh my," she said.

A thick, rancid smell clogged the air. Roran clenched his teeth as his gorge rose, then looked down. The skin under the poultice had turned white and spongy, like a giant birthmark of maggot flesh. The bite itself had been stitched up while he was unconscious, so all he saw was a jagged pink line caked with blood on the front of his shoulder. Swelling and inflammation had forced the twisted catgut threads to cut deep into his flesh, while beads of clear liquid oozed from the wound.

Gertrude clucked her tongue as she inspected him, then refastened the bandages and looked Roran in the eye. "You're doing well enough, but the tissue may become diseased. I can't tell yet. If it does, we'll have to cauterize your shoulder."

Roran nodded. "Will my arm work once it heals?"

"As long as the muscle knits together properly. It also depends on how you want to use it. You—"

"Will I be able to fight?"

"If you want to fight," said Gertrude slowly, "I suggest that you learn to use your left hand." She patted his cheek, then hurried back

toward her hut.

My arm. Roran stared at his bound limb as if it no longer belonged to him. Until that moment, he had not realized how closely his sense of identity was linked to the condition of his body. Injuring his flesh caused injury to his psyche, as well as the other way around. Roran was proud of his body, and seeing it mutilated sent a jolt of panic through him, especially since the damage was permanent. Even if he regained the use of his arm, he would always bear a thick scar as a memento of his injury.

Taking his hand, Elain led Roran back into the house, where she crumbled mint into a kettle, then set it on the stove to boil. "You really love her, don't you?"

"What?" He looked at her, startled.

Elain rested a hand on her belly. "Katrina." She smiled. "I'm not blind. I know what you've done for her, and I'm proud of you. Not every man would go as far."

"It won't matter, if I can't free her."

The kettle began to whistle stridently. "You will, I'm sure of it—one way or another." Elain poured the tea. "We had better start preparing for the trip. I'm going to sort through the kitchen first. While I do, can you go upstairs and bring me all the clothes, bedding, and anything else you think might be useful?"

"Where should I put it?" asked Roran.

"The dining room will be fine."

Since the mountains were too steep—and the forest too dense—for wagons, Roran realized that their supplies were limited to however much they could carry themselves, as well as what they could pile onto Horst's two horses, although one of those had to be left partially unburdened so that Elain could ride whenever the trail proved too strenuous for her pregnancy.

Compounding the issue was the fact that some families in Carvahall did not have enough steeds for both provisions and the young, old, and infirm who would be unable to keep pace on foot. Everyone would have to share resources. The question, though, was with whom? They still did not know who else was going, besides Birgit and Delwin.

Thus, when Elain finished packing the items she deemed essential—mainly food and shelter—she sent Roran to find out if anyone needed extra storage space and, if not, if she could borrow some in turn, for there were plenty of nonessential items she wanted to bring but would otherwise abandon.

Despite the people hurrying through the streets, Carvahall was heavy with a forced stillness, an unnatural calm that belied the

feverish activity hidden within the houses. Almost everyone was silent and walked with downturned faces, engrossed in their own thoughts.

When Roran arrived at Orval's house, he had to pound on the knocker for almost a minute before the farmer answered the door. "Oh, it's you, Stronghammer." Orval stepped out on the porch. "Sorry for the wait, but I was busy. How can I help you?" He tapped a long black pipe against his palm, then began to roll it nervously between his fingers. Inside the house, Roran heard chairs being shoved across the floor and pots and pans banging together.

Roran quickly explained Elain's offer and request. Orval squinted up at the sky. "I reckon I've got enough room for my own stuff. Ask around, an' if you still need space, I have a pair of oxen that could hold a bit more."

"So you *are* going?"

Orval shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I wouldn't say that. We're just … getting ready in case of another attack."

"Ah." Puzzled, Roran trudged on to Kiselt's house. He soon discovered that no one was willing to reveal whether they had decided to leave—even when evidence of their preparations was in plain sight.

And they all treated Roran with a deference that he found unsettling. It manifested itself in small gestures: offers of condolences for his misfortune, respectful silence whenever he spoke, and murmurs of assent when he made a statement. It was as if his deeds had inflated his stature and intimidated the people he had known since childhood, distancing him from them.

I am branded, thought Roran, limping through the mud. He stopped at the edge of a puddle and bent to examine his reflection, curious if he could discern what made him so different.

He saw a man in ragged, blood-stained clothes, with a humped back and a crooked arm tied across his chest. His neck and cheeks were scumbled with an impending beard, while his hair was matted into snarled ropes that writhed in a halo around his head. Most frightening of all, though, were his eyes, which had sunk deep into the sockets, giving him a haunted appearance. From within those two morbid caverns, his gaze boiled like molten steel, full of loss, rage, and an obsessive craving.

A lopsided smile crept across Roran's face, rendering his visage even more shocking. He liked how he looked. It matched his feelings. Now he understood how he had managed to influence the villagers. He bared his teeth. *I can use this image. I can use it to destroy the Ra'zac*.

Lifting his head, he slouched up the street, pleased with himself. Just then, Thane approached him and grasped his left forearm in a hearty grip. "Stronghammer! You don't know how glad I am to see

you."

"You are?" Roran wondered if the whole world had been turned inside out during the night.

Thane nodded vigorously. "Ever since we attacked the soldiers, everything has seemed hopeless to me. It pains me to admit it, but so it was. My heart pounded all the time, like I was about to fall down a well; my hands shook; and I felt dreadfully ill. I thought someone had poisoned me! It was worse than death. But what you said yesterday healed me instantly and let me see purpose and meaning in the world again! I … I can't even explain the horror you saved me from. I am in your debt. If you need or want anything, just ask and I'll help."

Moved, Roran gripped the farmer's forearm in return and said, "Thank you, Thane. Thank you." Thane bowed his head, tears in his eyes, then released Roran and left him standing alone in the middle of the street.

What have I done?

EXODUS

A wall of thick, smoky air engulfed Roran as he entered the Seven Sheaves, Morn's tavern. He stopped beneath the Urgal horns pegged over the door and let his eyes adjust to the dim interior. "Hello?" he called.

The door to the back rooms banged open as Tara plowed forward, trailed by Morn. They both glared sullenly at Roran. Tara planted her meaty fists on her hips and demanded, "What do you want here?"

Roran stared at her for a moment, trying to determine the source of her animosity. "Have you decided whether to accompany me into the Spine?"

"That's none of your business," snapped Tara.

Oh yes, it is. He restrained himself, though, and instead said, "Whatever your intentions are, if you *were* to go, Elain would like to know if you have room in your bags for a few more items, or if you need extra room yourself. She has—"

"Extra room!" burst out Morn. He waved at the wall behind the bar, which was lined with oak casks. "I have, packed in straw, twelve barrels of the clearest winter ale, which have been kept at the perfect temperature for the past five months. They were Quimby's last batch! What am I supposed to do with them? Or my hogsheads of lager and stout? If I leave them, the soldiers will dispose of it in a week, or they'll spike the barrels and pour the beer into the ground, where the only creatures who'll enjoy it will be grubs and worms. Oh!" Morn sat and wrung his hands, shaking his head. "Twelve years of work! Ever since Father died I ran the tavern the same way he did, day in and day out. And then you and Eragon had to cause this trouble. It …" He stopped, breathing with difficulty, and wiped his mashed face with the edge of his sleeve.

"There, there now," said Tara. She put her arm around Morn and jabbed a finger at Roran. "Who gave you leave to stir up Carvahall with your fancy words? If we go, how will my poor husband make a living? He can't take his trade with him like Horst or Gedric. He can't squat in an empty field and farm it like you! Impossible! Everyone will go and we will starve. Or we will go and we will *still* starve. You have ruined us!"

Roran looked from her flushed, angry face to Morn's distraught one, then turned and opened the door. He paused on the threshold and said

in a low voice, “I have always counted you among my friends. I would not have you killed by the Empire.” Stepping outside, he pulled his vest tight around himself and paced away from the tavern, ruminating the whole way.

At Fisk’s well, he stopped for a drink and found himself joined by Birgit. She watched him struggle to turn the crank with only one hand, then took it from him and brought up the water bucket, which she passed to him without drinking. He sipped the cool liquid, then said, “I’m glad that you are coming.” He handed the bucket back.

Birgit eyed him. “I recognize the force that drives you, Roran, for it propels me as well; we both wish to find the Ra’zac. Once we do, though, I will have my compensation from you for Quimby’s death. Never forget that.” She pushed the full bucket back into the well and let it fall unchecked, the crank spinning wildly. A second later, the well echoed with a hollow splash.

Roran smiled as he watched her walk away. He was more pleased than upset by her declaration; he knew that even if everyone else in Carvahall were to forsake the cause or die, Birgit would still help him to hunt the Ra’zac. Afterward, though—if an afterward existed—he would have to pay her price or kill her. That was the only way to resolve such matters.

By evening Horst and his sons had returned to the house, bearing two small bundles wrapped in oilcloth. “Is that all?” asked Elain. Horst nodded curtly, lay the bundles on the kitchen table, and unwrapped them to expose four hammers, three tongs, a clamp, a medium-sized bellows, and a three-pound anvil.

As the five of them sat to dinner, Albriech and Baldor discussed the various people they had seen making covert preparations. Roran listened intently, trying to keep track of who had lent donkeys to whom, who showed no signs of departing, and who might need help to leave.

“The biggest problem,” said Baldor, “is food. We can only carry so much, and it’ll be difficult to hunt enough in the Spine to feed two or three hundred people.”

“Mmm.” Horst shook his finger, his mouth full of beans, then swallowed. “No, hunting won’t work. We have to bring our flocks with us. Combined, we own enough sheep and goats to feed the lot of us for a month or more.”

Roran raised his knife. “Wolves.”

“I’m more worried about keeping the animals from wandering off into the forest,” replied Horst. “Herding them will be a chore.”

Roran spent the following day assisting whomever he could, saying

little, and generally allowing people to see him working for the good of the village. Late that night, he tumbled into bed exhausted but hopeful.

The advent of dawn pierced Roran's dreams and woke him with a sense of momentous expectation. He stood and tiptoed downstairs, then went outside and stared at the misty mountains, absorbed by the morning's silence. His breath formed a white plume in the air, but he felt warm, for his heart throbbed with fear and eagerness.

After a subdued breakfast, Horst brought the horses to the front of the house, where Roran helped Albriech and Baldor load them with saddlebags and other bundles of supplies. Next Roran took up his own pack, hissing as the leather shoulder strap pressed down on his injury.

Horst closed the door to the house. He lingered for a moment with his fingers on the steel doorknob, then took Elain's hand and said, "Let's go."

As they walked through Carvahall, Roran saw somber families gathering by their houses with their piles of possessions and yammering livestock. He saw sheep and dogs with bags tied on their backs, teary-eyed children on donkeys, and makeshift sledges hitched to horses with crates of fluttering chickens hung on each side. He saw the fruits of his success, and he knew not whether to laugh or to cry.

They stopped at Carvahall's north end and waited to see who would join them. A minute passed, then Birgit approached from the side, accompanied by Nolfavrell and his younger siblings. Birgit greeted Horst and Elain and stationed herself nearby.

Ridley and his family arrived outside the wall of trees, driving over a hundred sheep from the east side of Palancar Valley. "I figured that it would be better to keep them out of Carvahall," shouted Ridley over the animals.

"Good thinking!" replied Horst.

Next came Delwin, Lenna, and their five children; Orval and his family; Loring with his sons; Calitha and Thane—who gave Roran a large smile; and then Kiselt's clan. Those women who had been recently widowed, like Nolla, clustered around Birgit. Before the sun had cleared the mountain peaks, most of the village had assembled along the wall. But not all.

Morn, Tara, and several others had yet to show themselves, and when Ivor arrived, it was without any supplies. "You're staying," observed Roran. He sidestepped a knot of testy goats that Gertrude was attempting to restrain.

"Aye," said Ivor, drawing out the word into a weary admission. He shivered, crossed his bony arms for warmth, and faced the rising sun, lifting his head so as to catch the transparent rays. "Svart refused to leave. Heh! It was like carving against the grain to get him into the

Spine in the first place. Someone has to look after him, an' I don't have any children, so …" He shrugged. "Doubt I could give up the farm anyway."

"What will you do when the soldiers arrive?"

"Give them a fight that they'll remember."

Roran laughed hoarsely and clapped Ivor on the arm, doing his best to ignore the unspoken fate that they both knew awaited anyone who remained.

A thin, middle-aged man, Ethlbert, marched to the edge of the congregation and shouted, "You're all fools!" With an ominous rustle, people turned to look at their accuser. "I've held my peace through this madness, but I'll not follow a nattering lunatic! If you weren't blinded by his words, you'd see that he's leading you to destruction! Well, I won't go! I'll take my chances sneaking past the soldiers and finding refuge in Therinsford. They're our own people at least, not the barbarians you'll find in Surda." He spat on the ground, then spun on his heel and stomped away.

Afraid that Ethlbert might convince others to defect, Roran scanned the crowd and was relieved to see nothing more than restless muttering. Still, he did not want to dawdle and give people a chance to change their minds. He asked Horst under his breath, "How long should we wait?"

"Albriech, you and Baldor run around as fast as you can and check if anyone else is coming. Otherwise, we'll leave." The brothers dashed off in opposite directions.

Half an hour later, Baldor returned with Fisk, Isold, and their borrowed horse. Leaving her husband, Isold hurried toward Horst, shooing her hands at anyone who got in her way, oblivious to the fact that most of her hair had escaped imprisonment in its bun and stuck out in odd tufts. She stopped, wheezing for breath. "I *am* sorry we're so late, but Fisk had trouble closing up the shop. He couldn't pick which planers or chisels to bring." She laughed in a shrill tone, almost hysterical. "It was like watching a cat surrounded by mice trying to decide which one to chase. First this one, then that one."

A wry smile tugged at Horst's lips. "I understand perfectly."

Roran strained for a glimpse of Albriech, but to no avail. He gritted his teeth. "Where *is* he?"

Horst tapped his shoulder. "Right over there, I do believe."

Albriech advanced between the houses with three beer casks tied to his back and an aggrieved look that was comic enough to make Baldor and several others laugh. On either side of Albriech walked Morn and Tara, who staggered under the weight of their enormous packs, as did the donkey and two goats that they towed behind them. To Roran's astonishment, the animals were burdened with even more casks.

“They won’t last a mile,” said Roran, growing angry at the couple’s foolishness. “And they don’t have enough food. Do they expect us to feed them or—”

With a chuckle, Horst cut him off. “I wouldn’t worry about the food. Morn’s beer will be good for morale, and that’s worth more than a few extra meals. You’ll see.”

As soon as Albriech had freed himself of the casks, Roran asked him and his brother, “Is that everyone?” When they answered in the affirmative, Roran swore and struck his thigh with a clenched fist. Excluding Ivor, three families were determined to remain in Palancar Valley: Ethlbert’s, Parr’s, and Knute’s. *I can’t force them to come.* He sighed. “All right. There’s no sense in waiting longer.”

Excitement rippled through the villagers; the moment had finally arrived. Horst and five other men pulled open the wall of trees, then laid planks across the trench so that the people and animals could walk over.

Horst gestured. “I think that you should go first, Roran.”

“Wait!” Fisk ran up and, with evident pride, handed Roran a blackened six-foot-long staff of hawthorn wood with a knot of polished roots at the top, and a blued-steel ferrule that tapered into a blunt spike at the base. “I made it last night,” said the carpenter. “I thought that you might have need of it.”

Roran ran his left hand over the wood, marveling at its smoothness. “I couldn’t have asked for anything better. Your skill is masterful.… Thank you.” Fisk grinned and backed away.

Conscious of the fact that the entire crowd was watching, Roran faced the mountains and the Igualda Falls. His shoulder throbbed beneath the leather strap. Behind him lay his father’s bones and everything he had known in life. Before him the jagged peaks piled high into the pale sky and blocked his way and his will. But he would not be denied. And he would not look back.

Katrina.

Lifting his chin, Roran strode forward. His staff knocked against the hard planks as he crossed the trench and passed out of Carvahall, leading the villagers into the wilderness.

✦ ✦ ✦

On the Crags of Tel'naeír

Thud.

Bright as a flaming sun, the dragon hung before Eragon and everyone clustered along the Crags of Tel'naeír, buffeting them with gusts from its mighty wings. The dragon's body appeared to be on fire as the brilliant dawn illuminated its golden scales and sprayed the ground and trees with dazzling chips of light. It was far larger than Saphira, large enough to be several hundred years old, and proportionally thicker in its neck, limbs, and tail. Upon its back sat the Rider, robes startling white against the brilliance of the scales.

Eragon fell to his knees, his face upturned. *I'm not alone.…* Awe and relief coursed through him. No more would he have to bear the responsibility of the Varden and of Galbatorix by himself. Here was one of the guardians of old resurrected from the depths of time to guide him, a living symbol, and a testament to the legends he had been raised with. Here was his master. Here *was* a legend!

As the dragon turned to land, Eragon gasped; the creature's left foreleg had been severed by a terrible blow, leaving a helpless white stump in place of the once mighty limb. Tears filled his eyes.

A whirlwind of dry twigs and leaves enveloped the hilltop as the dragon settled on the sweet clover and folded its wings. The Rider carefully descended from his steed along the dragon's intact front right leg, then approached Eragon, his hands clasped before him. He was an elf with silver hair, old beyond measure, though the only sign of age was the expression of great compassion and sadness upon his face.

"Osthato Chetowä," said Eragon. "The Mourning Sage … As you asked, I have come." With a jolt, he remembered his manners and touched his lips. "Atra esterní ono thelduin."

The Rider smiled. He took Eragon by the shoulders and lifted him upright, staring at him with such kindness that Eragon could look at nothing else; he was consumed by the endless depths within the elf's eyes. "Oromis is my proper name, Eragon Shadeslayer."

"You knew," whispered Islanzadí with a hurt expression that quickly transformed into a storm of rage. "You knew of Eragon's existence and yet you did not tell me? Why have you betrayed me, Shur'tugal?"

Oromis released Eragon from his gaze and transferred it onto the

queen. “I kept my peace because it was uncertain if Eragon or Arya would live long enough to come here; I had no wish to give you a fragile hope that might have been torn away at any moment.”

Islanzadí spun about, her cape of swan feathers billowing like wings. “You had no right to withhold such information from me! I could have sent warriors to protect Arya, Eragon, and Saphira in Farthen Dûr and to escort them safely here.”

Oromis smiled sadly. “I hid nothing from you, Islanzadí, but what you had already chosen not to see. If you had scryed the land, as is your duty, you would have discerned the source of the chaos that has swept Alagaësia and learned the truth of Arya and Eragon. That you might forget the Varden and the dwarves in your grief is understandable, but Brom? Vinr Älfakyn? The last of the Elf Friends? You have been blind to the world, Islanzadí, and lax upon your throne. I could not risk driving you further away by subjecting you to another loss.”

Islanzadí’s anger drained away, leaving her face pale and her shoulders slumped. “I am diminished,” she whispered.

A cloud of hot, moist air pressed against Eragon as the gold dragon bent to examine him with eyes that glittered and sparked. *We are well met, Eragon Shadeslayer. I am Glaedr*. His voice—for it was unmistakably male—rumbled and shook through Eragon’s mind, like the growl of a mountain avalanche.

All Eragon could do was touch his lips and say, “I am honored.”

Then Glaedr brought his attention to bear on Saphira. She remained perfectly still, her neck arched stiffly as Glaedr sniffed her cheek and along the line of her wing. Eragon saw Saphira’s clenched leg muscles flutter with an involuntary tremor. *You smell of humans*, said Glaedr, *and all you know of your own race is what your instincts have taught you, but you have the heart of a true dragon*.

During this silent exchange, Orik presented himself to Oromis. “Truly, this is beyond anything that I dared hope or expect. You are a pleasant surprise in these dark times, Rider.” He clapped his fist over his heart. “If it is not too presumptuous, I would ask a boon on behalf of my king and my clan, as was the custom between our people.”

Oromis nodded. “And I will grant it if it is within my power.”

“Then tell me: Why have you remained hidden for all these years? You were sorely needed, Argetlam.”

“Ah,” said Oromis. “Many sorrows exist in this world, and one of the greatest is being unable to help those in pain. I could not risk leaving this sanctuary, for if I had died before one of Galbatorix’s eggs had hatched, then there would have been no one to pass on our secrets to the new Rider, and it would have been even harder to defeat Galbatorix.”

"*That* was your reason?" spat Orik. "Those are the words of a coward! The eggs might have never hatched."

Everyone went deathly quiet, except for a faint growl that emanated from between Glaedr's teeth. "If you were not my guest here," said Islanzadí, "I would strike you down myself for that insult."

Oromis spread his hands. "Nay, I am not offended. It is an apt reaction. Understand, Orik, that Glaedr and I cannot fight. Glaedr has his disability, and I," he touched the side of his head, "I am also maimed. The Forsworn broke something within me when I was their captive, and while I can still teach and learn, I can no longer control magic, except for the smallest of spells. The power escapes me, no matter how much I struggle. I would be worse than useless in battle, I would be a weakness and a liability, one who could easily be captured and used against you. So I removed myself from Galbatorix's influence for the good of the many, even though I yearned to openly oppose him."

"The Cripple Who Is Whole," murmured Eragon.

"Forgive me," said Orik. He appeared stricken.

"It is of no consequence." Oromis placed a hand on Eragon's shoulder. "Islanzadí Dröttning, by your leave?"

"Go," she said wearily. "Go and be done with you."

Glaedr crouched low to the ground, and Oromis nimbly climbed up his leg and into the saddle on his back. "Come, Eragon and Saphira. We have much to talk about." The gold dragon leaped off the cliff and circled overhead, rising on an updraft.

Eragon and Orik solemnly clasped arms. "Bring honor to your clan," said the dwarf.

As Eragon mounted Saphira, he felt as if he were about to embark on a long journey and that he should say farewell to those who remained behind. Instead, he just looked at Arya and smiled, letting his wonder and joy show. She half frowned, appearing troubled, but then he was gone, swept into the sky by the eagerness of Saphira's flight.

Together the two dragons followed the white cliff northward for several miles, accompanied only by the sound of their wings. Saphira flew abreast of Glaedr. Her enthusiasm boiled over into Eragon's mind, heightening his own emotions.

They landed in another clearing situated on the edge of the cliff, just before the wall of exposed stone crumbled back into the earth. A bare path led from the precipice to the doorstep of a low hut grown between the trunks of four trees, one of which straddled a stream that emerged from the moody depths of the forest. Glaedr would not fit inside; the hut could have easily sat between his ribs.

"Welcome to my home," said Oromis as he alighted on the ground

with uncommon ease. “I live here, on the brink of the Crags of Tel’naeír, because it provides me the opportunity to think and study in peace. My mind works better away from Ellesméra and the distractions of other people.”

He disappeared inside the hut, then returned with two stools and flagons of clear, cold water for both himself and Eragon. Eragon sipped his drink and admired the spacious view of Du Weldenvarden in an attempt to conceal his awe and nervousness while he waited for the elf to speak. *I’m in the presence of another Rider!* Beside him, Saphira crouched with her eyes fixed on Glaedr, slowly kneading the dirt between her claws.

The gap in their conversation stretched longer and longer. Ten minutes passed … half an hour … then an hour. It reached the point where Eragon began to measure the elapsed time by the sun’s progress. At first his mind buzzed with questions and thoughts, but those eventually subsided into calm acceptance. He enjoyed just observing the day.

Only then did Oromis say, “You have learned the value of patience well. That is good.”

It took Eragon a moment to find his voice. “You can’t stalk a deer if you are in a hurry.”

Oromis lowered his flagon. “True enough. Let me see your hands. I find that they tell me much about a person.” Eragon removed his gloves and allowed the elf to grip his wrists with thin, dry fingers. He examined Eragon’s calluses, then said, “Correct me if I am wrong. You have wielded a scythe and plow more often than a sword, though you are accustomed to a bow.”

“Aye.”

“And you have done little writing or drawing, maybe none at all.”

“Brom taught me my letters in Teirm.”

“Mmm. Beyond your choice of tools, it seems obvious that you tend to be reckless and disregard your own safety.”

“What makes you say that, Oromis-elda?” asked Eragon, using the most respectful and formal honorific that he could think of.

“Not *elda*,” corrected Oromis. “You may call me master in this tongue and ebrithil in the ancient language, nothing else. You will extend the same courtesy to Glaedr. We are your teachers; you are our students; and you will act with proper respect and deference.” Oromis spoke gently, but with the authority of one who expects absolute obedience.

“Yes, Master Oromis.”

“As will you, Saphira.”

Eragon could sense how hard it was for Saphira to unbend her pride enough to say, *Yes, Master*.

Oromis nodded. “Now. Anyone with such a collection of scars has either been hopelessly unfortunate, fights like a berserker, or deliberately pursues danger. Do you fight like a berserker?”

“No.”

“Nor do you seem unfortunate; quite the opposite. That leaves only one explanation. Unless you think differently?”

Eragon cast his mind over his experiences at home and on the road, in an attempt to categorize his behavior. “I would say, rather, that once I dedicate myself to a certain project or path, I see it through, no matter the cost … especially if someone I love is in danger.” His gaze flicked toward Saphira.

“And do you undertake challenging projects?”

“I like to be challenged.”

“So you feel the need to pit yourself against adversity in order to test your abilities.”

“I enjoy overcoming challenges, but I’ve faced enough hardship to know that it’s foolish to make things more difficult than they are. It’s all I can do to survive as it is.”

“Yet you chose to follow the Ra’zac when it would have been easier to remain in Palancar Valley. And you came here.”

“It was the right thing to do … Master.”

For several minutes, no one spoke. Eragon tried to guess what the elf was thinking, but could glean no information from his masklike visage. Finally, Oromis stirred. “Were you, perchance, given a trinket of some kind in Tarnag, Eragon? A piece of jewelry, armor, or even a coin?”

“Aye.” Eragon reached inside of his tunic and fished out the necklace with the tiny silver hammer. “Gannel made this for me on Hrothgar’s orders, to prevent anyone from scrying Saphira or me. They were afraid that Galbatorix might have discovered what I look like.… How did you know?”

“Because,” said Oromis, “I could no longer sense you.”

“Someone tried to scry me by Sílthrim about a week ago. Was that you?”

Oromis shook his head. “After I first scryed you with Arya, I had no need to use such crude methods to find you. I could reach out and touch your mind with mine, as I did when you were injured in Farthen Dûr.” Lifting the amulet, he murmured several lines in the ancient language, then released it. “It contains no other spells I can detect. Keep it with you at all times; it is a valuable gift.” He pressed the tips of his long fingers together, his nails as round and bright as fish scales, and stared between the arches they formed toward the white horizon. “Why are you here, Eragon?”

“To complete my training.”

"And what do you think that process entails?"

Eragon shifted uncomfortably. "Learning more about magic and fighting. Brom wasn't able to finish teaching me everything that he knew."

"Magic, swordsmanship, and other such skills are useless unless you know how and when to apply them. This I will teach you. However, as Galbatorix has demonstrated, power without moral direction is the most dangerous force in the world. My main task, then, is to help you, Eragon and Saphira, to understand what principles guide you, so that you do not make the right choices for the wrong reasons. You must learn more about yourself, who you are and what you are capable of doing. That is why you are here."

When do we begin? asked Saphira.

Oromis began to answer when he stiffened and dropped his flagon. His face went crimson and his fingers tightened into hooked claws that dragged at his robe like cockleburs. The change was frightening and instantaneous. Before Eragon could do more than flinch, the elf had relaxed again, although his entire body now bespoke weariness.

Concerned, Eragon dared to ask, "Are you well?"

A trace of amusement lifted the corner of Oromis's mouth. "Less so than I might wish. We elves fancy ourselves immortal, but not even we can escape certain maladies of the flesh, which are beyond our knowledge of magic to do more than delay. No, do not worry … it isn't contagious, but neither can I rid myself of it." He sighed. "I have spent decades binding myself with hundreds of small, weak spells that, layered one upon another, duplicate the effect of enchantments that are now beyond my reach. I bound myself with them so that I might live long enough to witness the birth of the last dragons and to foster the Riders' resurrection from the ruin of our mistakes."

"How long until …"

Oromis lifted a sharp eyebrow. "How long until I die? We have time, but precious little for you or me, especially if the Varden decide to call upon your help. As a result—to answer your question, Saphira—we will begin your instruction immediately, and we will train faster than any Rider ever has or ever will, for I must condense decades of knowledge into months and weeks."

"You do know," said Eragon, struggling against the embarrassment and shame that made his cheeks burn, "about my … my own *infirmity*." He ground out the last word, hating the sound of it. "I am as crippled as you are."

Sympathy tempered Oromis's gaze, though his voice was firm. "Eragon, you are only a cripple if you consider yourself one. I understand how you feel, but you must remain optimistic, for a negative outlook is more of a handicap than any physical injury. I

speak from personal experience. Pitying yourself serves neither you nor Saphira. I and the other spellweavers will study your malady to see if we might devise a way to alleviate it, but in the meantime, your training will proceed as if nothing were amiss."

Eragon's gut clenched and he tasted bile as he considered the implications. *Surely Oromis wouldn't make me endure that torment again!* "The pain is unbearable," he said frantically. "It would kill me. I—"

"No, Eragon. It will not kill you. That much I know about your curse. However, we both have our duty; you to the Varden, and I to you. We cannot shirk it for the sake of mere pain. Far too much is at risk, and we can ill afford to fail." All Eragon could do was shake his head as panic threatened to overwhelm him. He tried to deny Oromis's words, but their truth was inescapable. "Eragon. You must accept this burden freely. Have you no one or nothing that you are willing to sacrifice yourself for?"

His first thought was of Saphira, but he was not doing this for her. Nor for Nasuada. Nor even for Arya. What drove him, then? When he had pledged fealty to Nasuada, he had done so for the good of Roran and the other people trapped within the Empire. But did they mean enough to him to put himself through such anguish? *Yes*, he decided. *Yes, they do, because I am the only one who has a chance to help them, and because I won't be free of Galbatorix's shadow until they are as well. And because this is my only purpose in life. What else would I do?* He shuddered as he mouthed the ghastly phrase, "I accept on behalf of those I fight for: the people of Alagaësia—of all races—who have suffered from Galbatorix's brutality. No matter the pain, I swear that I will study harder than any student you've had before."

Oromis nodded gravely. "I ask for nothing less." He looked at Glaedr for a moment, then said, "Stand and remove your tunic. Let me see what you are made of."

Wait, said Saphira. *Was Brom aware of your existence here, Master?* Eragon paused, struck by the possibility.

"Of course," said Oromis. "He was my pupil as a boy in Ilirea. I am glad that you gave him a proper burial, for he had a hard life and few enough ever showed him kindness. I hope that he found peace before he entered the void."

Eragon slowly frowned. "Did you know Morzan as well?"

"He was my apprentice before Brom."

"And Galbatorix?"

"I was one of the Elders who denied him another dragon after his first was killed, but no, I never had the misfortune to teach him. He made sure to personally hunt down and kill each of his mentors."

Eragon wanted to inquire further, but he knew that it would be better to wait, so he stood and unlaced the top of his tunic. *It seems*,

he said to Saphira, *that we will never learn all of Brom's secrets*. He shivered as he pulled off the tunic in the cool air, then squared his shoulders and lifted his chest.

Oromis circled him, stopping with an astonished exclamation as he saw the scar that crossed Eragon's back. "Did not Arya or one of the Varden's healers offer to remove this weal? You should not have to carry it."

"Arya did offer, but …" Eragon stopped, unable to articulate his feelings. Finally, he just said, "It's part of me now, just as Murtagh's scar is part of him."

"Murtagh's scar?"

"Murtagh bore a similar mark. It was inflicted when his father, Morzan, threw Zar'roc at him while he was only a child."

Oromis stared at him seriously for a long time before he nodded and moved on. "You have a fair amount of muscle, and you are not as lopsided as most swordsmen. Are you ambidextrous?"

"Not really, but I had to teach myself to fight with my left hand after I broke my wrist by Teirm."

"Good. That will save some time. Clasp your hands behind your back and lift them as high as possible." Eragon did as he was told, but the posture hurt his shoulders and he could barely make his hands meet. "Now bend forward while keeping your knees straight. Try to touch the ground." This was even harder for Eragon; he ended up bowed like a hunchback, with his arms hanging uselessly by his head while his hamstrings twinged and burned. His fingers were still nine or ten inches from the ground. "At least you can stretch without hurting yourself. I had not hoped for so much. You can perform a number of exercises for flexibility without overexerting. Yes."

Then Oromis addressed Saphira: "I would know your capabilities as well, dragon." He gave her a number of complex poses that had her contort every foot of her sinuous length in fantastic ways, culminating in a series of aerial acrobatics the likes of which Eragon had never seen before. Only a few things exceeded her ability, such as executing a backward loop while corkscrewing through the air.

When she landed, it was Glaedr who said, *I fear that we coddled the Riders. If our hatchlings had been forced to care for themselves in the wild —as you were, and so our ancestors were—then perhaps they would have possessed your skill.*

"No," said Oromis, "even if Saphira had been raised on Vroengard using the established methods, she would still be an extraordinary flier. I've rarely seen a dragon so naturally suited to the sky." Saphira blinked, then shuffled her wings and busied herself cleaning one of her claws in a manner that hid her head from view. "You have room to improve, as do we all, but little, very little." The elf reseated

himself, his back perfectly straight.

For the next five hours, by Eragon's reckoning, Oromis delved into every aspect of his and Saphira's knowledge, from botany to woodworking to metallurgy and medicine, although he mainly concentrated on their grasp of history and the ancient language. The interrogation comforted Eragon, as it reminded him of how Brom used to quiz him during their long treks to Teirm and Dras-Leona.

When they broke for lunch, Oromis invited Eragon into his house, leaving the two dragons alone. The elf's quarters were barren except for those few essentials necessary for food, hygiene, and the pursuit of an intellectual life. Two entire walls were dotted with cubbyholes that held hundreds of scrolls. Next to the table hung a golden sheath—the same color as Glaedr's scales—and a matching sword with a blade the color of iridescent bronze.

On the inner pane of the door, set within the heart of the wood, was a flat panel one span high and two wide. It depicted a beautiful, towering city built against an escarpment and caught in the ruddy light of a rising harvest moon. The pitted lunar face was bisected by the horizon and appeared to sit on the ground like a maculated dome as large as a mountain. The picture was so clear and perfectly detailed, Eragon at first took it to be a magical window; it was only when he saw that the image was indeed static that he could accept it as a piece of art.

"Where is this?" he asked.

Oromis's slanted features tightened for an instant. "You would do well to memorize that landscape, Eragon, for there lies the heart of your misery. You see what was once our city of Ilirea. It was burned and abandoned during Du Fyrn Skulblaka and became the capital of the Broddring Kingdom and now is the black city of Urû'baen. I made that fairth on the night that I and others were forced to flee our home before Galbatorix arrived."

"You painted this … fairth?"

"No, no such thing. A fairth is an image fixed by magic upon a square of polished slate that is prepared beforehand with layers of pigments. The landscape upon that door is exactly how Ilirea presented itself to me at the moment I uttered my spell."

"And," said Eragon, unable to stop the flow of questions, "what was the Broddring Kingdom?"

Oromis's eyes widened with dismay. "You don't know?" Eragon shook his head. "How can you not? Considering your circumstances and the fear that Galbatorix wields among your people, I might understand that you were raised in darkness, ignorant of your heritage. But I cannot credit Brom with being so lax with your instruction as to neglect subjects that even the youngest elf or dwarf

knows. The children of your Varden could tell me more about the past."

"Brom was more concerned with keeping me alive than teaching me about people who are already dead," retorted Eragon.

This drew silence from Oromis. Finally, he said, "Forgive me. I did not mean to impugn Brom's judgment, only I am impatient beyond reason; we have so little time, and each new thing you must learn reduces that which you can master during your tenure here." He opened a series of cupboards hidden within the curved wall and removed bread rolls and bowls of fruit, which he rowed out on the table. He paused for a moment over the food with his eyes closed before beginning to eat. "The Broddring Kingdom was the human's country before the Riders fell. After Galbatorix killed Vrael, he flew on Ilirea with the Forsworn and deposed King Angrenost, taking his throne and titles for his own. The Broddring Kingdom then formed the core of Galbatorix's conquests. He added Vroengard and other lands to the east and south to his holdings, creating the empire you are familiar with. Technically, the Broddring Kingdom still exists, though, at this point, I doubt that it is much more than a name on royal decrees."

Afraid to pester the elf with further inquiries, Eragon concentrated on his food. His face must have betrayed him, though, because Oromis said, "You remind me of Brom when I chose him as my apprentice. He was younger than you, only ten, but his curiosity was just as great. I doubt I heard aught from him for a year but *how, what, when*, and, above all else, *why*. Do not be shy to ask what lies in your heart."

"I want to know so much," whispered Eragon. "Who are you? Where do you come from? … Where did Brom come from? What was Morzan like? How, what, when, *why*? And I want to know everything about Vroengard and the Riders. Maybe then my own path will be clearer."

Silence fell between them as Oromis meticulously disassembled a blackberry, prying out one plump segment at a time. When the last corpuscle vanished between his port-red lips, he rubbed his hands flat together—"polishing his palms," as Garrow used to say—and said, "Know this about me, then: I was born some centuries past in our city of Luthivíra, which stood in the woods by Lake Tüdosten. At the age of twenty, like all elf children, I was presented to the eggs that the dragons had given the Riders, and Glaedr hatched for me. We were trained as Riders, and for near a century, we traveled the world over, doing Vrael's will. Eventually, the day arrived when it was deemed appropriate for us to retire and pass on our experience to the next generation, so we took a position in Ilirea and taught new Riders, one or two at a time, until Galbatorix destroyed us."

"And Brom?"

"Brom came from a family of illuminators in Kuasta. His mother was Nelda and his father Holcomb. Kuasta is so isolated by the Spine from the rest of Alagaësia, it has become a peculiar place, full of strange customs and superstitions. When he was still new to Ilirea, Brom would knock on a door frame three times before entering or leaving a room. The human students teased him about it until he abandoned the practice along with some of his other habits.

"Morzan was my greatest failure. Brom idolized him. He never left his side, never contradicted him, and never believed that he could best Morzan in any venture. Morzan, I'm ashamed to admit—for it was within my power to stop—was aware of this and took advantage of Brom's devotion in a hundred different ways. He grew so proud and cruel that I considered separating him from Brom. But before I could, Morzan helped Galbatorix to steal a dragon hatchling, Shruikan, to replace the one Galbatorix had lost, killing the dragon's original Rider in the process. Morzan and Galbatorix then fled together, sealing our doom.

"You cannot begin to fathom the effect Morzan's betrayal had on Brom until you understand the depth of Brom's affection for him. And when Galbatorix at last revealed himself and the Forsworn killed Brom's dragon, Brom focused all of his anger and pain on the one who he felt was responsible for the destruction of his world: Morzan."

Oromis paused, his face grave. "Do you know why losing your dragon, or vice versa, usually kills the survivor?"

"I can imagine," said Eragon. He quailed at the thought.

"The pain is shock enough—although it isn't always a factor—but what really causes the damage is feeling part of your mind, part of your identity, die. When it happened to Brom, I fear that he went mad for a time. After I was captured and escaped, I brought him to Ellesméra for safety, but he refused to stay, instead marching with our army to the plains of Ilirea, where King Evandar was slain.

"The confusion then was indescribable. Galbatorix was busy consolidating his power, the dwarves were in retreat, the southwest was a mass of war as the humans rebelled and fought to create Surda, and we had just lost our king. Driven by his desire for vengeance, Brom sought to use the turmoil to his advantage. He gathered together many of those who had been exiled, freed some who had been imprisoned, and with them he formed the Varden. He led them for a few years, then surrendered the position to another so that he was free to pursue his true passion, which was Morzan's downfall. Brom personally killed three of the Forsworn, including Morzan, and he was responsible for the deaths of five others. He was rarely happy during his life, but he was a good Rider and a good man, and I am honored to

have known him."

"I never heard his name mentioned in connection to the Forsworn's deaths," objected Eragon.

"Galbatorix did not want to publicize the fact that any still existed who could defeat his servants. Much of his power resides in the appearance of invulnerability."

Once again, Eragon was forced to revise his conception of Brom, from the village storyteller that Eragon had first taken him to be, to the warrior and magician he had traveled with, to the Rider he was at last revealed as, and now firebrand, revolutionary leader, and assassin. It was hard to reconcile all of those roles. *I feel as if I barely knew him. I wish that we had had a chance to talk about all of this at least once*. "He was a good man," agreed Eragon.

He looked out one of the round windows that faced the edge of the cliff and allowed the afternoon warmth to suffuse the room. He watched Saphira, noting how she acted with Glaedr, seeming both shy and coy. One moment she would twist around to examine some feature of the clearing, the next she would shuffle her wings and make small advances on the larger dragon, weaving her head from side to side, the tip of her tail twitching as if she were about to pounce on a deer. She reminded Eragon of a kitten trying to bait an old tomcat into playing with her, only Glaedr remained impassive throughout her machinations.

Saphira, he said. She responded with a distracted flicker of her thoughts, barely acknowledging him. *Saphira, answer me*.

What?

I know you're excited, but don't make a fool of yourself.

You've made a fool of yourself plenty of times, she snapped.

Her reply was so unexpected, it stunned him. It was the sort of casually cruel remark that humans often make, but that he had never thought to hear from her. He finally managed to say, *That doesn't make it any better*. She grunted and closed her mind to his, although he could still feel the thread of her emotions connecting them.

Eragon returned to himself to find Oromis's gray eyes heavy upon him. The elf's gaze was so perceptive, Eragon was sure that Oromis understood what had transpired. Eragon forced a smile and motioned toward Saphira. "Even though we're linked, I can never predict what she's going to do. The more I learn about her, the more I realize how different we are."

Then Oromis made his first statement that Eragon thought was truly wise: "Those whom we love are often the most alien to us." The elf paused. "She is very young, as are you. It took Glaedr and me decades before we fully understood each other. A Rider's bond with his dragon is like any relationship—that is, a work in progress. Do you trust her?"

"With my life."

"And does she trust you?"

"Yes."

"Then humor her. You were brought up as an orphan. She was brought up to believe that she was the last sane individual of her entire race. And now she has been proved wrong. Don't be surprised if it takes some months before she stops pestering Glaedr and returns her attention to you."

Eragon rolled a blueberry between his thumb and forefinger; his appetite had vanished. "Why don't elves eat meat?"

"Why should we?" Oromis held up a strawberry and rotated it so that the light reflected off its dimpled skin and illuminated the tiny hairs that bearded the fruit. "Everything that we need or want we sing from the plants, including our food. It would be barbaric to make animals suffer that we might have additional courses on the table.… Our choice will make greater sense to you before long."

Eragon frowned. He had always eaten meat and did not look forward to living solely on fruit and vegetables while in Ellesméra. "Don't you miss the taste?"

"You cannot miss that which you have never had."

"What about Glaedr, though? He can't live off grass."

"No, but neither does he needlessly inflict pain. We each do the best we can with what we are given. You cannot help who or what you are born as."

"And Islanzadí? Her cape was made of swan feathers."

"Loose feathers gathered over the course of many years. No birds were killed to make her garment."

They finished the meal, and Eragon helped Oromis to scour the dishes clean with sand. As the elf stacked them in the cupboard, he asked, "Did you bathe this morning?" The question startled Eragon, but he answered that no, he had not. "Please do so tomorrow then, and every day following."

"Every day! The water's too cold for that. I'll catch the ague."

Oromis eyed him oddly. "Then make it warmer."

Now it was Eragon's turn to look askance. "I'm not strong enough to heat an entire stream with magic," he protested.

The house echoed as Oromis laughed. Outside, Glaedr swung his head toward the window and inspected the elf, then returned to his earlier position. "I assume that you explored your quarters last night." Eragon nodded. "And you saw a small room with a depression in the floor?"

"I thought that it might be for washing clothes or linens."

"It is for washing *you*. Two nozzles are concealed in the side of the wall above the hollow. Open them and you can bathe in water of any

temperature. Also," he gestured at Eragon's chin, "while you are my student, I expect you to keep yourself clean-shaven until you can grow a full beard—if you so choose—and not look like a tree with half its leaves blown off. Elves do not shave, but I will have a razor and mirror found and sent to you."

Wincing at the blow to his pride, Eragon agreed. They returned outside, whereupon Oromis looked at Glaedr and the dragon said, *We have decided upon a curriculum for Saphira and you*.

The elf said, "You will start—"

—an hour after sunrise tomorrow, in the time of the Red Lily. Return here then.

"And bring the saddle that Brom made for you, Saphira," continued Oromis. "Do what you wish in the meantime; Ellesméra holds many wonders for a foreigner, if you care to see them."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Eragon, bowing his head. "Before I go, Master, I want to thank you for helping me in Tronjheim after I killed Durza. I doubt that I would have survived without your assistance. I am in your debt."

We are both in your debt, added Saphira.

Oromis smiled slightly and inclined his head.

THE SECRET LIVES OF ANTS

The moment that Oromis and Glaedr were out of sight, Saphira said, *Eragon, another dragon! Can you believe it?* He patted her shoulder. *It's wonderful.* High above Du Weldenvarden, the only sign of habitation in the forest was an occasional ghostly plume of smoke that rose from the crown of a tree and soon faded into clear air.

I never expected to encounter another dragon, except for Shruikan. Maybe rescue the eggs from Galbatorix, yes, but that was the extent of my hopes. And now this! She wriggled underneath him with joy. *Glaedr is incredible, isn't he? He's so old and strong and his scales are so bright. He must be two, no, three times bigger than me. Did you see his claws? They …*

She continued on in that manner for several minutes, waxing eloquent about Glaedr's attributes. But stronger than her words were the emotions Eragon sensed roiling within her: eagerness and enthusiasm, twined over what he could only identify as a longing adoration.

Eragon tried to tell Saphira what he had learned from Oromis—since he knew that she had not paid attention—but he found it impossible to change the subject of conversation. He sat silently on her back, the world an emerald ocean below, and felt himself the loneliest man in existence.

Back at their quarters, Eragon decided against any sightseeing; he was far too tired from the day's events and the weeks of traveling. And Saphira was more than content to sit on her bed and chatter about Glaedr while he examined the mysteries of the elves' wash closet.

Morning came, and with it a package wrapped in onionskin paper containing the razor and mirror that Oromis had promised. The blade was of elvish make, so it needed no sharpening or stropping. Grimacing, Eragon first bathed in steaming hot water, then held up the mirror and confronted his visage.

I look older. Older and worn. Not only that, but his features had become far more angled, giving him an ascetic, hawklike appearance. He was no elf, but neither would anyone take him to be a purebred human if they inspected him closely. Pulling back his hair, he bared his ears, which now tapered to slight points, more evidence of how his

bond with Saphira had changed him. He touched one ear, letting his fingers wander over the unfamiliar shape.

It was difficult for him to accept the transformation of his flesh. Even though he had known it would occur—and occasionally welcomed the prospect as the last confirmation that he was a Rider—the reality of it filled him with confusion. He resented the fact that he had no say in how his body was being altered, yet at the same time he was curious where the process would take him. Also, he was aware that he was still in the midst of his own, human adolescence, and its attendant realm of mysteries and difficulties.

When will I finally know who and what I am?

He placed the edge of the razor against his cheek, as he had seen Garrow do, and dragged it across his skin. The hairs came free, but they were cut long and ragged. He altered the angle of the blade and tried again with a bit more success.

When he reached his chin, though, the razor slipped in his hand and cut him from the corner of his mouth to the underside of his jaw. He howled and dropped the razor, clapping his hand over the incision, which poured blood down his neck. Spitting the words past bared teeth, he said, "Waíse heill." The pain quickly receded as magic knitted his flesh back together, though his heart still pounded from the shock.

Eragon! cried Saphira. She forced her head and shoulders into the vestibule and nosed open the door to the closet, flaring her nostrils at the scent of blood.

I'll live, he assured her.

She eyed the sanguine water. *Be more careful. I'd rather you were as ragged as a molting deer than have you decapitate yourself for the sake of a close shave.*

So would I. Go on, I'm fine.

Saphira grunted and reluctantly withdrew.

Eragon sat, glaring at the razor. Finally, he muttered, "Forget this." Composing himself, he reviewed his store of words from the ancient language, selected those that he needed, and then allowed his invented spell to roll off his tongue. A faint stream of black powder fell from his face as his stubble crumbled into dust, leaving his cheeks perfectly smooth.

Satisfied, Eragon went and saddled Saphira, who immediately took to the air, aiming their course toward the Crags of Tel'naeír. They landed before the hut and were met by Oromis and Glaedr.

Oromis examined Saphira's saddle. He traced each strap with his fingers, pausing on the stitching and buckles, and then pronounced it passable handiwork considering how and when it had been constructed. "Brom was always clever with his hands. Use this saddle

when you must travel with great speed. But when comfort is allowed —" He stepped into his hut for a moment and reappeared carrying a thick, molded saddle decorated with gilt designs along the seat and leg pieces. "—use this. It was crafted in Vroengard and imbued with many spells so that it will never fail you in time of need."

Eragon staggered under the weight of the saddle as he received it from Oromis. It had the same general shape as Brom's, with a row of buckles—intended to immobilize his legs—hanging from each side. The deep seat was sculpted out of the leather in such a way that he could fly for hours with ease, both sitting upright and lying flat against Saphira's neck. Also, the straps encircling Saphira's chest were rigged with slips and knots so that they could extend to accommodate years of growth. A series of broad ties on either side of the head of the saddle caught Eragon's attention. He asked their purpose.

Glaedr rumbled, *Those secure your wrists and arms so that you are not killed like a rat shaken to death when Saphira performs a complex maneuver*.

Oromis helped Eragon relieve Saphira of her current saddle. "Saphira, you will go with Glaedr today, and I will work with Eragon here."

As you wish, she said, and crowed with excitement. Heaving his golden bulk off the ground, Glaedr soared off to the north, Saphira close behind.

Oromis did not give Eragon long to ponder Saphira's departure; the elf marched him to a square of hard-packed dirt beneath a willow tree at the far side of the clearing. Standing opposite him in the square, Oromis said, "What I am about to show you is called the Rimgar, or the Dance of Snake and Crane. It is a series of poses that we developed to prepare our warriors for combat, although all elves use it now to maintain their health and fitness. The Rimgar consists of four levels, each more difficult than the last. We will start with the first."

Apprehension for the coming ordeal sickened Eragon to the point where he could barely move. He clenched his fists and hunched his shoulders, his scar tugging at the skin of his back as he glared between his feet.

"Relax," advised Oromis. Eragon jerked open his hands and let them hang limply at the end of his rigid arms. "I asked you to relax, Eragon. You can't do the Rimgar if you are as stiff as a piece of rawhide."

"Yes, Master." Eragon grimaced and reluctantly loosened his muscles and joints, although a knot of tension remained coiled in his belly.

"Place your feet together and your arms at your sides. Look straight ahead. Now take a deep breath and lift your arms over your head so that your palms meet.… Yes, like that. Exhale and bend down as far as

you can, put your palms on the ground, take another breath … and jump back. Good. Breathe in and bend up, looking toward the sky … and exhale, lifting your hips until you form a triangle. Breathe in through the back of your throat … and out. In … and out. In …"

To Eragon's utter relief, the stances proved gentle enough to hold without igniting the pain in his back, yet challenging enough that sweat beaded his forehead and he panted for breath. He found himself grinning with joy at his reprieve. His wariness evaporated and he flowed through the postures—most of which far exceeded his flexibility—with more energy and confidence than he had possessed since before the battle in Farthen Dûr. *Maybe I've healed!*

Oromis performed the Rimgar with him, displaying a level of strength and flexibility that astounded Eragon, especially for one so old. The elf could touch his forehead to his toes. Throughout the exercise, Oromis remained impeccably composed, as if he were doing no more than strolling down a garden path. His instruction was calmer and more patient than Brom's, yet completely unyielding. No deviation was allowed from the correct path.

"Let us wash the sweat from our limbs," said Oromis when they finished.

Going to the stream by the house, they quickly disrobed. Eragon surreptitiously watched the elf, curious as to what he looked like without his clothes. Oromis was very thin, yet his muscles were perfectly defined, etched under his skin with the hard lines of a woodcut. No hair grew upon his chest or legs, not even around his groin. His body seemed almost freakish to Eragon, compared to the men he was used to seeing in Carvahall—although it had a certain refined elegance to it, like that of a wildcat.

When they were clean, Oromis took Eragon deep into Du Weldenvarden to a hollow where the dark trees leaned inward, obscuring the sky behind branches and veils of snarled lichen. Their feet sank into the moss above their ankles. All was silent about them.

Pointing to a white stump with a flat, polished top three yards across that rested in the center of the hollow, Oromis said, "Sit here." Eragon did as he was told. "Cross your legs and close your eyes." The world went dark around him. From his right, he heard Oromis whisper, "Open your mind, Eragon. Open your mind and listen to the world around you, to the thoughts of every being in this glade, from the ants in the trees to the worms in the ground. Listen until you can hear them all and you understand their purpose and nature. Listen, and when you hear no more, come tell me what you have learned."

Then the forest was quiet.

Unsure if Oromis had left, Eragon tentatively lowered the barriers around his mind and reached out with his consciousness, like he did

when trying to contact Saphira at a great distance. Initially only a void surrounded him, but then pricks of light and warmth began to appear in the darkness, strengthening until he sat in the midst of a galaxy of swirling constellations, each bright point representing a life. Whenever he had contacted other beings with his mind, like Cadoc, Snowfire, or Solembum, the focus had always been on the one he wanted to communicate with. But this … this was as if he had been standing deaf in the midst of a crowd and now he could hear the rivers of conversation whirling around him.

He felt suddenly vulnerable; he was completely exposed to the world. Anyone or anything that might want to leap into his mind and control him could now do so. He tensed unconsciously, withdrawing back into himself, and his awareness of the hollow vanished. Remembering one of Oromis's lessons, Eragon slowed his breathing and monitored the sweep of his lungs until he had relaxed enough to reopen his mind.

Of all the lives he could sense, the majority were, by far, insects. Their sheer number astounded him. Tens of thousands dwelled in a square foot of moss, teeming millions throughout the rest of the small hollow, and uncounted masses beyond. Their abundance actually frightened Eragon. He had always known that humans were scarce and beleaguered in Alagaësia, but he had never imagined that they were so outnumbered by even *beetles*.

Since they were one of the few insects that he was familiar with, and Oromis had mentioned them, Eragon concentrated his attention on the columns of red ants marching across the ground and up the stems of a wild rosebush. What he gleaned from them were not so much thoughts—their brains were too primitive—but urges: the urge to find food and avoid injury, the urge to defend one's territory, the urge to mate. By examining the ants' instincts, he could begin to puzzle out their behavior.

It fascinated him to discover that—except for the few individuals exploring outside the borders of their province—the ants knew exactly where they were going. He was unable to ascertain what mechanism guided them, but they followed clearly defined paths from their nest to food and back. Their source of food was another surprise. As he had expected, the ants killed and scavenged other insects, but most of their efforts were directed toward the cultivation of … of *something* that dotted the rosebush. Whatever the lifeform was, it was barely large enough for him to sense. He focused all of his strength on it in an attempt to identify it and satisfy his curiosity.

The answer was so simple, he laughed out loud when he comprehended it: *aphids*. The ants were acting as shepherds for aphids, driving and protecting them, as well as extracting sustenance

from them by massaging the aphids' bellies with the tips of their antennae. Eragon could hardly believe it, but the longer he watched, the more he became convinced that he was correct.

He traced the ants underground into their complex matrix of warrens and studied how they cared for a certain member of their species that was several times bigger than a normal ant. However, he was unable to determine the insect's purpose; all he could see were servants swarming around it, rotating it, and removing the specks of matter it produced at regular intervals.

After a time, Eragon decided that he had gleaned all the information from the ants that he could—unless he was willing to sit there for the rest of the day—and was about to return to his body when a squirrel jumped into the glade. Its appearance was like a blast of light to him, attuned as he was to the insects. Stunned, he was overwhelmed by a rush of sensations and feelings from the animal. He smelled the forest with its nose, felt the bark give under his hooked claws and the air swish through his upraised plume of a tail. Compared to an ant, the squirrel burned with energy and possessed unquestionable intelligence.

Then it leaped to another branch and faded from his awareness.

The forest seemed much darker and quieter than before when Eragon opened his eyes. He took a deep breath and looked about, appreciating for the first time how much life existed in the world. Unfolding his cramped legs, he walked over to the rosebush.

He bent down and examined the branches and twigs. Sure enough, aphids and their crimson guardians clung to them. And near the base of the plant was the mound of pine needles that marked the entrance to the ants' lair. It was strange to see with his own eyes; none of it betrayed the numerous and subtle interactions that he was now aware of.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Eragon returned to the clearing, wondering what he might be crushing under his feet with every step. When he emerged from under the trees' shelter, he was startled by how far the sun had fallen. *I must have been sitting there for at least three hours*.

He found Oromis in his hut, writing with a goose-feather quill. The elf finished his line, then wiped the nib of the quill clean, stoppered his ink, and asked, "And what did you hear, Eragon?"

Eragon was eager to share. As he described his experience, he heard his voice rise with enthusiasm over the details of the ants' society. He recounted everything that he could recall, down to the minutest and most inconsequential observation, proud of the information that he had gathered.

When he finished, Oromis raised an eyebrow. "Is that all?"

"I …" Dismay gripped Eragon as he understood that he had somehow missed the point of the exercise. "Yes, Ebrithil."

"And what about the other organisms in the earth and the air? Can you tell me what they were doing while your ants tended their droves?"

"No, Ebrithil."

"Therein lies your mistake. You must become aware of all things equally and not blinker yourself in order to concentrate on a particular subject. This is an essential lesson, and until you master it, you will meditate on the stump for an hour each day."

"How will I know when I have mastered it?"

"When you can watch one and know all."

Oromis motioned for Eragon to join him at the table, then set a fresh sheet of paper before him, along with a quill and a bottle of ink. "So far you have made do with an incomplete knowledge of the ancient language. Not that any of us knows all the words in the language, but you must be familiar with its grammar and structure so that you do not kill yourself through an incorrectly placed verb or similar mistake. I do not expect you to speak our language like an elf —that would take a lifetime—but I do expect you to achieve unconscious competence. That is, you must be able to use it without thinking.

"In addition, you must learn to read and write the ancient language. Not only will this help you to memorize words, it is an essential skill if you need to compose an especially long spell and you don't trust your memory, or if you find such a spell recorded and you want to use it.

"Every race has evolved their own system of writing the ancient language. The dwarves use their runic alphabet, as do humans. They are only makeshift techniques, though, and are incapable of expressing the language's true subtleties as well as our Liduen Kvaedhí, the Poetic Script. The Liduen Kvaedhí was designed to be as elegant, beautiful, and precise as possible. It is composed of forty-two different shapes that represent various sounds. These shapes can be combined in a nearly infinite range of glyphs that represent both individual words and entire phrases. The symbol on your ring is one such glyph. The symbol on Zar'roc is another.… Let us start: What are the basic vowel sounds of the ancient language?"

"What?"

Eragon's ignorance of the underpinnings of the ancient language quickly became apparent. When he had traveled with Brom, the old storyteller had concentrated on having Eragon memorize lists of words that he might need to survive, as well as perfecting his pronunciation. In those two areas, he excelled, but he could not even explain the difference between a definite and indefinite article. If the gaps in his

education frustrated Oromis, the elf did not betray it through word or action, but labored persistently to mend them.

At a certain point during the lesson, Eragon commented, "I've never needed very many words in my spells; Brom said it was a gift that I could do so much with just *brisingr*. I think the most I ever said in the ancient language was when I spoke to Arya in her mind and when I blessed an orphan in Farthen Dûr."

"You blessed a child in the ancient language?" asked Oromis, suddenly alert. "Do you remember how you worded this blessing?"

"Aye."

"Recite it for me." Eragon did so, and a look of pure horror engulfed Oromis. He exclaimed, "You used *skölir*! Are you sure? Wasn't it *sköliro*?"

Eragon frowned. "No, *skölir*. Why shouldn't I have used it? *Skölir* means *shielded*. '… and may you be shielded from misfortune.' It was a good blessing."

"That was no blessing, but a curse." Oromis was more agitated than Eragon had ever seen him. "The suffix *o* forms the past tense of verbs ending with *r* and *i*. *Sköliro* means *shielded*, but *skölir* means *shield*. What you said was 'May luck and happiness follow you and may you be a *shield* from misfortune.' Instead of protecting this child from the vagaries of fate, you condemned her to be a sacrifice for others, to absorb their misery and suffering so that they might live in peace."

No, no! It can't be! Eragon recoiled from the possibility. "The effect a spell has isn't only determined by the word's sense, but also by your intent, and I didn't intend to harm—"

"You cannot gainsay a word's inherent nature. Twist it, yes. Guide it, yes. But not contravene its definition to imply the very opposite." Oromis pressed his fingers together and stared at the table, his lips reduced to a flat white line. "I will trust that you did *not* mean harm, else I would refuse to teach you further. If you were honest and your heart was pure, then this blessing may cause less evil than I fear, though it will still be the nucleus of more pain than either of us could wish."

Violent trembling overtook Eragon as he realized what he had done to the child's life. "It may not undo my mistake," he said, "but perhaps it will alleviate it; Saphira marked the girl on the brow, just like she marked my palm with the gedwëy ignasia."

For the first time in his life, Eragon witnessed an elf dumbstruck. Oromis's gray eyes widened, his mouth opened, and he clutched the arms of his chair until the wood groaned with protest. "One who bears the sign of the Riders, and yet is not a Rider," he murmured. "In all my years, I have never met anyone such as the two of you. Every decision you make seems to have an impact far beyond what anyone

could anticipate. You change the world with your whims."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Neither, it just is. Where is the babe now?"

It took a moment for Eragon to compose his thoughts. "With the Varden, either in Farthen Dûr or Surda. Do you think that Saphira's mark will help her?"

"I know not," said Oromis. "No precedent exists to draw upon for wisdom."

"There must be ways to remove the blessing, to negate a spell." Eragon was almost pleading.

"There are. But for them to be most effective, you should be the one to apply them, and you cannot be spared here. Even under the best of circumstances, remnants of your magic will haunt this girl evermore. Such is the power of the ancient language." He paused. "I see that you understand the gravity of the situation, so I will say this only once: you bear full responsibility for this girl's doom, and, because of the wrong you did her, it is incumbent upon you to help her if ever the opportunity should arise. By the Riders' law, she is your shame as surely as if you had begotten her out of wedlock, a disgrace among humans, if I remember correctly."

"Aye," whispered Eragon. "I understand." *I understand that I forced a defenseless baby to pursue a certain destiny without ever giving her a choice in the matter. Can someone be truly good if they never have the opportunity to act badly? I made her a slave*. He also knew that if he had been bound in that manner without permission, he would hate his jailer with every fiber of his being.

"Then we will speak of this no more."

"Yes, Ebrithil."

Eragon was still subdued, even depressed, by the end of the day. He barely looked up when they went outside to meet Saphira and Glaedr upon their return. The trees shook from the fury of the gale that the two dragons created with their wings. Saphira seemed proud of herself; she arched her neck and pranced toward Eragon, opening her chops in a lupine grin.

A stone cracked under Glaedr's weight as the ancient dragon turned a giant eye—as large as a dinner platter—on Eragon and asked, *What are the rules three to spotting downdrafts, and the rules five for escaping them?*

Startled out of his reverie, Eragon could only blink dumbly. "I don't know."

Then Oromis confronted Saphira and asked, "What creatures do ants farm, and how do they extract food from them?"

I wouldn't know, declared Saphira. She sounded affronted.

A gleam of anger leaped into Oromis's eyes and he crossed his arms, though his expression remained calm. "After all the two of you have done together, I would think that you had learned the most basic lesson of being Shur'tugal: Share everything with your partner. Would you cut off your right arm? Would you fly with only one wing? Never. Then why would you ignore the bond that links you? By doing so, you reject your greatest gift and your advantage over any single opponent. Nor should you just talk to each other with your minds, but rather mingle your consciousnesses until you act and think as one. I expect both of you to know what either one of you is taught."

"What about our privacy?" objected Eragon.

Privacy? said Glaedr. *Keep your thoughts to thyself when you leave here, if it pleases you, but while we tutor you, you have no privacy*.

Eragon looked at Saphira, feeling even worse than before. She avoided his gaze, then stamped a foot and faced him directly. *What?*

They're right. We have been negligent.

It's not my fault.

I didn't say that it was. She had guessed his opinion, though. He resented the attention she lavished on Glaedr and how it drew her away from him. *We'll do better, won't we?*

Of course! she snapped.

She declined to offer Oromis and Glaedr an apology, though, leaving the task to Eragon. "We won't disappoint you again."

"See that you don't. You will be tested tomorrow on what the other learned." Oromis revealed a round wood bauble nestled in the middle of his palm. "So long as you take care to wind it regularly, this device will wake you at the proper time each morning. Return here as soon as you have bathed and eaten."

The bauble was surprisingly heavy when Eragon took it. The size of a walnut, it had been carved with deep whorls around a knob wrought in the likeness of a moss-rose blossom. He turned the knob experimentally and heard three clicks as a hidden ratchet advanced. "Thank you," he said.

Under the Menoa Tree

After Eragon and Saphira had said their farewells, they flew back to their tree house with Saphira's new saddle dangling between her front claws. Without acknowledging the fact, they gradually opened their minds and allowed their connection to widen and deepen, though neither of them consciously reached for the other. Eragon's tumultuous emotions must have been strong enough for Saphira to sense anyway, though, for she asked, *What happened, then?*

A throbbing pain built up behind his eyes as he explained the terrible crime he had committed in Farthen Dûr. Saphira was as appalled by it as he was. He said, *Your gift may help that girl, but what I did is inexcusable and will only hurt her*.

The blame isn't all yours. I share your knowledge of the ancient language, and I didn't spot the error any more than you did. When Eragon remained silent, she added, *At least your back didn't cause any trouble today. Be grateful for that*.

He grunted, unwilling to be tempted out of his black mood. *And what did you learn this fine day?*

How to identify and avoid dangerous weather patterns. She paused, apparently ready to share the memories with him, but he was too busy worrying about his distorted blessing to inquire further. Nor could he bear the thought of being so intimate right then. When he did not pursue the matter, Saphira withdrew into a taciturn silence.

Back in their bedroom, he found a tray of food by the screen door, as he had the previous night. Carrying the tray to his bed—which had been remade with fresh linens—he settled down to eat, cursing the lack of meat. Already sore from the Rimgar, he propped himself up with pillows and was about to take his first bite when there came a gentle rapping at the opening to his chamber. "Enter," he growled. He took a drink of water.

Eragon nearly choked as Arya stepped through the doorway. She had abandoned the leather clothes she usually wore in favor of a soft green tunic cinched at the waist with a girdle adorned with moonstones. She had also removed her customary headband, allowing her hair to tumble around her face and over her shoulders. The biggest change, however, was not so much in her dress but her bearing; the brittle tension that had permeated her demeanor ever since Eragon first met her was now gone.

She seemed to have finally relaxed.

He scrambled to his feet, noticing that her own were bare. “Arya! Why are you here?”

Touching her first two fingers to her lips, she said, “Do you plan on spending another evening inside?”

“I—”

“You have been in Ellesméra for three days now, and yet you have seen nothing of our city. I know that you always wished to explore it. Set aside your weariness this once and accompany me.” Gliding toward him, she took Zar’roc from where it lay by his side and beckoned to him.

He rose from the bed and followed her into the vestibule, where they descended through the trapdoor and down the precipitous staircase that wound around the rough tree trunk. Overhead, the gathering clouds glowed with the sun’s last rays before it was extinguished behind the edge of the world.

A piece of bark fell on Eragon’s head and he looked up to see Saphira leaning out of their bedroom, gripping the wood with her claws. Without opening her wings, she sprang into the air and dropped the hundred or so feet to the ground, landing in a thunderous cloud of dirt. *I’m coming.*

“Of course,” said Arya, as if she expected nothing less. Eragon scowled; he had wanted to be alone with her, but he knew better than to complain.

They walked under the trees, where dusk already extended its tendrils from inside hollow logs, dark crevices in boulders, and the underside of knobby eaves. Here and there, a gemlike lantern twinkled within the side of a tree or at the end of a branch, casting gentle pools of light on either side of the path.

Elves worked on various projects in and around the lanterns’ radius, solitary except for a few, rare couples. Several elves sat high in the trees, playing mellifluous tunes on their reed pipes, while others stared at the sky with peaceful expressions—neither awake nor asleep. One elf sat cross-legged before a pottery wheel that whirled round and round with a steady rhythm while a delicate urn took form beneath his hands. The werecat, Maud, crouched beside him in the shadows, watching his progress. Her eyes flared silver as she looked at Eragon and Saphira. The elf followed her gaze and nodded to them without halting his work.

Through the trees, Eragon glimpsed an elf—man or woman, he could not tell—squatting on a rock in the middle of a stream, muttering a spell over the orb of glass clutched in its hands. He twisted his neck in an attempt to get an unobstructed view, but the spectacle had already vanished into the dark.

“What,” asked Eragon, keeping his voice low so as to not disturb anyone, “do most elves do for a living or profession?”

Arya answered just as quietly. “Our strength with magic grants us as much leisure as we desire. We neither hunt nor farm, and, as a result, we spend our days working to master our interests, whatever they might be. Very little exists that we must strive for.”

Through a tunnel of dogwood draped with creepers, they entered the enclosed atrium of a house grown out of a ring of trees. An open-walled hut occupied the center of the atrium, which sheltered a forge and an assortment of tools that Eragon knew even Horst would covet.

An elf woman held a pair of small tongs in a nest of molten coals, working bellows with her right hand. With uncanny speed, she pulled the tongs from the fire—revealing a ring of white-hot steel clamped in the pincers’ jaws—looped the ring through the edge of an incomplete mail corselet hung over the anvil, grasped a hammer, and welded shut the open ends of the ring with a blow and a burst of sparks.

Only then did Arya approach. “Atra esterní ono thelduin.”

The elf faced them, her neck and cheek lit from underneath by the coals’ bloody light. Like taut wires embedded in her skin, her face was scribed with a delicate pattern of lines—the greatest display of age Eragon had seen in an elf. She gave no response to Arya, which he knew was offensive and discourteous, especially since the queen’s daughter had honored her by speaking first.

“Rhunön-elda, I have brought you the newest Rider, Eragon Shadeslayer.”

“I heard you were dead,” said Rhunön to Arya. Rhunön’s voice guttered and rasped unlike any other elf’s. It reminded Eragon of the old men of Carvahall who sat on the porches outside their houses, smoking pipes and telling stories.

Arya smiled. “When did you last leave your house, Rhunön?”

“You should know. It was that Midsummer’s Feast you forced me to attend.”

“That was three years ago.”

“Was it?” Rhunön frowned as she banked the coals and covered them with a grated lid. “Well, what of it? I find company trying. A gaggle of meaningless chatter that …” She glared at Arya. “Why are we speaking this foul language? I suppose you want me to forge a sword for him? You know I swore to never create instruments of death again, not after that traitor of a Rider and the destruction he wreaked with my blade.”

“Eragon already has a sword,” said Arya. She raised her arm and presented Zar’roc to the smith.

Rhunön took Zar’roc with a look of wonder. She caressed the wine-red sheath, lingered on the black symbol etched into it, rubbed a bit of

dirt from the hilt, then wrapped her fingers around the handle and drew the sword with all the authority of a warrior. She sighted down each of Zar'roc's edges and flexed the blade between her hands until Eragon feared it might break. Then, in a single movement, Rhunön swung Zar'roc over her head and brought it down upon the tongs on her anvil, riving them in half with a resounding ring.

"Zar'roc," said Rhunön. "I remember thee." She cradled the weapon like a mother would her firstborn. "As perfect as the day you were finished." Turning her back, she looked up at the knotted branches while she traced the curves of the pommel. "My entire life I spent hammering these swords out of ore. Then *he* came and destroyed them. Centuries of effort obliterated in an instant. So far as I knew, only four examples of my art still existed. *His* sword, Oromis's, and two others guarded by families who managed to rescue them from the Wyrdfell."

Wyrdfell? Eragon dared ask Arya with his mind.

Another name for the Forsworn.

Rhunön turned on Eragon. "Now Zar'roc has returned to me. Of all my creations, this I least expected to hold again, save for *his*. How came you to possess Morzan's sword?"

"It was given to me by Brom."

"Brom?" She hefted Zar'roc. "Brom … I remember Brom. He begged me to replace the sword he had lost. Truly, I wished to help him, but I had already taken my oath. My refusal angered him beyond reason. Oromis had to knock him unconscious before he would leave."

Eragon seized on the information with interest. "Your handiwork has served me well, Rhunön-elda. I would be long dead were it not for Zar'roc. I killed the Shade Durza with it."

"Did you now? Then some good has come of it." Sheathing Zar'roc, Rhunön returned it to him, though not without reluctance, then looked past him to Saphira. "Ah. Well met, Skulblaka."

Well met, Rhunön-elda.

Without bothering to ask permission, Rhunön went up to Saphira's shoulder and tapped a scale with one of her blunt fingernails, twisting her head from side to side in an attempt to peer into the translucent pebble. "Good color. Not like those brown dragons, all muddy and dark. Properly speaking, a Rider's sword should match the hue of his dragon, and this blue would have made a gorgeous blade.…" The thought seemed to drain the energy from her. She returned to the anvil and stared at the wrecked tongs, as if the will to replace them had deserted her.

Eragon felt that it would be wrong to end the conversation on such a depressing note, but he could not think of a tactful way to change the subject. The glimmering corselet caught his attention and, as he

studied it, he was astonished to see that every ring was welded shut. Because the tiny links cooled so quickly, they usually had to be welded before being attached to the main piece of mail, which meant that the finest mail—such as Eragon's hauberk—was composed of links that were alternately welded and riveted closed. Unless, it seemed, the smith possessed an elf's speed and precision.

Eragon said, "I've never seen the equal of your mail, not even among the dwarves. How do you have the patience to weld every link? Why don't you just use magic and save yourself the work?"

He hardly expected the burst of passion that animated Rhunön. She tossed her short-cropped hair and said, "And rob myself of all pleasure in this task? Aye, every other elf and I could use magic to satisfy our desires—and some do—but then what meaning is there in life? How would you fill your time? Tell me."

"I don't know," he confessed.

"By pursuing that which you love the most. When you can have anything you want by uttering a few words, the goal matters not, only the journey to it. A lesson for you. You'll face the same dilemma one day, if you live long enough.… Now begone! I am weary of this talk." With that Rhunön plucked the lid off the forge, retrieved a new pair of tongs, and immersed a ring in the coals while she worked the bellows with single-minded intensity.

"Rhunön-elda," said Arya, "remember, I will return for you on the eve of the Agaetí Blödhren." A grunt was her only reply.

The rhythmic peal of steel on steel, as lonely as the cry of a death bird in the night, accompanied them back through the dogwood tunnel and onto the path. Behind them, Rhunön was no more than a black figure bowed over the sullen glow of her forge.

"She made all the Riders' swords?" asked Eragon. "Every last one?"

"That and more. She's the greatest smith who has ever lived. I thought that you should meet her, for her sake and yours."

"Thank you."

Is she always so brusque? asked Saphira.

Arya laughed. "Always. For her, nothing matters except her craft, and she's famously impatient with anything—or anyone—that interferes with it. Her eccentricities are well tolerated, though, because of her incredible skill and accomplishments."

While she spoke, Eragon tried to work out the meaning of *Agaetí Blödhren*. He was fairly sure that *blödh* stood for *blood* and, as a result, that *blödhren* was *blood-oath*, but he had never heard of *agaetí*.

"Celebration," explained Arya when he asked. "We hold the Blood-oath Celebration once every century to honor our pact with the dragons. Both of you are fortunate to be here now, for it is nigh upon us.…" Her slanted eyebrows met as she frowned. "Fate has indeed

arranged a most auspicious coincidence."

She surprised Eragon by leading them deeper into Du Weldenvarden, down paths tangled with nettles and currant bushes, until the lights around them vanished and they entered the restless wilderness. In the darkness, Eragon had to rely on Saphira's keen night vision so as to not lose his way. The craggy trees increased in width, crowding closer and closer together and threatening to form an impenetrable barrier. Just when it appeared that they could go no farther, the forest ended and they entered a clearing washed with moonlight from the bright sickle low in the eastern sky.

A lone pine tree stood in the middle of the clearing. No taller than the rest of its brethren, it was thicker than a hundred regular trees combined; in comparison, they looked as puny as windblown saplings. A blanket of roots radiated from the tree's massive trunk, covering the ground with bark-sheathed veins that made it seem as if the entire forest flowed out from the tree, as if it were the heart of Du Weldenvarden itself. The tree presided over the woods like a benevolent matriarch, protecting its inhabitants under the shelter of her branches.

"Behold the Menoa tree," whispered Arya. "We observe the Agaetí Blödhren in her shade."

A cold tingle crawled down Eragon's side as he recognized the name. After Angela told his fortune in Teirm, Solembum had come up to him and said, *When the time comes and you need a weapon, look under the roots of the Menoa tree. Then, when all seems lost and your power is insufficient, go to the rock of Kuthian and speak your name to open the Vault of Souls*. Eragon could not imagine what kind of weapon might be buried under the tree, nor how he would go about finding it.

Do you see anything? he asked Saphira.

No, but then I doubt that Solembum's words will make sense until our need is clear.

Eragon told Arya about both parts of the werecat's counsel, although—as he had with Ajihad and Islanzadí—he kept Angela's prophecy a secret because of its personal nature, and because he feared that it might lead Arya to guess his attraction to her.

When he finished, Arya said, "Werecats rarely offer help, and when they do, it's not to be ignored. So far as I know, no weapon is hidden here, not even in song or legend. As for the Rock of Kuthian … the name echoes in my head like a voice from a half-forgotten dream, familiar yet strange. I've heard it before, though I cannot recall where."

As they approached the Menoa tree, Eragon's attention was caught by the multitude of ants crawling over the roots. Faint black smudges were all he could see of the insects, but Oromis's assignment had

sensitized him to the currents of life around him, and he could feel the ants' primitive consciousness with his mind. He lowered his defenses and allowed his awareness to flood outward, lightly touching Saphira and Arya and then expanding beyond them to see what else lived in the clearing.

With unexpected suddenness, he encountered an immense entity, a sentient being of such a colossal nature, he could not grasp the limits of its psyche. Even Oromis's vast intellect, which Eragon had been in contact with in Farthen Dûr, was dwarfed in comparison to this presence. The very air seemed to thrum with the energy and strength that emanated from … *the tree?*

The source was unmistakable.

Deliberate and inexorable, the tree's thoughts moved at a measured pace as slow as the creep of ice over granite. It took no notice of Eragon nor, he was sure, of any single individual. It was entirely concerned with the affairs of things that grow and flourish in the bright sunlight, with the dogbane and the lily, the evening primrose and the silky foxglove and the yellow mustard tall beside the crabapple with its purple blossoms.

"It's awake!" exclaimed Eragon, shocked into speaking. "I mean … it's intelligent." He knew that Saphira felt it too; she cocked her head toward the Menoa tree, as if listening, then flew to one of its branches, which were as thick as the road from Carvahall to Therinsford. There she perched with her tail hanging free, waving the tip of it back and forth, ever so gracefully. It was such an odd sight, a dragon in a tree, that Eragon almost laughed.

"Of course she's awake," said Arya. Her voice was low and mellow in the night air. "Shall I tell you the story of the Menoa tree?"

"I'd like that."

A flash of white streaked across the sky, like a banished specter, and resolved itself beside Saphira in the form of Blagden. The raven's narrow shoulders and crooked neck gave him the appearance of a miser basking in the radiance of a pile of gold. The raven lifted his pallid head and uttered his ominous cry, *"Wyrda!"*

"This is what happened. Once there lived a woman, Linnëa, in the years of spice and wine before our war with the dragons and before we became as immortal as any beings still composed of vulnerable flesh can be. Linnëa had grown old without the comfort of a mate or children, nor did she feel the need to seek them out, preferring to occupy herself with the art of singing to plants, of which she was a master. That is, she did until a young man came to her door and beguiled her with words of love. His affections woke a part of Linnëa that she had never suspected existed, a craving to experience the things that she had unknowingly sacrificed. The offer of a second

chance was too great an opportunity for her to ignore. She deserted her work and devoted herself to the young man and, for a time, they were happy.

"But the young man was young, and he began to long for a mate closer to his own age. His eye fell upon a young woman, and he wooed and won her. And for a time, they too were happy.

"When Linnëa discovered that she had been spurned, scorned, and abandoned, she went mad with grief. The young man had done the worst possible thing; he had given her a taste of the fullness of life, then torn it away with no more thought than a rooster flitting from one hen to the next. She found him with the woman and, in her fury, she stabbed him to death.

"Linnëa knew that what she had done was evil. She also knew that even if she was exonerated of the murder, she could not return to her previous existence. Life had lost all joy for her. So she went to the oldest tree in Du Weldenvarden, pressed herself against it, and sang herself into the tree, abandoning all allegiance to her own race. For three days and three nights she sang, and when she finished, she had become one with her beloved plants. And through all the millennia since has she kept watch over the forest.… Thus was the Menoa tree created."

At the conclusion of her tale, Arya and Eragon sat side by side on the crest of a huge root, twelve feet off the ground. Eragon bounced his heels against the tree and wondered if Arya had intended the story as a warning to him or if it was merely an innocent piece of history.

His doubt hardened into certainty when she asked, "Do you think that the young man was to blame for the tragedy?"

"I think," he said, knowing that a clumsy reply could turn her against him, "that what he did was cruel … and that Linnëa overreacted. They were both at fault."

Arya stared at him until he was forced to avert his gaze. "They weren't suited for each other."

Eragon began to deny it but then stopped himself. She was right. And she had maneuvered him so that he had to say it out loud, so that he had to say it to *her*. "Perhaps," he admitted.

Silence accumulated between them like sand piling into a wall that neither of them was willing to breach. The high-pitched hum of cicadas echoed from the edge of the clearing. At last he said, "Being home seems to agree with you."

"It does." With unconscious ease, she leaned over and picked up a thin branch that had fallen from the Menoa tree and began to weave the clumps of needles into a small basket.

Hot blood rushed to Eragon's face as he watched her. He hoped that the moon was not bright enough to reveal that his cheeks had turned

mottled red. “Where … where do you live? Do you and Islanzadí have a palace or castle …?”

“We live in Tialdarí Hall, our family’s ancestral buildings, in the western part of Ellesméra. I would enjoy showing our home to you.”

“Ah.” A practical question suddenly intruded in Eragon’s muddled thoughts, driving away his embarrassment. “Arya, do you have any siblings?” She shook her head. “Then you are the sole heir to the elven throne?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?” She sounded bemused by his curiosity.

“I don’t understand why you were allowed to become an ambassador to the Varden and dwarves, as well as ferry Saphira’s egg from here to Tronjheim. It’s too dangerous an errand for a princess, much less the queen-in-waiting.”

“You mean it’s too dangerous for a *human* woman. I told you before that I am not one of your helpless females. What you fail to realize is that we view our monarchs differently than you or the dwarves. To us, a king or queen’s highest responsibility is to serve their people however and wherever possible. If that means forfeiting our lives in the process, we welcome the opportunity to prove our devotion to—as the dwarves say—hearth, hall, and honor. If I had died in the course of my duty, then a replacement successor would have been chosen from among our various Houses. Even now I would not be required to become queen if I found the prospect distasteful. We do not choose leaders who are unwilling to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their obligation.” She hesitated, then hugged her knees against her chest and propped her chin on them. “I had many years to perfect those arguments with my mother.” For a minute, the *wheet-wheet* of the cicadas went undisturbed in the clearing. Then she asked, “How go your studies with Oromis?”

Eragon grunted as his foul temper returned on a wave of unpleasant memories, souring his pleasure at being with Arya. All he wanted to do was crawl into bed, go to sleep, and forget the day. “Oromis-elda,” he said, working each word around his mouth before letting it escape, “is quite thorough.”

He winced as she gripped his upper arm with bruising strength. “What has gone amiss?”

He tried to shrug her hand off. “Nothing.”

“I’ve traveled with you long enough to know when you’re happy, angry … or in pain. Did something happen between you and Oromis? If so, you have to tell me so that it can be rectified as soon as possible. Or was it your back? We could—”

“It’s not my training!” Despite his pique, Eragon noticed that she seemed genuinely concerned, which pleased him. “Ask Saphira. She

can tell you."

"I want to hear it from you," she said quietly.

The muscles in Eragon's jaw spasmed as he clenched his teeth. In a low voice, no more than a whisper, he first described how he had failed at his meditation in the glade, then the incident that poisoned his heart like a viper coiled in his chest: his blessing.

Arya released his arm and clutched at the root of the Menoa tree, as if to steady herself. "Barzûl." The dwarf curse alarmed him; he had never heard her use profanity before, and this one was particularly apt, for it meant *ill fate*. "I knew of your act in Farthen Dûr, for sure, but I never thought … I never *suspected* that such a thing could occur. I cry your pardon, Eragon, for forcing you to leave your rooms tonight. I did not comprehend your discomfort. You must want to be alone."

"No," he said. "No, I appreciate the company and the things you've shown me." He smiled at her, and after a moment, she smiled back. Together they sat small and still at the base of the ancient tree and watched the moon arch high over the peaceful forest before it hid behind the gathering clouds. "I only wonder what will become of the child."

High above their heads, Blagden ruffled his bone-white feathers and shrieked, *"Wyrda!"*

A Maze of Opposition

Nasuada crossed her arms without bothering to conceal her impatience as she examined the two men before her. The one on the right had a neck so thick, it forced his head to jut forward at nearly right angles to his shoulders, giving him a stubborn, dim-witted appearance. This was intensified by his heavy brow with its two cliffs of matted hair—almost long enough to pull over his eyes—and bulbous lips that remained puckered into a pink mushroom, even when he spoke. She knew better than to put stock in his repulsive looks, though. No matter its rough housing, his tongue was as clever as a jester's.

The only identifying feature of the second man was his pale skin, which refused to darken under Surda's relentless sun, even though the Varden had been in Aberon, the capital, for some weeks now. From his coloring, Nasuada guessed he had been born in the northern reaches of the Empire. He held a knit wool cap that he wrung into a hard rope between his hands.

"You," she said, pointing at him. "How many of your chickens did he kill again?"

"Thirteen, Ma'am."

Nasuada returned her attention to the ugly man. "An unlucky number, by all accounts, Master Gamble. And so it has proved for you. You are guilty of both theft and destroying someone else's property without offering proper recompense."

"I never denied it."

"I only wonder how you ate thirteen chickens in four days. Are you *ever* full, Master Gamble?"

He gave her a jocular grin and scratched the side of his face. The rasp of his untrimmed fingernails over his stubble annoyed her, and it was only with an effort of will that she kept from asking him to stop. "Well, not to be disrespectful, Ma'am, but filling my stomach wouldn't be a problem if you fed us properly, what with all the work we do. I'm a large man, an' I need a bit o' meat in my belly after half a day breaking rocks with a mattock. I did my best to resist temptation, I did. But three weeks of short rations and watching these farmers drive around fat livestock they wouldn't share even if a body were starving … Well, I'll admit, it broke me. I'm not a strong man when it comes to food. I like it hot and I like plenty of it. An' I don't fancy I'm

the only one willing to help himself."

And that's the heart of the problem, reflected Nasuada. The Varden could not afford to feed its members, not even with Surda's king, Orrin, helping. Orrin had opened his treasury to them, but he had refused to behave as Galbatorix was wont to do when moving his army across the Empire, which was to appropriate supplies from his countrymen without paying for them. *A noble sentiment, but one that only makes my task harder*. Still, she knew that acts like those were what separated her, Orrin, Hrothgar, and Islanzadí from Galbatorix's despotism. *It would be so easy to cross that divide without noticing it*.

"I understand your reasons, Master Gamble. However, although the Varden aren't a country and we answer to no one's authority but our own, that does *not* give you or anyone else leave to ignore the rule of law as laid down by my predecessors or as it's observed here in Surda. Therefore, I order you to pay a copper for each chicken you stole."

Gamble surprised her by acceding without protest. "As you wish, Ma'am," he said.

"That's it?" exclaimed the pale man. He wrung his cap even tighter. "That's no fair price. If I sold them in any market, they'd—"

She could not contain herself any longer. "Yes! You'd get more. But I happen to know that Master Gamble cannot afford to give you the chickens' full price, as I'm the one who provides his salary! As I do yours. You forget that if I decided to acquire your poultry for the good of the Varden, you'd get no more than a copper a chicken and be lucky at that. Am I understood?"

"He can't—"

"Am I understood?"

After a moment, the pale man subsided and muttered, "Yes, Ma'am."

"Very well. You're both dismissed." With an expression of sardonic admiration, Gamble touched his brow and bowed to Nasuada before backing out of the stone room with his sullen opponent. "You too," she said to the guards on either side of the door.

As soon as they were gone, she slumped in her chair with an exhausted sigh and reached for her fan, batting it over her face in a futile attempt to dissipate the pinpricks of sweat that accumulated on her forehead. The constant heat drained her strength and made even the smallest task arduous.

She suspected she would feel tired even if it were winter. Familiar as she was with the innermost secrets of the Varden, it still had taken more work than she expected to transport the entire organization from Farthen Dûr, through the Beor Mountains, and deliver them to Surda and Aberon. She shuddered, remembering long, uncomfortable days spent in the saddle. Planning and executing their departure had been

exceedingly difficult, as was integrating the Varden into their new surroundings while simultaneously preparing for an attack on the Empire. *I don't have enough time each day to solve all these problems*, she lamented.

Finally, she dropped the fan and rang the bellpull, summoning her handmaid, Farica. The banner hanging to the right of the cherrywood desk rippled as the door hidden behind it opened. Farica slipped out to stand with downcast eyes by Nasuada's elbow.

"Are there any more?" asked Nasuada.

"No, Ma'am."

She tried not to let her relief show. Once a week, she held an open court to resolve the Varden's various disputes. Anyone who felt that they had been wronged could seek an audience with her and ask for her judgment. She could not imagine a more difficult and thankless chore. As her father had often said after negotiating with Hrothgar, "A good compromise leaves everyone angry." And so it seemed.

Returning her attention to the matter at hand, she told Farica, "I want that Gamble reassigned. Give him a job where his talent with words will be of some use. Quartermaster, perhaps, just so long as it's a job where he'll get full rations. I don't want to see him before me for stealing again."

Farica nodded and went to the desk, where she recorded Nasuada's instructions on a parchment scroll. That skill alone made her invaluable. Farica asked, "Where can I find him?"

"One of the work gangs in the quarry."

"Yes, Ma'am. Oh, while you were occupied, King Orrin asked that you join him in his laboratory."

"What has he done in there now, blinded himself?" Nasuada washed her wrists and neck with lavender water, then checked her hair in the mirror of polished silver that Orrin had given her and tugged on her overgown until the sleeves were straight.

Satisfied with her appearance, she swept out of her chambers with Farica in tow. The sun was so bright today that no torches were needed to illuminate the inside of Borromeo Castle, nor could their added warmth have been tolerated. Shafts of light fell through the crossletted arrow slits and glowed upon the inner wall of the corridor, striping the air with bars of golden dust at regular intervals. Nasuada looked out one embrasure toward the barbican, where thirty or so of Orrin's orange-clad cavalry soldiers were setting forth on another of their ceaseless rounds of patrols in the countryside surrounding Aberon.

Not that they could do much good if Galbatorix decided to attack us himself, she thought bitterly. Their only protection against that was Galbatorix's pride and, she hoped, his fear of Eragon. All leaders were

aware of the risk of usurpation, but usurpers themselves were doubly afraid of the threat that a single determined individual could pose. Nasuada knew that she was playing an exceedingly dangerous game with the most powerful madman in Alagaësia. If she misjudged how far she could push him, she and the rest of the Varden would be destroyed, along with any hope of ending Galbatorix's reign.

The clean smell of the castle reminded her of the times she had stayed there as a child, back when Orrin's father, King Larkin, still ruled. She never saw much of Orrin then. He was five years older than she and already occupied with his duties as a prince. Nowadays, though, she often felt as if she were the elder one.

At the door to Orrin's laboratory, she had to stop and wait for his bodyguards, who were always posted outside, to announce her presence to the king. Soon Orrin's voice boomed out into the stairwell: "Lady Nasuada! I'm so glad you came. I have something to show you."

Mentally bracing herself, she entered the laboratory with Farica. A maze of tables laden with a fantastic array of alembics, beakers, and retorts confronted them, like a glass thicket waiting to snag their dresses on any one of its myriad fragile branches. The heavy odor of metallic vapors made Nasuada's eyes water. Lifting their hems off the floor, she and Farica wended their way in single file toward the back of the room, past hourglasses and scales, arcane tomes bound with black iron, dwarven astrolabes, and piles of phosphorescent crystal prisms that produced fitful blue flashes.

They met Orrin by a marble-topped bench, where he stirred a crucible of quicksilver with a glass tube that was closed at one end, open at the other, and must have measured at least three feet in length, although it was only a quarter of an inch thick.

"Sire," said Nasuada. As befitted one of equal rank to the king, she remained upright while Farica curtsied. "You seem to have recovered from the explosion last week."

Orrin grimaced good-naturedly. "I learned that it's not wise to combine potassium and water in an enclosed space. The result can be quite violent."

"Has all of your hearing returned?"

"Not entirely, but …" Grinning like a boy with his first dagger, he lit a taper with the coals from a brazier, which she could not fathom how he endured in the stifling weather, carried the flaming brand back to the bench, and used it to start a pipe packed with cardus weed.

"I didn't know that you smoked."

"I don't really," he confessed, "except that I found that since my eardrum hasn't completely sealed up yet, I can do this.…" Drawing on the pipe, he puffed out his cheeks until a tendril of smoke issued from

his left ear, like a snake leaving its den, and coiled up the side of his head. It was so unexpected, Nasuada burst out laughing, and after a moment, Orrin joined her, releasing a plume of smoke from his mouth. “It’s the most peculiar sensation,” he confided. “Tickles like crazy on the way out.”

Growing serious again, Nasuada asked, “Was there something else that you wished to discuss with me, Sire?”

He snapped his fingers. “Of course.” Dipping his long glass tube in the crucible, he filled it with quicksilver, then capped the open end with one finger and showed it to her. “Would you agree that the only thing in this tube is quicksilver?”

“I would.” *Is this why he wanted to see me?*

“And what about now?” With a quick movement, he inverted the tube and planted the open end inside the crucible, removing his finger. Instead of all pouring out, as Nasuada expected, the quicksilver in the tube dropped about halfway, then stopped and held its position. Orrin pointed to the empty section above the suspended metal. He asked, “What occupies that space?”

“It must be air,” asserted Nasuada.

Orrin grinned and shook his head. “If that were true, how would the air bypass the quicksilver or diffuse through the glass? No routes are available by which the atmosphere can gain admission.” He gestured at Farica. “What’s your opinion, maid?”

Farica stared at the tube, then shrugged and said, “It can’t be nothing, Sire.”

“Ah, but that’s exactly what I think it is: *nothing*. I believe that I’ve solved one of the oldest conundrums of natural philosophy by creating and proving the existence of a vacuum! It completely invalidates Vacher’s theories and means that Ládin was actually a genius. Blasted elves always seem to be right.”

Nasuada struggled to remain cordial as she asked, “What purpose does it serve, though?”

“Purpose?” Orrin looked at her with genuine astonishment. “None, of course. At least not that I can think of. However, this will help us to understand the mechanics of our world, how and why things happen. It’s a wondrous discovery. Who knows what else it might lead to?” While he spoke, he emptied the tube and carefully placed it in a velvet-padded box that held similar delicate instruments. “The prospect that truly excites me, though, is of using magic to ferret out nature’s secrets. Why, just yesterday, with a single spell, Trianna helped me to discover two entirely new gases. Imagine what could be learned if magic were systematically applied to the disciplines of natural philosophy. I’m considering learning magic myself, if I have the talent for it, and if I can convince some magic users to divulge

their knowledge. It's a pity that your Dragon Rider, Eragon, didn't accompany you here; I'm sure that he could help me."

Looking at Farica, Nasuada said, "Wait for me outside." The woman curtsied and then departed. Once Nasuada heard the door to the laboratory close, she said, "Orrin. Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"While you spend your time locked in here conducting experiments that no one understands—endangering your well-being in the process—your country totters on the brink of war. A myriad issues await your decision, and you stand here blowing smoke and playing with quicksilver?"

His face hardened. "I am quite aware of my duties, Nasuada. You may lead the Varden, but I'm still king of Surda, and you would do well to recall that before you speak so disrespectfully. Need I remind you that your sanctuary here depends on my continued goodwill?"

She knew it was an idle threat; many of the Surdan people had relatives in the Varden, and vice versa. They were too closely linked for either of them to abandon the other. No, the real reason that Orrin had taken offense was the question of authority. Since it was nigh impossible to keep large groups of armed warriors at the ready over extended periods of time—as Nasuada had learned, feeding that many inactive people was a logistical nightmare—the Varden had begun taking jobs, starting farms, and otherwise assimilating into their host country. *Where will that leave me eventually? As the leader of a nonexistent army? A general or councilor under Orrin?* Her position was precarious. If she moved too quickly or with too much initiative, Orrin would perceive it as a threat and turn against her, especially now that she was cloaked in the glamour of the Varden's victory in Farthen Dûr. But if she waited too long, they would lose their chance to exploit Galbatorix's momentary weakness. Her only advantage over the maze of opposition was her command of the one element that had instigated this act of the play: Eragon and Saphira.

She said, "I don't seek to undermine your command, Orrin. That was never my intention, and I apologize if it appeared that way." He bowed his neck with a stiff bob. Unsure of how to continue, she leaned on her fingertips against the lip of the bench. "It's only … so many things must be done. I work night and day—I keep a tablet beside my bed for notes—and yet I never catch up; I feel as if we are always balanced on the brink of disaster."

Orrin picked up a pestle stained black from use and rolled it between his palms with a steady, hypnotic rhythm. "Before you came here … No, that's not right. Before your Rider materialized fully formed from the ethers like Moratensis from his fountain, I expected

to live my life as my father and grandfather before me. That is, opposing Galbatorix in secret. You must excuse me if it takes a while to accustom myself to this new reality."

It was as much contrition as she could expect in return. "I understand."

He stopped the pestle in its path for a brief moment. "You are newly come to your power, whereas I have held mine for a number of years. If I may be arrogant enough to offer advice, I've found that it's essential for my sanity to allocate a certain portion of the day for my own interests."

"I couldn't do that," objected Nasuada. "Every moment I waste might be the moment of effort that's needed to defeat Galbatorix."

The pestle paused again. "You do the Varden a disservice if you insist on overworking yourself. No one can function properly without occasional peace and quiet. They don't have to be long breaks, just five or ten minutes. You could even practice your archery, and then you would still serve your goals, albeit in a different manner.… That's why I had this laboratory constructed in the first place. That's why I blow smoke and play with quicksilver, as you put it—so that I don't scream with frustration throughout the rest of the day."

Despite her reluctance to surrender her view of Orrin as a feckless layabout, Nasuada could not help but acknowledge the validity of his argument. "I will keep your recommendation in mind."

Some of his former levity returned as he smiled. "That's all I ask."

Walking to the window, she pushed the shutters farther open and gazed down upon Aberon, with its cries of quick-fingered merchants hawking their wares to unsuspecting customers, the clotted yellow dust blowing from the western road as a caravan approached the city gates, the air that shimmered over clay tile roofs and carried the scent of cardus weed and incense from the marble temples, and the fields that surrounded Aberon like the outstretched petals of a flower.

Without turning around, she asked, "Have you received copies of our latest reports from the Empire?"

"I have." He joined her at the window.

"What is your opinion of them?"

"That they're too meager and incomplete to extract any meaningful conclusions."

"They're the best we have, though. Give me your suspicions and your hunches. Extrapolate from the known facts like you would if this were one of your experiments." She smiled to herself. "I promise that I won't attach meaning to what you say."

She had to wait for his reply, and when it came, it was with the dolorous weight of a doomsday prophecy. "Increased taxes, emptied garrisons, horses and oxen confiscated throughout the Empire … It

seems that Galbatorix gathers his forces in preparation to confront us, though I cannot tell whether he means to do it in offense or defense." Revolving shadows cooled their faces as a cloud of starlings whirled across the sun. "The question that weighs upon my mind now is, how long will it take him to mobilize? For that will determine the course of our strategies."

"Weeks. Months. Years. I cannot predict his actions."

He nodded. "Have your agents continued to spread tidings of Eragon?"

"It has become increasingly dangerous, but yes. My hope is that if we inundate cities like Dras-Leona with rumors of Eragon's prowess, when we actually reach the city and they see him, they will join us of their own accord and we can avoid a siege."

"War is rarely so easy."

She let the comment pass uncontested. "And how fares the mobilization of your own army? The Varden, as always, are ready to fight."

Orrin spread his hands in a placating gesture. "It's difficult to rouse a nation, Nasuada. There are nobles whom I must convince to back me, armor and weapons to be constructed, supplies to be gathered.…"

"And in the meantime, how do I feed my people? We need more land than you allotted us—"

"Well I know it," he said.

"—and we'll only get it by invading the Empire, unless you fancy making the Varden a permanent addition to Surda. If so, you'll have to find homes for the thousands of people I brought from Farthen Dûr, which won't please your existing citizens. Whatever your choice, choose quickly, because I fear that if you continue to procrastinate, the Varden will disintegrate into an uncontrollable horde." She tried not to make it sound like a threat.

Nevertheless, Orrin obviously did not appreciate the insinuation. His upper lip curled and he said, "Your father never let his men get out of hand. I trust you won't either, if you expect to remain leader of the Varden. As for our preparations, there's a limit to what we can do in so short a time; you'll just have to wait until we are ready."

She gripped the windowsill until veins stood out on her wrists and her fingernails sank into the crevices between the stones, yet she allowed none of her anger to color her voice: "In that case, will you lend the Varden more gold for food?"

"No. I've given you all the money I can spare."

"How will we eat, then?"

"I would suggest that you raise the funds yourself."

Furious, she gave him her widest, brightest smile—holding it long enough to make him shift with unease—and then curtsied as deeply as

a servant, never letting her demented grimace waver. “Farewell then, Sire. I hope that the rest of your day is as enjoyable as our conversation was.”

Orrin muttered an unintelligible response as she swept back to the laboratory’s entrance. In her anger, Nasuada caught her right sleeve on a jade bottle and knocked it over, cracking the stone and releasing a flood of yellow liquid that splattered her sleeve and soaked her skirt. She flicked her wrist in annoyance without stopping.

Farica rejoined her in the stairwell, and together they traversed the warren of passageways to Nasuada’s chambers.

HANGING BY A THREAD

Throwing open the doors to her rooms, Nasuada strode to her desk, then dropped into a chair, blind to her surroundings. Her spine was so rigid that her shoulders did not touch the back. She felt frozen by the insoluble quandary the Varden faced. The rise and fall of her chest slowed until it was imperceptible. *I have failed*, was all she could think.

"Ma'am, your sleeve!"

Jolted from her reverie, Nasuada looked down to find Farica beating at her right arm with a cleaning rag. A wisp of smoke rose from the embroidered sleeve. Alarmed, Nasuada pushed herself out of the chair and twisted her arm, trying to find the cause of the smoke. Her sleeve and skirt were disintegrating into chalky cobwebs that emitted acrid fumes.

"Get me out of this," she said.

She held her contaminated arm away from her body and forced herself to remain still as Farica unlaced her overgown. The handmaid's fingers scrabbled against Nasuada's back with frantic haste, fumbling with the knots, and then finally loosening the wool shell that encased Nasuada's torso. As soon as the overgown sagged, Nasuada yanked her arms out of the sleeves and clawed her way free of the robe.

Panting, she stood by the desk, clad only in her slippers and linen chemise. To her relief, the expensive chainsil had escaped harm, although it had acquired a foul reek.

"Did it burn you?" asked Farica. Nasuada shook her head, not trusting her tongue to respond. Farica nudged the overgown with the tip of her shoe. "What evil is this?"

"One of Orrin's foul concoctions," croaked Nasuada. "I spilled it in his laboratory." Calming herself with long breaths, she examined the ruined gown with dismay. It had been woven by the dwarf women of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum as a gift for her last birthday and was one of the finest pieces in her wardrobe. She had nothing to replace it, nor could she justify commissioning a new dress, considering the Varden's financial difficulties. *Somehow I will have to make do without.*

Farica shook her head. "It's a shame to lose such a pretty dress." She went round the desk to a sewing basket and returned with a pair of etched scissors. "We might as well save as much of the cloth as we

can. I'll cut off the ruined parts and have them burned."

Nasuada scowled and paced the length of the room, seething with anger at her own clumsiness and at having another problem added to her already overwhelming list of worries. "What am I going to wear to court now?" she demanded.

The scissors bit into the soft wool with brisk authority. "Mayhap your linen dress."

"It's too casual to appear in before Orrin and his nobles."

"Give me a chance with it, Ma'am. I'm sure that I can alter it so it's serviceable. By the time I'm done, it'll look twice as grand as this one ever did."

"No, no. It won't work. They'll just laugh at me. It's hard enough to command their respect when I'm dressed properly, much less if I'm wearing patched gowns that advertise our poverty."

The older woman fixed Nasuada with a stern gaze. "It *will* work, so long as you don't apologize for your appearance. Not only that, I guarantee that the other ladies will be so taken with your new fashion that they'll imitate you. Just you wait and see." Going to the door, she cracked it open and handed the damaged fabric to one of the guards outside. "Your mistress wants this burned. Do it in secret and breathe not a word of this to another soul or you'll have me to answer to." The guard saluted.

Nasuada could not help smiling. "How would I function without you, Farica?"

"Quite well, I should think."

After donning her green hunting frock—which, with its light skirt, provided some respite from the day's heat—Nasuada decided that even though she was ill disposed toward Orrin, she would take his advice and break with her regular schedule to do nothing more important than help Farica rip out stitches from the overgown. She found the repetitive task an excellent way to focus her thoughts. While she pulled on the threads, she discussed the Varden's predicament with Farica, in the hope that she might perceive a solution that had escaped Nasuada.

In the end, Farica's only assistance was to observe, "Seems most matters in this world have their root in gold. If we had enough of it, we could buy Galbatorix right off his black throne … might not even have to fight his men."

Did I really expect that someone else would do my job for me? Nasuada asked herself. *I led us into this blind and I have to lead us out.*

Intending to cut open a seam, she extended her arm and snagged the tip of her knife on a fringe of bobbin lace, slicing it in half. She stared at the ragged wound in the lace, at the frayed ends of the parchment-colored strands that wriggled across the overgown like so

many contorted worms, stared and felt a hysterical laugh claw at her throat even as a tear formed in her eye. Could her luck be any worse?

The bobbin lace was the most valuable part of the dress. Even though lace required skill to make, its rarity and expense were mainly due to its central ingredient: vast, copious, mind-numbing, and deadening amounts of time. It took so long to produce that if you attempted to create a lace veil by yourself, your progress would be measured not in weeks but in months. Ounce for ounce, lace was worth more than gold or silver.

She ran her fingers over the band of threads, pausing on the rift that she had created. *It's not as if lace takes that much energy, just time*. She hated making it herself. *Energy … energy …* At that moment, a series of images flashed through her mind: Orrin talking about using magic for research; Trianna, the woman who had helmed Du Vrangr Gata since the Twins' deaths; looking up at one of the Varden's healers while he explained the principles of magic to Nasuada when she was only five or six years old. The disparate experiences formed a chain of reasoning that was so outrageous and unlikely, it finally released the laugh imprisoned in her throat.

Farica gave her an odd look and waited for an explanation. Standing, Nasuada tumbled half the overgown off her lap and onto the floor. "Fetch me Trianna this instant," she said. "I don't care what she's doing; bring her here."

The skin around Farica's eyes tightened, but she curtsied and said, "As you wish, Ma'am." She departed through the hidden servants' door.

"Thank you," Nasuada whispered in the empty room.

She understood her maid's reluctance; she too felt uncomfortable whenever she had to interact with magic users. Indeed, she only trusted Eragon because he was a Rider—although that was no proof of virtue, as Galbatorix had shown—and because of his oath of fealty, which Nasuada knew he would never break. It scared her to consider magicians' and sorcerers' powers. The thought that a seemingly ordinary person could kill with a word; invade your mind if he or she wished; cheat, lie, and steal without being caught; and otherwise defy society with near impunity …

Her heart quickened.

How did you enforce the law when a certain segment of the population possessed special powers? At its most basic level, the Varden's war against the Empire was nothing more than an attempt to bring to justice a man who had abused his magical abilities and to prevent him from committing further crimes. *All this pain and destruction because no one had the strength to defeat Galbatorix. He won't even die after a normal span of years!*

Although she disliked magic, she knew that it would play a crucial role in removing Galbatorix and that she could not afford to alienate its practitioners until victory was assured. Once that occurred, she intended to resolve the problem that they presented.

A brazen knock on her chamber door disturbed her thoughts. Fixing a pleasant smile on her face and guarding her mind as she had been trained, Nasuada said, "Enter!" It was important that she appear polite after summoning Trianna in such a rude manner.

The door thrust open and the brunette sorceress strode into the room, her tousled locks piled high above her head with obvious haste. She looked as if she had just been roused from bed. Bowing in the dwarven fashion, she said, "You asked for me, Lady?"

"I did." Relaxing into a chair, Nasuada let her gaze slowly drift up and down Trianna. The sorceress lifted her chin under Nasuada's examination. "I need to know: What is the most important rule of magic?"

Trianna frowned. "That whatever you do with magic requires the same amount of energy as it would to do otherwise."

"And what you *can* do is only limited by your ingenuity and by your knowledge of the ancient language?"

"Other strictures apply, but in general, yes. Lady, why do you ask? These are basic principles of magic that, while not commonly bandied about, I am sure you are familiar with."

"I am. I wished to ensure that I understood them properly." Without moving from her chair, Nasuada reached down and lifted the overgown so that Trianna could see the mutilated lace. "So then, within those limits, you should be able to devise a spell that will allow you to manufacture lace with magic."

A condescending sneer distorted the sorceress's dark lips. "Du Vrangr Gata has more important duties than repairing your clothes, Lady. Our art is not so common as to be employed for mere whims. I'm sure that you will find your seamstresses and tailors more than capable of fulfilling your request. Now, if you will excuse me, I—"

"Be quiet, woman," said Nasuada in a flat voice. Astonishment muted Trianna in midsentence. "I see that I must teach Du Vrangr Gata the same lesson that I taught the Council of Elders: I may be young, but I am no child to be patronized. I ask about lace because if you can manufacture it quickly and easily with magic, then we can support the Varden by selling inexpensive bobbin and needle lace throughout the Empire. Galbatorix's own people will provide the funds we need to survive."

"But that's ridiculous," protested Trianna. Even Farica looked skeptical. "You can't pay for a war with *lace*."

Nasuada raised an eyebrow. "Why not? Women who otherwise

could never afford to own lace will leap at the chance to buy ours. Every farmer's wife who longs to appear richer than she is will want it. Even wealthy merchants and nobles will give us their gold because our lace will be finer than any thrown or stitched by human hands. We'll garner a fortune to rival the dwarves'. That is, *if* you are skilled enough in magic to do what I want."

Trianna tossed her hair. "You doubt my abilities?"

"Can it be done!"

Trianna hesitated, then took the overgown from Nasuada and studied the lace strip for a long while. At last she said, "It should be possible, but I'll have to conduct some tests before I know for certain."

"Do so immediately. From now on, this is your most important assignment. And find an experienced lace maker to advise you on the patterns."

"Yes, Lady Nasuada."

Nasuada allowed her voice to soften. "Good. I also want you to select the brightest members of Du Vrangr Gata and work with them to invent other magical techniques that will help the Varden. That's your responsibility, not mine."

"Yes, Lady Nasuada."

"*Now* you are excused. Report back to me tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Lady Nasuada."

Satisfied, Nasuada watched the sorceress depart, then closed her eyes and allowed herself to enjoy a moment of pride for what she had accomplished. She knew that no man, not even her father, would have thought of her solution. "This is *my* contribution to the Varden," she told herself, wishing that Ajihad could witness it. Louder, she asked, "Did I surprise you, Farica?"

"You always do, Ma'am."

ELVA

"Ma'am? … You're needed, Ma'am."

"What?" Reluctant to move, Nasuada opened her eyes and saw Jörmundur enter the room. The wiry veteran pulled off his helm, tucked it in the crook of his right arm, and made his way to her with his left hand planted on the pommel of his sword.

The links of his hauberk clinked as he bowed. "My Lady."

"Welcome, Jörmundur. How is your son today?" She was pleased that he had come. Of all the members of the Council of Elders, he had accepted her leadership the most easily, serving her with the same dogged loyalty and determination as he had Ajihad. *If all my warriors were like him, no one could stop us*.

"His cough has subsided."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now, what brings you?"

Lines appeared on Jörmundur's forehead. He ran his free hand over his hair, which was tied back in a ponytail, then caught himself and pushed his hand back down to his side. "Magic, of the strangest kind."

"Oh?"

"Do you remember the babe that Eragon blessed?"

"Aye." Nasuada had seen her only once, but she was well aware of the exaggerated tales about the child that circulated among the Varden, as well as the Varden's hopes for what the girl might achieve once she grew up. Nasuada was more pragmatic about the subject. Whatever the infant became, it would not be for many years, by which time the battle with Galbatorix would already be won or lost.

"I've been asked to take you to her."

"Asked? By whom? And why?"

"A boy on the practice field told me that you should visit the child. Said that you would find it interesting. He refused to give me his name, but he looked like what that witch's werecat is supposed to turn into, so I thought … Well, I thought you should know." Jörmundur looked embarrassed. "I asked my men questions about the girl, and I heard things … that she's *different*."

"In what way?"

He shrugged. "Enough to believe that you should do what the werecat says."

Nasuada frowned. She knew from the old stories that ignoring a werecat was the height of folly and often led to one's doom. However,

his companion—Angela the herbalist—was another magic user that Nasuada did not entirely trust; she was too independent and unpredictable. “Magic,” she said, making it a curse.

“Magic,” agreed Jörmundur, though he used it as a word of awe and fear.

“Very well, let us go visit this child. Is she within the castle?”

“Orrin gave her and her caretaker rooms on the west side of the keep.”

“Take me to her.”

Gathering up her skirts, Nasuada ordered Farica to postpone the rest of the day’s appointments, then left the chambers. Behind her, she heard Jörmundur snap his fingers as he directed four guards to take up positions around her. A moment later, he joined her side, pointing out their course.

The heat within Borromeo Castle had increased to the point where they felt as if they were trapped within a giant bread oven. The air shimmered like liquid glass along the windowsills.

Though she was uncomfortable, Nasuada knew that she dealt with the heat better than most people because of her swarthy skin. The ones who had the hardest time enduring the high temperatures were men like Jörmundur and her guards, who had to wear their armor all day long, even if they were stationed out under the lidless gaze of the sun.

Nasuada kept close watch on the five men as sweat gathered on their exposed skin and their breathing became ever more ragged. Since they had arrived in Aberon, a number of the Varden had fainted from heatstroke—two of whom died an hour or two later—and she had no intention of losing more of her subjects by driving them beyond their physical limits.

When she deemed they needed to rest, she bade them to stop—overriding their objections—and get drinks of water from a servant. “I can’t have you toppling like ninepins.”

They had to break twice more before they reached their destination, a nondescript door recessed in the inner wall of the corridor. The floor around it was littered with gifts.

Jörmundur knocked, and a quavering voice from inside asked, “Who is it?”

“Lady Nasuada, come to see the child,” he said.

“Be you of true heart and steadfast resolve?”

This time Nasuada answered, “My heart is pure and my resolve is as iron.”

“Cross the threshold, then, and be welcome.”

The door swung open to an entryway lit by a single red dwarf lantern. No one was at the door. Proceeding inward, Nasuada saw that

the walls and ceiling were swathed with layers of dark fabric, giving the place the appearance of a cave or lair. To her surprise, the air was quite cold, almost chilly, like a brisk autumn night. Apprehension sank its poisonous claws into her belly. *Magic*.

A black mesh curtain blocked her way. Brushing it aside, she found herself in what was once a sitting room. The furniture had been removed, except for a line of chairs pushed against the shrouded walls. A cluster of faint dwarf lanterns were hung in a dimple of the sagging fabric overhead, casting weird multicolored shadows in every direction.

A bent crone watched her from the depths of one corner, bracketed by Angela the herbalist and the werecat, who stood with his hackles raised. In the center of the room knelt a pale girl that Nasuada took to be three or four years old. The girl picked at a platter of food on her lap. No one spoke.

Confused, Nasuada asked, “Where is the baby?”

The girl looked up.

Nasuada gasped as she saw the dragon mark bright upon the child’s brow and as she peered deep into her violet eyes. The girl quirked her lips with a terrible, knowing smile. “I am Elva.”

Nasuada recoiled without thinking, clutching at the dagger she kept strapped to her left forearm. It was an adult’s voice and filled with an adult’s experience and cynicism. It sounded profane coming from the mouth of a child.

“Don’t run,” said Elva. “I’m your friend.” She put the platter aside; it was empty now. To the crone, she said, “More food.” The old woman hurried from the room. Then Elva patted the floor beside her. “Please, sit. I have been waiting for you ever since I learned to talk.”

Keeping her grip on her dagger, Nasuada lowered herself to the stones. “When was that?”

“Last week.” Elva folded her hands in her lap. She fixed her ghastly eyes on Nasuada, pinning her in place through the unnatural strength of her gaze. Nasuada felt as if a violet lance had pierced her skull and was twisting inside her mind, tearing apart her thoughts and memories. She fought the desire to scream.

Leaning forward, Elva reached out and cupped Nasuada’s cheek with one soft hand. “You know, Ajihad could not have led the Varden better than you have. You chose the correct path. Your name will be praised for centuries for having the courage and foresight to move the Varden to Surda and attack the Empire when everyone else thought it was insane to do so.”

Nasuada gaped at the girl, stunned. Like a key matched to a lock, Elva’s words perfectly addressed Nasuada’s primal fears, the doubts that kept her awake at night, sweating in the darkness. An involuntary

surge of emotion rushed through her, bolstering her with a sense of confidence and peace that she had not possessed since before Ajihad's death. Tears of relief burst from her eyes and rolled down her face. It was as if Elva had known exactly what to say in order to comfort her.

Nasuada loathed her for it.

Her euphoria warred against her distaste for how this moment of weakness had been induced and by whom. Nor did she trust the girl's motivation.

"What *are* you?" she demanded.

"I am what Eragon made me."

"He blessed you."

The dreadful, ancient eyes were obscured for a moment as Elva blinked. "He did not understand his actions. Since Eragon ensorcelled me, whenever I see a person, I sense all the hurts that beset him and are about to beset him. When I was smaller, I could do nothing about it. So I grew bigger."

"Why would—"

"The magic in my blood drives me to protect people from pain … no matter the injury to myself or whether I want to help or not." Her smile acquired a bitter twist. "It costs me dearly if I resist the urge."

As Nasuada digested the implications, she realized that Elva's unsettling aspect was a by-product of the suffering that she had been exposed to. Nasuada shivered at the thought of what the girl had endured. *It must have torn her apart to have this compulsion and yet be unable to act on it.* Against her better judgment, she began to feel a measure of sympathy for Elva.

"Why have you told me this?"

"I thought that you should know who and what I am." Elva paused, and the fire in her gaze strengthened. "And that I will fight for you however I can. Use me as you would an assassin—in hiding, in the dark, and without mercy." She laughed with a high, chilling voice. "You wonder why; I see you do. Because unless this war ends, and sooner rather than later, it will drive me insane. I find it hard enough to deal with the agonies of everyday life without also having to confront the atrocities of battle. Use me to end it and I'll ensure that your life is as happy as any human has had the privilege to experience."

At that moment, the crone scurried back into the room, bowed to Elva, and handed her a new platter of food. It was a physical relief to Nasuada as Elva looked down and attacked a leg of mutton, cramming the meat into her mouth with both hands. She ate with the ravenous intensity of a gorging wolf, displaying a complete lack of decorum. With her violet eyes hidden and her dragon mark covered by black

bangs, she once again appeared to be nothing more than an innocent child.

Nasuada waited until it became apparent that Elva had said all she was going to. Then—at a gesture from Angela—she accompanied the herbalist through a side door, leaving the pale girl sitting alone in the center of the dark, cloth-bound room, like a dire fetus nestled in its womb, waiting for the right moment to emerge.

Angela made sure that the door was closed and whispered, "All she does is eat and eat. We can't sate her appetite with the current rations. Can you—"

"She'll be fed. You needn't worry about it." Nasuada rubbed her arms, trying to eradicate the memory of those awful, horrible eyes.…

"Thank you."

"Has this ever happened to anyone else?"

Angela shook her head until her curly hair bounced on her shoulders. "Not in the entire history of magic. I tried to cast her future, but it's a hopeless quagmire—lovely word, *quagmire*—because her life interacts with so many others."

"Is she dangerous?"

"We're all dangerous."

"You know what I mean."

Angela shrugged. "She's more dangerous than some and less than others. The one she's most likely to kill, though, is herself. If she meets someone who's about to be hurt and Eragon's spell catches her unawares, then she'll take the doomed person's place. That's why she stays inside most of the time."

"How far in advance can she foretell events?"

"Two or three hours at the most."

Leaning against the wall, Nasuada considered the newest complication in her life. Elva could be a potent weapon if she were applied correctly. *Through her, I can discern my opponents' troubles and weaknesses, as well as what will please them and make them amenable to my wishes*. In an emergency, the girl could also act as an infallible guard if one of the Varden, like Eragon or Saphira, had to be protected.

She can't be left unsupervised. I need someone to watch her. Someone who understands magic and is comfortable enough with their own identity to resist Elva's influence … and who I can trust to be reliable and honest. She immediately discounted Trianna.

Nasuada looked at Angela. Though she was wary of the herbalist, she knew that Angela had helped the Varden with matters of the utmost delicacy and importance—like healing Eragon—and had asked for nothing in return. Nasuada could think of no one else who had the time, inclination, and expertise to look after Elva.

“I realize,” said Nasuada, “that this is presumptuous of me, as you aren’t under my command and I know little of your life or duties, but I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Proceed.” Angela waved a hand.

Nasuada faltered, disconcerted, then forged ahead. “Would you be willing to keep an eye on Elva for me? I need—”

“Of course! And I’ll keep two eyes on her, if I can spare them. I relish the opportunity to study her.”

“You’ll have to report to me,” warned Nasuada.

“The poison dart hidden in the raisin tart. Ah, well, I suppose I can manage.”

“I have your word, then?”

“You have my word.”

Relieved, Nasuada groaned and sank into a nearby chair. “Oh, what a mess. What a *quagmire*. As Eragon’s liegelord, I’m responsible for his deeds, but I never imagined that he would do anything as dreadful as this. It’s a blight on my honor as much as his.”

A ripple of sharp pops filled the room as Angela cracked her knuckles. “Yes. I intend to speak to him about it once he returns from Ellesméra.”

Her expression was so fierce, it alarmed Nasuada. “Well, don’t hurt him. We need him.”

“I won’t … permanently.”

RESURGENCE

A blast of ravening wind tore Eragon from his sleep.

Blankets flapped over him as a tempest clawed at his room, hurling his possessions into the air and knocking the lanterns against the walls. Outside, the sky was black with thunderheads.

Saphira watched as Eragon staggered upright and fought to keep his balance as the tree swayed like a ship at sea. He lowered his head against the gale and made his way around the room, clutching at the wall until he reached the teardrop portal through which the storm howled.

Eragon looked past the heaving floor to the ground below. It appeared to rock back and forth. He swallowed and tried to ignore the churning in his stomach.

By touch he found the edge of the cloth membrane that could be pulled out of the wood to cover the opening. He prepared to launch himself from one side of the gap to the next. If he slipped, nothing would stop him from falling onto the roots of the tree.

Wait, said Saphira.

She backed off the low pedestal where she slept and laid her tail alongside him so that he could use it as a handrail.

Holding the cloth with just his right hand, which took all his strength, Eragon used the line of spikes on Saphira's tail to pull himself across the portal. As soon as he reached the far side, he grabbed the cloth with both hands and pressed its edge into the groove that locked it in place.

The room went silent.

The membrane bulged inward under the force of the angry elements but showed no sign of giving. Eragon poked it with his finger. The fabric was as taut as a drum.

It's amazing what the elves can do, he said.

Saphira cocked her head, then lifted it so that her head was flat against the ceiling while she listened. *You'd better close up the study; it's being wrecked.*

As he headed toward the stairs, the tree jolted and his leg buckled, sending him down hard on one knee.

"Blast it," he growled.

The study was a whirlwind of paper and quills, darting about as if they had a mind of their own. He dove into the flurry with his arms

wrapped around his head. It felt like he was being pelted with stones when the tips of the quills struck him.

Eragon struggled to close the upper portal without Saphira's help. The moment he did, pain—endless, mind-numbing *pain*—ripped open his back.

He screamed once and went hoarse from the strength of his cry. His vision flashed with red and yellow, then faded to black as he toppled to his side. Below, he heard Saphira howl with frustration; the staircase was too small and, outside, the wind was too ferocious for her to reach him. His connection with her receded. He surrendered to the waiting darkness as a release from his agony.

A sour taste filled Eragon's mouth when he woke. He did not know how long he had been lying on the floor, but the muscles in his arms and legs were knotted from being curled into a tight ball. The storm still assailed the tree, accompanied by a thudding rain that matched the pounding in his head.

Saphira …?

I'm here. Can you come down?

I'll try.

He was too weak to stand on the pitching floor, so he crawled to the stairs and slid down one at a time, wincing with each impact. Halfway down, he encountered Saphira, who had jammed her head and neck as far up the stairs as she could, gouging the wood in her frenzy.

Little one. She flicked out her tongue and caught him on the hand with its rough tip. He smiled. Then she arched her neck and tried to pull back, but to no avail.

What's wrong?

I'm stuck.

You're … He could not help it; he laughed even though it hurt. The situation was too absurd.

She snarled and heaved her entire body, shaking the tree with her efforts and knocking him over. Then she collapsed, panting. *Well, don't just sit there grinning like an idiot fox. Help me!*

Fighting the urge to giggle, he put his foot on her nose and pushed as hard as he dared while Saphira twisted and squirmed in an attempt to free herself.

It took more than ten minutes before she succeeded. Only then did Eragon see the full extent of the damage to the stairwell. He groaned. Her scales had cut through the bark and obliterated the delicate patterns grown out from the wood.

Oops, said Saphira.

At least you *did it, not me. The elves might forgive* you. *They'd sing dwarf love ballads night and day if you asked them to*.

He joined Saphira on her dais and huddled against the flat scales of her belly, listening as the storm roared about them. The wide membrane became translucent whenever lightning pulsed in jagged shards of light.

What time do you think it is?

Several hours before we must meet Oromis. Go on, sleep and recover. I will keep guard.

He did just that, despite the tree's churning.

WHY DO YOU FIGHT?

Oromis's timepiece buzzed like a giant hornet, blaring in Eragon's ears until he retrieved the bauble and wound the mechanism.

His bashed knee had turned purple, he was sore both from his attack and the elves' Dance of Snake and Crane, and he could do no more than croak with his ragged throat. The worst injury, though, was his sense of foreboding that this would not be the last time Durza's wound would trouble him. The prospect sickened him, draining his strength and will.

So many weeks passed between attacks, he said, *I began to hope that maybe, just maybe, I was healed.… I suppose sheer luck is the only reason I was spared that long*.

Extending her neck, Saphira nuzzled him on the arm. *You know you aren't alone, little one. I'll do everything I can to help*. He responded with a weak smile. Then she licked his face and added, *You should get ready to leave*.

I know. He stared at the floor, unwilling to move, then dragged himself to the wash closet, where he scrubbed himself clean and used magic to shave.

He was in the middle of drying himself when he felt a presence touch his mind. Without pausing to think, Eragon began to fortify his mind, concentrating on an image of his big toe to the exclusion of all else. Then he heard Oromis say, *Admirable, but unnecessary. Bring Zar'roc with you today*. The presence vanished.

Eragon released a shaky breath. *I need to be more alert*, he told Saphira. *I would have been at his mercy if he were an enemy*.

Not with me around.

When his ablutions were complete, Eragon unhooked the membrane from the wall and mounted Saphira, cradling Zar'roc in the crook of his arm.

Saphira took flight with a rush of air, angling toward the Crags of Tel'naeír. From their high vantage point, they could see the damage that the storm had wreaked on Du Weldenvarden. No trees had fallen in Ellesméra, but farther away, where the elves' magic was weaker, numerous pines had been knocked over. The remaining wind made the crossed branches and trees rub together, producing a brittle chorus of creaks and groans. Clouds of golden pollen, as thick as dust, streamed out from the trees and flowers.

While they flew, Eragon and Saphira exchanged memories of their separate lessons from the day before. He told her what he had learned about ants and the ancient language, and she told him about downdrafts and other dangerous weather patterns and how to avoid them.

Thus, when they landed and Oromis interrogated Eragon about Saphira's lessons and Glaedr interrogated Saphira about Eragon's, they were able to answer every question.

"Very good, Eragon-vodhr."

Aye. Well played, Bjartskular, added Glaedr to Saphira.

As before, Saphira was sent off with Glaedr while Eragon remained on the cliffs, although this time he and Saphira were careful to maintain their link so as to absorb each other's instruction.

As the dragons departed, Oromis observed, "Your voice is rougher today, Eragon. Are you sick?"

"My back hurt again this morning."

"Ah. You have my sympathy." He motioned with one finger. "Wait here."

Eragon watched as Oromis strode into his hut and then reappeared, looking fierce and warlike with his silver mane rippling in the wind and his bronze sword in hand. "Today," he said, "we shall forgo the Rimgar and instead cross our two blades, Naegling and Zar'roc. Draw thy sword and guard its edge as your first master taught you."

Eragon wanted nothing more than to refuse. However, he had no intention of breaking his vow or letting his resolve waver in front of Oromis. He swallowed his trepidation. *This is what it means to be a Rider*, he thought.

Drawing upon his reserves, he located the nub deep within his mind that connected him to the wild flow of magic. He delved into it, and the energy suffused him. "Gëuloth du knífr," he said, and a winking blue star popped into existence between his thumb and forefinger, jumping from one to the next as he ran it down Zar'roc's perilous length.

The instant their swords met, Eragon knew that he was as outmatched by Oromis as by Durza and Arya. Eragon was an exemplary human swordsman, but he could not compete with warriors whose blood ran thick with magic. His arm was too weak and his reflexes too slow. Still, that did not stop him from trying to win. He fought to the limits of his abilities, even if, in the end, it was a futile prospect.

Oromis tested him in every conceivable manner, forcing Eragon to utilize his entire arsenal of blows, counterblows, and underhand tricks. It was all for naught. He could not touch the elf. As a last resort, he tried altering his style of fighting, which could unsettle even

the most hardened veteran. All it got him was a welt on his thigh.

"Move your feet faster," cried Oromis. "He who stands like a pillar dies in battle. He who bends like a reed is triumphant!"

The elf was glorious in action, a perfect blend of control and untamed violence. He pounced like a cat, struck like a heron, and bobbed and wove with the grace of a weasel.

They had been sparring for almost twenty minutes when Oromis faltered, his narrow features clamped in a brief grimace. Eragon recognized the symptoms of Oromis's mysterious illness and lashed out with Zar'roc. It was a low thing to do, but Eragon was so frustrated, he was willing to take advantage of any opening, no matter how unfair, just to have the satisfaction of marking Oromis at least once.

Zar'roc never reached its target. As Eragon twisted, he overextended and strained his back.

The pain was upon him without warning.

The last thing he heard was Saphira shouting, *Eragon!*

Despite the intensity of the fit, Eragon remained conscious throughout his ordeal. Not that he was aware of his surroundings, only the fire that burned in his flesh and prolonged each second into an eternity. The worst part was that he could do nothing to end his suffering but wait …

… and wait …

Eragon lay panting in the cold mud. He blinked as his vision came into focus and he saw Oromis sitting on a stool next to him. Pushing himself onto his knees, Eragon surveyed his new tunic with a mixture of regret and disgust. The fine russet cloth was caked with dirt from his convulsions on the ground. Muck filled his hair as well.

He could sense Saphira in his mind, radiating concern as she waited for him to notice her. *How can you continue like this?* she fretted. *It'll destroy you.*

Her misgivings undermined Eragon's remaining fortitude. Saphira had never before expressed doubt that he would prevail, not at Dras-Leona, Gil'ead, or Farthen Dûr, nor with any of the dangers they had encountered. Her confidence had given him courage. Without it he was truly afraid.

You should concentrate on your lesson, he said.

I should concentrate on you.

Leave me alone! He snapped at her like a wounded animal that wants to nurse its injuries in silence and in dark. She fell silent,

leaving just enough of their connection intact so that he was vaguely aware of Glaedr teaching her about fireweed, which she could chew to help her digestion.

Eragon combed the mud from his hair with his fingers, then spat out a globule of blood. “Bit my tongue.”

Oromis nodded as if it were to be expected. “Do you require healing?”

“No.”

“Very well. Tend to your sword, then bathe and go to the stump in the glade and listen to the thoughts of the forest. Listen, and when you hear no more, come tell me what you have learned.”

“Yes, Master.”

As he sat on the stump, Eragon found that his turbulent thoughts and emotions prevented him from mustering the concentration to open his mind and sense the creatures in the hollow. Nor was he interested in doing so.

Still, the peaceful quality of his surroundings gradually ameliorated his resentment, confusion, and stubborn anger. It did not make him happy, but it did bring him a certain fatalistic acceptance. *This is my lot in life, and I’d better get used to it because it’s not about to improve in the foreseeable future*.

After a quarter of an hour, his faculties had regained their usual acuity, so he resumed studying the colony of red ants that he had discovered the day before. He also tried to be aware of everything else that was happening in the glade, as Oromis had instructed.

Eragon met with limited success. If he relaxed and allowed himself to absorb input from all the consciousnesses nearby, thousands of images and feelings rushed into his head, piling on top of one another in quick flashes of sound and color, touch and smell, pain and pleasure. The amount of information was overwhelming. Out of pure habit, his mind would snatch one subject or another from the torrent, excluding all the rest before he noticed his lapse and wrenched himself back into a state of passive receptivity. The cycle repeated itself every few seconds.

Despite that, he was able to improve his understanding of the ants’ world. He got his first clue as to their genders when he deduced that the huge ant in the heart of their underground lair was laying eggs, one every minute or so, which made it—her—a female. And when he accompanied a group of the red ants up the stem of their rosebush, he got a vivid demonstration of the kind of enemies they faced: some *thing* darted out from underneath a leaf and killed one of the ants he was bound to. It was hard for him to guess exactly what the creature was, since the ants only saw fragments of it and, in any case, they placed more emphasis on smell than vision. If they had been people,

he would have said that they were attacked by a terrifying monster the size of a dragon, which had jaws as powerful as the spiked portcullis at Teirm and could move with whiplash speed.

The ants ringed in the monster like grooms working to capture a runaway horse. They darted at it with a total lack of fear, nipping at its knobbed legs and withdrawing an instant before they were caught in the monster's iron pincers. More and more ants joined the throng. They worked together to overpower the intruder, never faltering, even when two were caught and killed and when several of their brethren fell off the stem to the ground below.

It was a desperate battle, with neither side willing to give quarter. Only escape or victory would save the combatants from a horrible death. Eragon followed the fray with breathless anticipation, awed by the ants' bravery and how they continued to fight in spite of injuries that would incapacitate a human. Their feats were heroic enough to be sung about by bards throughout the land.

Eragon was so engrossed by the contest that when the ants finally prevailed, he loosed an elated cry so loud, it roused the birds from their roosts among the trees.

Out of curiosity, he returned his attention to his own body, then walked to the rosebush to view the dead monster for himself. What he saw was an ordinary brown spider with its legs curled into a fist being transported by the ants down to their nest for food.

Amazing.

He started to leave, but then realized that once again he had neglected to keep watch over the myriad other insects and animals in the glade. He closed his eyes and whirled through the minds of several dozen beings, doing his best to memorize as many interesting details as he could. It was a poor substitute for prolonged observation, but he was hungry and he had already exhausted his assigned hour.

When Eragon rejoined Oromis in his hut, the elf asked, "How went it?"

"Master, I could listen night and day for the next twenty years and still not know everything that goes on in the forest."

Oromis raised an eyebrow. "You have made progress." After Eragon described what he had witnessed, Oromis said, "But still not enough, I fear. You must work harder, Eragon. I know you can. You are intelligent and persistent, and you have the potential to be a great Rider. As difficult as it is, you have to learn to put aside your troubles and concentrate entirely on the task at hand. Find peace within yourself and let your actions flow from there."

"I'm doing my best."

"No, this isn't your best. We shall recognize your best when it appears." He paused thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would help if you had a

fellow student to compete with. Then we might see your best.… I will think on the matter."

From his cupboards, Oromis produced a loaf of freshly baked bread, a wood jar of hazelnut butter—which the elves used in place of actual butter—and a pair of bowls that he ladled full of a vegetable stew that had been simmering in a pot hung over a bed of coals in the corner fireplace.

Eragon looked at the stew with distaste; he was sick of the elves' fare. He longed for meat, fish, or fowl, something hearty that he could sink his teeth into, not this endless parade of plants. "Master," he asked to distract himself, "why do you have me meditate? Is it so that I will understand the doings of the animals and insects, or is there more to it than that?"

"Can you think of no other motive?" Oromis sighed when Eragon shook his head. "Always it is thus with my new students, and especially with the human ones; the mind is the last muscle they train or use, and the one that they regard the least. Ask them about swordplay and they can list every blow from a duel a month old, but ask them to solve a problem or make a coherent statement and … well, I would be lucky to get more than a blank stare in return. You are still new to the world of gramarye—as magic is properly called—but you must begin to consider its full implications."

"How so?"

"Imagine for a moment that you are Galbatorix, with all of his vast resources at your command. The Varden have destroyed your Urgal army with the help of a rival Dragon Rider, who you know was educated—at least in part—by one of your most dangerous and implacable foes, Brom. You are also aware that your enemies are massing in Surda for a possible invasion. Given that, what would be the easiest way to deal with these various threats, short of flying into battle yourself?"

Eragon stirred his stew to cool it while he examined the issue. "It seems to me," he said slowly, "that the easiest thing would be to train a corps of magicians—they wouldn't even have to be that powerful—force them to swear loyalty to me in the ancient language, then have them infiltrate Surda to sabotage the Varden's efforts, poison wells, and assassinate Nasuada, King Orrin, and other key members of the resistance."

"And why hasn't Galbatorix done this yet?"

"Because until now, Surda was of negligible interest to him, and because the Varden have dwelled in Farthen Dûr for decades, where they were able to examine every newcomer's mind for duplicity, which they can't do in Surda since its border and population are so large."

“Those are my very conclusions,” said Oromis. “Unless Galbatorix forsakes his lair in Urû’baen, the greatest danger you’re likely to encounter during the Varden’s campaign will come from fellow magicians. You know as well as I how difficult it is to guard against magic, especially if your opponent has sworn in the ancient language to kill you, no matter the cost. Instead of attempting to first conquer your mind, such a foe will simply cast a spell to obliterate you, even though—in the instant before you are destroyed—you will still be free to retaliate. However, you cannot fell your murderer if you don’t know who or where he is.”

“So sometimes you don’t have to bother taking control of your opponent’s mind?”

“Sometimes, but it’s a risk to avoid.” Oromis paused to consume a few spoonfuls of stew. “Now, to address the heart of this issue, how do you defend yourself against anonymous enemies who can contravene any physical precautions and slay with a muttered word?”

“I don’t see how, unless …” Eragon hesitated, then smiled. “Unless I was aware of the consciousnesses of all the people around me. Then I could sense if they meant me harm.”

Oromis appeared pleased by his answer. “Even so, Eragon-finiarel. And that’s the answer to your question. Your meditations condition your mind to find and exploit flaws in your enemies’ mental armor, no matter how small.”

“But won’t another magic user know if I touch their mind?”

“Aye, they will know, but most people won’t. And as for the magicians, they will know, they will be afraid, and they will shield their minds from you out of their fear, and you will know them because of it.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to leave your consciousness unguarded? If you’re attacked mentally, you could easily be overwhelmed.”

“It’s less dangerous than being blind to the world.”

Eragon nodded. He tapped his spoon against his bowl in a measured meter of time, engrossed in his thoughts, then said, “It feels wrong.”

“Oh? Explain yourself.”

“What about people’s privacy? Brom taught me to never intrude in someone’s mind unless it was absolutely necessary.… I guess I’m uncomfortable with the idea of prying into people’s secrets … secrets that they have every right to keep to themselves.” He cocked his head. “Why didn’t Brom tell me about this if it’s so important? Why didn’t he train me in it himself?”

“Brom told you,” said Oromis, “what was appropriate to tell you under the circumstances. Dipping into the pool of minds can prove addictive to those with a malicious personality or a taste for power. It was not taught to prospective Riders—though we had them meditate

as you do throughout their training—until we were convinced that they were mature enough to resist temptation.

"It *is* an invasion of privacy, and you will learn many things from it that you never wanted to. However, this is for your own good and the good of the Varden. I can say from experience, and from watching other Riders experience the same, that this, above all else, will help you to understand what drives people. And understanding begets empathy and compassion, even for the meanest beggar in the meanest city of Alagaësia."

They were quiet for a while, eating, then Oromis asked, "Can you tell me, What is the most important mental tool a person can possess?"

It was a serious question, and Eragon considered it for a reasonable span before he ventured to say, "Determination."

Oromis tore the loaf in half with his long white fingers. "I can understand why you arrived at that conclusion—determination has served you well in your adventures—but no. I meant the tool most necessary to choose the best course of action in any given situation. Determination is as common among men who are dull and foolish as it is among those who are brilliant intellects. So, no, determination cannot be what we're looking for."

This time Eragon treated the question as he would a riddle, counting the number of words, whispering them out loud to establish whether they rhymed, and otherwise examining them for hidden meaning. The problem was, he was no more than a mediocre riddler and had never placed very high in Carvahall's annual riddle contest. He thought too literally to work out the answers to riddles that he had not heard before, a legacy of Garrow's practical upbringing.

"Wisdom," he finally said. "Wisdom is the most important tool for a person to possess."

"A fair guess, but, again, no. The answer is logic. Or, to put it another way, the ability to reason analytically. Applied properly, it can overcome any lack of wisdom, which one only gains through age and experience."

Eragon frowned. "Yes, but isn't having a good heart more important than logic? Pure logic can lead you to conclusions that are ethically wrong, whereas if you are moral and righteous, that will ensure that you don't act shamefully."

A razor-thin smile curled Oromis's lips. "You confuse the issue. All I wanted to know was the most useful *tool* a person can have, regardless of whether that person is good or evil. I agree that it's important to be of a virtuous nature, but I would also contend that if you had to choose between giving a man a noble disposition or teaching him to think clearly, you'd do better to teach him to think clearly. Too many

problems in this world are caused by men with noble dispositions and clouded minds.

"History provides us with numerous examples of people who were convinced that they were doing the right thing and committed terrible crimes because of it. Keep in mind, Eragon, that no one thinks of himself as a villain, and few make decisions they think are wrong. A person may dislike his choice, but he will stand by it because, even in the worst circumstances, he believes that it was the best option available to him at the time.

"On its own, being a decent person is no guarantee that you will act well, which brings us back to the one protection we have against demagogues, tricksters, and the madness of crowds, and our surest guide through the uncertain shoals of life: clear and reasoned thinking. Logic will never fail you, unless you're unaware of—or deliberately ignore—the consequences of your deeds."

"If elves are so logical," said Eragon, "then you must all agree on what to do."

"Hardly," averred Oromis. "Like every race, we adhere to a wide range of tenets, and, as a result, we often arrive at differing conclusions, even in identical situations. Conclusions, I might add, that make logical sense from each person's point of view. And although I wish it were otherwise, not all elves have trained their minds properly."

"How do you intend to teach me this logic?"

Oromis's smile broadened. "By the oldest and most effective method: debating. I will ask you a question, then you will answer and defend your position." He waited while Eragon refilled his bowl with stew. "For example, why do you fight the Empire?"

The sudden change of topic caught Eragon off guard. He had a feeling that Oromis had just reached the subject that he had been driving toward all along. "As I said before, to help those who suffer from Galbatorix's rule and, to a lesser extent, for personal vengeance."

"Then you fight for humanitarian reasons?"

"What do you mean?"

"That you fight to help the people whom Galbatorix has harmed and to stop him from hurting any more."

"Exactly," said Eragon.

"Ah, but answer me this, my young Rider: Won't your war with Galbatorix cause more pain than it will ever prevent? The majority of people in the Empire live normal, productive lives untouched by their king's madness. How can you justify invading their land, destroying their homes, and killing their sons and daughters?"

Eragon gaped, stunned that Oromis could ask such a question—Galbatorix was *evil*—and stunned because no easy reply presented

itself. He knew that he was in the right, but how could he prove it? "Don't you believe that Galbatorix should be overthrown?"

"That is not the question."

"You *must* believe it, though," persisted Eragon. "Look what he did to the Riders."

Dunking his bread in his stew, Oromis resumed eating, letting Eragon fume in silence. When he finished, Oromis folded his hands in his lap and asked, "Have I upset you?"

"Yes, you have."

"I see. Well then, continue to ponder the matter until you find an answer. I expect it to be a convincing one."

They cleared the table and took the dishes outside, where they cleaned them with sand. Oromis crumbled what remained of the bread around his house for the birds to eat, then they returned inside.

Oromis brought out pens and ink for Eragon, and they resumed his education of the Liduen Kvaedhí, the written form of the ancient language, which was so much more elegant than the humans' or dwarves' runes. Eragon lost himself in the arcane glyphs, happy to have a task that required nothing more strenuous than rote memorization.

After hours spent bent over the paper sheets, Oromis waved a hand and said, "Enough. We will continue this tomorrow." Eragon leaned back and rolled his shoulders while Oromis selected five scrolls from their nooks in the wall. "Two of these are in the ancient language, three are in your native tongue. They will help you to master both alphabets, as well as give you valuable information that would be tedious for me to vocalize."

"Vocalize?"

With unerring accuracy, Oromis's hand darted out and plucked a massive sixth scroll from the wall, which he added to the pyramid in Eragon's arms. "This is a dictionary. I doubt you can, but try to read it all."

When the elf opened the door for him to leave, Eragon said, "Master?"

"Yes, Eragon?"

"When will we start working with magic?"

Oromis leaned on one arm against the doorway, caving in on himself as if he no longer possessed the will to remain upright. Then he sighed and said, "You must trust me to guide your training, Eragon. Still, I suppose it would be foolish of me to delay any longer. Come, leave the scrolls on the table, and let us go explore the mysteries of gramarye."

On the greensward before the hut, Oromis stood looking out over the Crags of Tel'naeír, his back to Eragon, his feet shoulder width apart, and his hands clasped in the small of his back. Without turning around, he asked, "What is magic?"

"The manipulation of energy through the use of the ancient language."

There was a pause before Oromis responded. “Technically, you are correct, and many spellcasters never understand more than that. However, your description fails to capture the essence of magic. Magic is the art of *thinking*, not strength or language—you already know that a limited vocabulary is no obstacle to using magic. As with everything else you must master, magic relies on having a disciplined intellect.

“Brom bypassed the normal training regimen and ignored the subtleties of gramarye to ensure that you had the skills you needed to remain alive. I too must distort the regimen in order to focus on the skills that you will likely require in the coming battles. However, whereas Brom taught you the crude mechanics of magic, I will teach you its finer applications, the secrets that were reserved for the wisest of the Riders: how you can kill with no more energy than moving your finger, the method by which you can instantaneously transport an item from one point to another, a spell that will allow you to identify poisons in your food and drink, a variation on scrying that allows you to hear as well as to see, how you can draw energy from your surroundings and thus preserve your own strength, and how you can maximize your strength in every possible way.

“These techniques are so potent and dangerous, they were never shared with novice Riders such as yourself, but circumstances demand that I divulge them and trust that you won’t abuse them.” Raising his right arm to his side, his hand a hooked claw, Oromis proclaimed, “Adurna!”

Eragon watched as a sphere of water coalesced from the brook by the hut and floated through the air until it hovered between Oromis’s outstretched fingers.

The brook was dark and brown under the branches of the forest, but the sphere, removed from it, was as colorless as glass. Flecks of moss, dirt, and other bits of detritus floated inside the orb.

Still gazing toward the horizon, Oromis said, “Catch.” He tossed the sphere back over his shoulder toward Eragon.

Eragon tried to grab the ball, but as soon as it touched his skin, the water lost cohesion and splashed across his chest.

“Catch it with magic,” said Oromis. Again, he cried, “Adurna!” and a sphere of water gathered itself from the surface of the brook and leaped into his hand like a trained hawk obeying its master.

This time Oromis threw the ball without warning. Eragon was prepared, though, and said, “Reisa du adurna,” even as he reached for the ball. It slowed to a halt a hairsbreadth from the skin of his palm.

“An awkward word choice,” said Oromis, “but workable, nevertheless.”

Eragon grinned and whispered, “Thrysta.”

The ball reversed its course and sped toward the base of Oromis’s

silver head. However, the sphere did not land where Eragon had intended, but rather shot past the elf, whipped around, and flew back at Eragon with increased velocity.

The water remained as hard and solid as polished marble when it struck Eragon, producing a dull *thunk* as it collided with his skull. The blow knocked him sprawling on the turf, where he lay stunned, blinking as pulsing lights swam across the sky.

"Yes," said Oromis. "A better word might be *letta* or *kodthr*." He finally turned to look at Eragon and raised an eyebrow with apparent surprise. "Whatever are you doing? Get up. We can't lie about all day."

"Yes, Master," groaned Eragon.

When Eragon got back on his feet, Oromis had him manipulate the water in various ways—shaping it into complex knots, changing the color of light that it absorbed or reflected, and freezing it in certain prescribed sequences—none of which proved difficult for him.

The exercises continued for so long that Eragon's initial interest faded and was replaced by impatience and puzzlement. He was chary of offending Oromis, but he saw no point to what the elf was doing; it was as if Oromis were avoiding any spells that would require him to use more than a minimal amount of strength. *I've already demonstrated the extent of my skills. Why does he persist in reviewing these fundamentals?* He said, "Master, I know all of this. Can we not move on?"

The muscles in Oromis's neck hardened, and his shoulders were like chiseled granite for all they moved; even the elf's breathing halted before he said, "Will you never learn respect, Eragon-vodhr? So be it!" Then he uttered four words from the ancient language in a voice so deep that their meaning escaped Eragon.

Eragon yelped as he felt each of his legs enveloped by pressure up to the knee, squeezing and constricting his calves in such a way that made it impossible for him to walk. His thighs and upper body were free to move, but other than that, it was as if he had been cast in lime mortar.

"Free yourself," said Oromis.

Here now was a challenge that Eragon had never dealt with before: how to counter someone else's spells. He could sever his invisible bonds using one of two different methods. The most effective would be if he knew *how* Oromis had immobilized him—whether by affecting his body directly or using an external source—for then he could redirect the element or force to disperse Oromis's power. Or he could use a generic, vague spell to block whatever Oromis was doing. The downside to the tactic was that it would lead to a direct contest of strength between them. *It had to happen sometime,* thought Eragon. He

entertained no hope of prevailing against an elf.

Assembling the required phrase, he said, “Losna kalfya iet.” Release my calves.

The surge of energy that deserted Eragon was greater than he had anticipated; he went from being moderately tired from the day’s pains and exertions to feeling as if he had hiked over rough terrain since morn. Then the pressure vanished from his legs, causing him to stagger as he regained his balance.

Oromis shook his head. “Foolish,” he said, “very foolish. If I had committed more to maintaining my spell, that would have killed you. Never use absolutes.”

“Absolutes?”

“Never word your spells so that only two outcomes are possible: success or death. If an enemy had trapped your legs and if he were stronger than you, then you would have expended all of your energy trying to break his spell. You would have died with no chance to abort the attempt once you realized that it was futile.”

“How do I avoid that?” asked Eragon.

“It’s safer to make the spell a *process* that you can terminate at your discretion. Instead of saying *release my calves*, which is an absolute, you could say *reduce the magic imprisoning my calves*. A bit wordy, but you could then decide how much you wanted your opponent’s spell decreased and if it were safe to remove it entirely. We will try again.”

The pressure returned to Eragon’s legs as soon as Oromis mouthed his inaudible invocation. Eragon was so tired, he doubted that he could provide much opposition. Nevertheless, he reached for the magic.

Before the ancient language left Eragon’s mouth, he became aware of a curious sensation as the weight constraining his legs lessened at a steady rate. It tickled and felt like he was being pulled out of a mire of cold, slick mud. He glanced at Oromis and saw the elf’s face scribed by passion, as if he clung to something precious that he could not bear to lose. A vein throbbed at one of Oromis’s temples.

When Eragon’s arcane fetters ceased to exist, Oromis recoiled as if he had been pricked by a wasp and stood with his gaze fixed on his two hands, his thin chest heaving. For perhaps a minute, he remained thus, then he drew himself upright and walked to the very edge of the Crags of Tel’naeír, a lone figure outlined against the pale sky.

Regret and sorrow welled in Eragon—the same emotions that had gripped him when he first saw Glaedr’s mutilated foreleg. He cursed himself for being so arrogant with Oromis, so oblivious to his infirmities, and for not placing more confidence in the elf’s judgment. *I’m not the only one who must deal with past injuries*. Eragon had not fully comprehended what it meant when Oromis said that all but the

slightest magic escaped his grasp. Now he appreciated the depths of Oromis's situation and the pain that it must cause him, especially for one of his race, who was born and bred with magic.

Eragon went to Oromis, knelt, and bowed in the fashion of the dwarves, pressing his bruised forehead against the ground. "Ebrithil, I beg your pardon."

The elf gave no indication that he had heard.

The two of them lingered in their respective positions while the sun declined before them, the birds sang their evening songs, and the air grew cool and moist. From the north came the faint offbeat thumps of Saphira and Glaedr's wing strokes as they returned for the day.

In a low, distant voice, Oromis said, "We will begin anew tomorrow, with this and other subjects." From his profile, Eragon could tell that Oromis had regained his customary expression of impassive reserve. "Is that agreeable to you?"

"Yes, Master," said Eragon, grateful for the question.

"I think it best if, from now on, you endeavor to speak only in the ancient language. We have little time at our disposal, and this is the fastest way for you to learn."

"Even when I talk to Saphira?"

"Even then."

Adopting the elven tongue, Eragon vowed, "Then I will work ceaselessly until I not only think, but dream, in your language."

"If you achieve that," said Oromis, replying in kind, "our venture may yet succeed." He paused. "Instead of flying directly here in the morning, you will accompany the elf I send to guide you. He will take you to where those of Ellesméra practice swordplay. Stay for an hour, then continue on as normal."

"Won't you teach me yourself?" asked Eragon, feeling slighted.

"I have naught to teach. You are as good a swordsman as ever I have met. I know no more of fighting than you, and that which I possess and you do not, I cannot give you. All that remains for you is to preserve your current level of skill."

"Why can't I do that with you … Master?"

"Because I do not appreciate beginning the day with alarum and conflict." He looked at Eragon, then relented and added, "And because it will be good for you to become acquainted with others who live here. I am not representative of my race. But enough of that. Look, they approach."

The two dragons glided across the flat disk of the sun. First came Glaedr with a roar of wind, blotting out the sky with his massive bulk before he settled on the grass and folded his golden wings, then Saphira, as quick and agile as a sparrow beside an eagle.

As they had that morning, Oromis and Glaedr asked a number of

questions to ensure that Eragon and Saphira had paid attention to each other's lessons. They had not always, but by cooperating and sharing information between themselves, they were able to answer all of the questions. Their only stumbling block was the foreign language they were required to communicate in.

Better, rumbled Glaedr afterward. *Much better*. He bent his gaze toward Eragon. *You and I will have to train together soon*.

"Of course, Skulblaka."

The old dragon snorted and crawled alongside Oromis, half hopping with his front leg to compensate for his missing limb. Darting forward, Saphira nipped at the end of Glaedr's tail, tossing it into the air with a flip of her head, like she would to break the neck of a deer. She recoiled as Glaedr twisted round and snapped at her neck, exposing his enormous fangs.

Eragon winced and, too late, covered his ears to protect them from Glaedr's roar. The speed and intensity of Glaedr's response suggested to Eragon that this was not the first time Saphira had annoyed him throughout the day. Instead of remorse, Eragon detected an excited playfulness in her—like a child with a new toy—and a near-blind devotion to the other dragon.

"Contain yourself, Saphira!" said Oromis. Saphira pranced backward and settled on her haunches, though nothing in her demeanor expressed contrition. Eragon muttered a feeble excuse, and Oromis waved a hand and said, "Begone, both of you."

Without arguing, Eragon scrambled onto Saphira. He had to urge her to take flight, and once she did, she insisted on circling over the clearing three times before he got her to angle toward Ellesméra.

What possessed you to bite him? he demanded. He thought he knew, but he wanted her to confirm it.

I was only playing.

It was the truth, since they spoke in the ancient language, yet he suspected that it was but a piece of a larger truth. *Yes, and at what game?* She tensed underneath him. *You forget your duty. By …* He searched for the right word. Unable to find it, he reverted to his native speech, *By provoking Glaedr, you distract him, Oromis, and me—and hinder what we must accomplish. You've never been so thoughtless before*.

Do not presume to be my conscience.

He laughed then, heedless for a moment of where he sat among the clouds, rolling to his side until he almost dropped from the peak of her shoulders. *Oh, rich irony that, after the times you've told me what to do. I* am *your conscience, Saphira, as much as you are mine. You've had good reason to chastise and warn me in the past, and now I must do the same for you: stop pestering Glaedr with your attentions*.

She remained silent.

Saphira?

I hear you.

I hope so.

After a minute of peaceful flying, she said, *Two seizures in one day. How are you now?*

Sore and ill. He grimaced. *Some of it's from the Rimgar and sparring, but mostly it's the aftereffects of the pain. It's like a poison, weakening my muscles and clouding my mind. I just hope that I can remain sane long enough to reach the end of this training. Afterward, though … I don't know what I'll do. I certainly can't fight for the Varden like this.*

Don't think about it, she counseled. *You can do nothing about your condition, and you'll only make yourself feel worse. Live in the present, remember the past, and fear not the future, for it doesn't exist and never shall. There is only now.*

He patted her shoulder and smiled with resigned gratitude. To their right, a goshawk rode a warm air current while it patrolled the broken forest for signs of furred or feathered quarry. Eragon watched it, pondering the question that Oromis had given him: How could he justify fighting the Empire when it would cause so much grief and agony?

I have an answer, said Saphira.

What is it?

That Galbatorix has … She hesitated, then said, *No, I won't tell you. You should figure this out for yourself.*

Saphira! Be reasonable.

I am. If you don't know why what we do is the right thing, you might as well surrender to Galbatorix for all the good you'll do. No matter how eloquent his pleas, he could extract nothing more from her, for she blocked him from that part of her mind.

Back in their eyrie, Eragon ate a light supper and was just about to open one of Oromis's scrolls when a knock on the screen door disturbed his quiet.

"Enter," he said, hoping that Arya had returned to see him.

She had.

Arya greeted Eragon and Saphira, then said, "I thought that you might appreciate an opportunity to visit Tialdarí Hall and the adjacent gardens, since you expressed interest in them yesterday. That is, if you aren't too tired." She wore a flowing red kirtle trimmed and decorated with intricate designs wrought in black thread. The color scheme echoed the queen's robes and emphasized the strong resemblance between mother and daughter.

Eragon pushed aside the scrolls. "I'd be delighted to see them."

He means we'd *be delighted*, added Saphira.

Arya looked surprised when both of them spoke in the ancient language, so Eragon explained Oromis's command. "An excellent idea," said Arya, joining them in the same language. "And it is more appropriate to speak thus while you stay here."

When all three of them had descended from the tree, Arya directed them westward toward an unfamiliar quadrant of Ellesméra. They encountered many elves on the path, all of whom stopped to bow to Saphira.

Eragon noticed once again that no elf children were to be seen. He mentioned this to Arya, and she said, "Aye, we have few children. Only two are in Ellesméra at the present, Dusan and Alanna. We treasure children above all else because they are so rare. To have a child is the greatest honor and responsibility that can be bestowed upon any living being."

At last they arrived at a ribbed lancet arch—grown between two trees—which served as the entrance for a wide compound. Still in the ancient language, Arya chanted, "Root of tree, fruit of vine, let me pass by this blood of mine."

The two archway doors trembled, then swung outward, releasing five monarch butterflies that fluttered toward the dusky sky. Through the archway lay a vast flower garden arranged to look as pristine and natural as a wild meadow. The one element that betrayed artifice was the sheer variety of plants; many of the species were blooming out of season, or came from hotter or colder climates and would never have flourished without the elves' magic. The scene was lit with the gemlike flameless lanterns, augmented by constellations of swirling fireflies.

To Saphira, Arya said, "Mind your tail, that it does not sweep across the beds."

Advancing, they crossed the garden and pressed deep into a line of scattered trees. Before Eragon quite knew where he was, the trees became more numerous and then thickened into a wall. He found himself standing on the threshold of a burnished wood hall without ever being conscious of having gone inside.

The hall was warm and homey—a place of peace, reflection, and comfort. Its shape was determined by the tree trunks, which on the inside of the hall had been stripped of their bark, polished, and rubbed with oil until the wood gleamed like amber. Regular gaps between the trunks acted as windows. The scent of crushed pine needles perfumed the air. A number of elves occupied the hall, reading, writing, and, in one dark corner, playing a set of reed pipes. They all paused and inclined their heads to acknowledge Saphira's presence.

"Here you would stay," said Arya, "were you not Rider and dragon."

“It’s magnificent,” replied Eragon.

Arya guided him and Saphira everywhere in the compound that was accessible to dragons. Each new room was a surprise; no two were alike, and each chamber found different ways to incorporate the forest in its construction. In one room, a silver brook trickled down the gnarled wall and flowed across the floor on a vein of pebbles and back out under the sky. In another, creepers blanketed the entire room, except for the floor, in a leafy green pelt adorned with trumpet-shaped flowers with the most delicate pink and white colors. Arya called it the Lianí Vine.

They saw many great works of art, from fairths and paintings to sculptures and radiant mosaics of stained glass—all based on the curved shapes of plants and animals.

Islanzadí met with them for a short time in an open pavilion joined to two other buildings by covered pathways. She inquired about the progress of Eragon’s training and the state of his back, both of which he described with brief, polite phrases. This seemed to satisfy the queen, who exchanged a few words with Saphira and then departed.

In the end, they returned to the garden. Eragon walked beside Arya —Saphira trailing behind—entranced by the sound of her voice as she told him about the different varieties of flowers, where they originated, how they were maintained, and, in many instances, how they had been altered with magic. She also pointed out the flowers that opened their petals only during the night, like a white datura.

“Which one is your favorite?” he asked.

Arya smiled and escorted him to a tree on the edge of the garden, by a pond lined with rushes. Around the tree’s lowest branch coiled a morning glory with three velvety black blossoms that were clenched shut.

Blowing on them, Arya whispered, “Open.”

The petals rustled as they unfurled, fanning their inky robes to expose the hoard of nectar in their centers. A starburst of royal blue filled the flowers’ throats, diffusing into the sable corolla like the vestiges of day into night.

“Is it not the most perfect and lovely flower?” asked Arya.

Eragon gazed at her, exquisitely aware of how close they were, and said, “Yes … it is.” Before his courage deserted him, he added, “As are you.”

Eragon! exclaimed Saphira.

Arya fixed her eyes upon him, studying him until he was forced to look away. When he dared face her again, he was mortified to see her wearing a faint smile, as if amused by his reaction. “You are too kind,” she murmured. Reaching up, she touched the rim of a blossom and glanced from it to him. “Fäolin created this especially for me one

summer solstice, long ago."

He shuffled his feet and responded with a few unintelligible words, hurt and offended that she did not take his compliment more seriously. He wished he could turn invisible, and even considered trying to cast a spell that would allow him to do just that.

In the end, he drew himself upright and said, "Please excuse us, Arya Svit-kona, but it is late, and we must return to our tree."

Her smile deepened. "Of course, Eragon. I understand." She accompanied them to the main archway, opened the doors for them, and said, "Good night, Saphira. Good night, Eragon."

Good night, replied Saphira.

Despite his embarrassment, Eragon could not help asking, "Will we see you tomorrow?"

Arya tilted her head. "I think I shall be busy tomorrow." Then the doors closed, cutting off his view of her as she returned to the main compound.

Crouching low on the path, Saphira nudged Eragon in the side. *Stop daydreaming and get on my back*. Climbing up her left foreleg, he took his usual place, then clutched the neck spike in front of him as Saphira rose to her full height. After a few steps: *How can you criticize my behavior with Glaedr and then go and do something like that? What were you thinking?*

You know how I feel about her, he grumbled.

Pah! If you are my conscience and I am yours, then it's my duty to tell you when you're acting like a deluded popinjay. You're not using logic, like Oromis keeps telling us to. What do you really expect to happen between you and Arya? She's a princess!

And I'm a Rider.

She's an elf; you're a human!

I look more like an elf every day.

Eragon, she's over a hundred years old!

I'll live as long as her or any elf.

Ah, but you haven't yet, and that's the problem. You can't overcome such a vast difference. She's a grown woman with a century of experience, while you're—What?

What am I? he snarled. *A child? Is that what you mean?*

No, not a child. Not after what you have seen and done since we were joined. But you are young, even by the reckoning of your short-lived race—much less by that of the dwarves, dragons, and elves.

As are you.

His retort silenced her for a minute. Then: *I'm just trying to protect you, Eragon. That's all. I want you to be happy, and I'm afraid you won't be if you insist on pursuing Arya*.

The two of them were about to retire when they heard the trapdoor in the vestibule bang open and the jingle of mail as someone climbed inside. Zar'roc in hand, Eragon threw back the screen door, ready to confront the intruder.

His hand dropped as he saw Orik on the floor. The dwarf took a hearty draught from the bottle he wielded in his left hand, then squinted at Eragon. "Bricks and bones, where be you? Ah, there you shtand. I wondered where you were. Couldn't find you, so I thought that given this fine dolorous night, I might go find you … and here you are! What shall we talk about, you and I, now that we're together in this delectable bird's nest?"

Taking hold of the dwarf's free arm, Eragon pulled him upright, surprised, as he always was, by how dense Orik was, like a miniature boulder. When Eragon removed his support, Orik swayed from one side to the other, achieving such precarious angles that he threatened to topple at the slightest provocation.

"Come on in," said Eragon in his own language. He closed the trapdoor. "You'll catch cold out here."

Orik blinked his round, deep-set eyes at Eragon. "I've not sheen you round my leafy exile, no I haven't. You've abandoned me to the company of elves … and misherable, dull company they are, yesh indeed."

A touch of guilt made Eragon disguise himself with an awkward smile. He *had* forgotten the dwarf amid the goings-on. "I'm sorry I haven't visited you, Orik, but my studies have kept me busy. Here, give me your cloak." As he helped the dwarf out of his brown mantle, he asked, "What are you drinking?"

"Faelnirv," declared Orik. "A mosht wonderful, ticklish potion. The besht and greatest of the elves' tricksty inventions; it gives you the gift of loquacion. Words float from your tongue like shoals of flapping minnows, like flocks of breathlessh hummingbirds, like rivers of writhing shnakes." He paused, apparently taken by the unique magnificence of his similes. As Eragon ushered him into the bedroom, Orik saluted Saphira with his bottle and said, "Greetings, O Irontooth. May your shcales shine as bright as the coals of Morgothal's forge."

Greetings, Orik, said Saphira, laying her head on the rim of her bed. *What has put you in this state? It is not like you*. Eragon repeated her question.

"What has put me in mine shtate?" repeated Orik. He dropped into the chair that Eragon provided—his feet dangling several inches above the ground—and began to shake his head. "Red cap, green cap, elves here and elves there. I drown in elvesh and their thrice-damned courtesy. Bloodless they be. Taciturn they are. Yesh sir, no shir, three bagsh full, sir, yet nary a pip more can I extract." He looked at Eragon

with a mournful expression. “What am I to do while you meander through your instruction? Am I to sit and twiddle mine thumbs while I turn to shtone and join the shpirits of mine anshestors? Tell me, O sagacious Rider.”

Have you no skills or hobbies that you might occupy yourself with? asked Saphira.

“Aye,” said Orik. “I’m a fair enough smith by any who’d care to judge. But why should I craft bright armsh and armor for those who treasure them not? I’m usheless here. As usheless as a three-legged Feldûnost.”

Eragon extended a hand toward the bottle. “May I?” Orik glanced between him and the bottle, then grimaced and gave it up. The faelnirv was cold as ice as it ran down Eragon’s throat, stinging and smarting. He blinked as his eyes watered. After he indulged in a second quaff, he passed the bottle back to Orik, who seemed disappointed by how little of the concoction remained.

“And what mischief,” asked Orik, “have you two managed to ferret out of Oromis and yon bucolic woods?”

The dwarf alternately chuckled and groaned as Eragon described his training, his misplaced blessing in Farthen Dûr, the Menoa tree, his back, and all else that had filled the past few days. Eragon ended with the topic that was dearest to him at the moment: Arya. Emboldened by the liqueur, he confessed his affection for her and described how she had dismissed his advance.

Wagging a finger, Orik said, “The rock beneath you is flawed, Eragon. Don’t tempt fate. Arya …” He stopped, then growled and took another gulp of faelnirv. “Ah, it’s too late for thish. Who am I to say what is wisdom and what isn’t?”

Saphira had closed her eyes a while ago. Without opening them, she asked, *Are you married, Orik?* The question surprised Eragon; he had never stopped to wonder about Orik’s personal life.

“Eta,” said Orik. “Although I’m promished to fair Hvedra, daughter of Thorgerd One-eye and Himinglada. We were to be wed thish spring, until the Urgals attacked and Hrothgar sent me on this accursed trip.”

“Is she of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum?” asked Eragon.

“Of coursh!” roared Orik, pounding his fist on the side of the chair. “Thinkest thou I would marry outside my clan? She’s the granddaughter of mine aunt Vardrûn, Hrothgar’s coushin twice removed, with white, round calves as smooth as satin, cheeks as red as apples, and the prettiesht dwarf maid who ever did exist.”

Undoubtedly, said Saphira.

“I’m sure it won’t be long before you see her again,” said Eragon.

“Hmph.” Orik squinted at Eragon. “Do you believe in giants? Tall giants, shtrong giants, thick and bearded giants with fingers like

spadeses?"

"I've never seen nor heard of them," said Eragon, "except in stories. If they do exist, it's not in Alagaësia."

"Ah, but they do! They do!" exclaimed Orik, waving the bottle about his head. "Tell me, O Rider, if a fearshome giant were to meet you on the garden path, what might he call you, if not dinner?"

"Eragon, I would presume."

"No, no. He'd call you a dwarf, for dwarf you'd be to him." Orik guffawed and nudged Eragon in the ribs with his hard elbow. "See you now? Humans and elvesh are the giants. The land's full of them, here, there, and everywhere, stomping about with their big feet and casting us in endless shadowses." He continued laughing, rocking back in his chair until it tipped over and he fell to the floor with a solid thump.

Helping him upright, Eragon said, "I think you'd better stay here for the night. You're in no condition to go down those stairs in the dark."

Orik agreed with cheery indifference. He allowed Eragon to remove his mail and bundle him onto one side of the bed. Afterward, Eragon sighed, covered the lights, and lay on his side of the mattress.

He fell asleep hearing the dwarf mutter, "… Hvedra … Hvedra … Hvedra …"

THE NATURE OF EVIL

Bright morning arrived all too soon.

Jolted to awareness by the buzz of the vibrating timepiece, Eragon grabbed his hunting knife and sprang out of bed, expecting an attack. He gasped as his body shrieked with protest from the abuse of the past two days.

Blinking away tears, Eragon rewound the timepiece. Orik was gone; the dwarf must have slipped away in the wee hours of the morning. With a groan, Eragon hobbled to the wash closet for his daily ablutions, like an old man afflicted by rheumatism.

He and Saphira waited by the tree for ten minutes before they were met by a solemn, black-haired elf. The elf bowed, touched two fingers to his lips—which Eragon mirrored—and then preempted Eragon by saying, "May good fortune rule over you."

"And may the stars watch over you," replied Eragon. "Did Oromis send you?"

The elf ignored him and said to Saphira, "Well met, dragon. I am Vanir of House Haldthin." Eragon scowled with annoyance.

Well met, Vanir.

Only then did the elf address Eragon: "I will show you where you may practice with your blade." He strode away, not waiting for Eragon to catch up.

The sparring yard was dotted with elves of both sexes fighting in pairs and groups. Their extraordinary physical gifts resulted in flurries of blows so quick and fast, they sounded like bursts of hail striking an iron bell. Under the trees that fringed the yard, individual elves performed the Rimgar with more grace and flexibility than Eragon thought he would ever achieve.

After everyone on the field stopped and bowed to Saphira, Vanir unsheathed his narrow blade. "If you will guard your sword, Silver Hand, we can begin."

Eragon eyed the inhuman swordsmanship of the other elves with trepidation. *Why do I have to do this?* he asked. *I'll just be humiliated.*

You'll be fine, said Saphira, yet he could sense her concern for him.

Right.

As he prepared Zar'roc, Eragon's hands trembled with dread. Instead of throwing himself into the fray, he fought Vanir from a distance, dodging, sidestepping, and doing everything possible to

avoid triggering another fit. Despite Eragon's evasions, Vanir touched him four times in rapid succession—once each on his ribs, shin, and both shoulders.

Vanir's initial expression of stoic impassivity soon devolved into open contempt. Dancing forward, he slid his blade up Zar'roc's length while at the same time twirling Zar'roc in a circle, wrenching Eragon's wrist. Eragon allowed Zar'roc to fly out of his hand rather than resist the elf's superior strength.

Vanir dropped his sword onto Eragon's neck and said, "Dead." Shrugging off the sword, Eragon trudged over to retrieve Zar'roc. "Dead," said Vanir. "How do you expect to defeat Galbatorix like this? I expected better, even from a weakling human."

"Then why don't you fight Galbatorix yourself instead of hiding in Du Weldenvarden?"

Vanir stiffened with outrage. "Because," he said, cool and haughty, "I'm not a Rider. And if I were, I would not be such a coward as you."

No one moved or spoke on the field.

His back to Vanir, Eragon leaned on Zar'roc and craned his neck toward the sky, snarling to himself. *He knows nothing. This is just one more test to overcome.*

"Coward, I say. Your blood is as thin as the rest of your race's. I think that Saphira was confused by Galbatorix's wiles and made the wrong choice of Rider." The spectating elves gasped at Vanir's words and muttered among themselves with open disapproval for his atrocious breach of etiquette.

Eragon ground his teeth. He could stand insults to himself, but not to Saphira. She was already moving when his pent-up frustration, fear, and pain burst within him and he whirled around, the tip of Zar'roc whistling through the air.

The blow would have killed Vanir had he not blocked it at the last second. He looked surprised by the ferocity of the attack. Holding nothing in reserve, Eragon drove Vanir to the center of the field, jabbing and slashing like a madman—determined to hurt the elf however he could. He nicked Vanir on the hip with enough force to draw blood, even with Zar'roc's blunted edge.

At that instant, Eragon's back ruptured in an explosion of agony so intense, he experienced it with all five senses: as a deafening, crashing waterfall of sound; a metallic taste that coated his tongue; an acrid, eye-watering stench in his nostrils, redolent of vinegar; pulsing colors; and, above all, the feeling that Durza had just laid open his back.

He could see Vanir standing over him with a derisive sneer. It occurred to Eragon that Vanir was very young.

After the seizure, Eragon wiped the blood from his mouth with his

hand and showed it to Vanir, asking, “Thin enough?” Vanir did not deign to respond, but rather sheathed his sword and walked away.

“Where are you going?” demanded Eragon. “We have unfinished business, you and I.”

“You are in no fit condition to spar,” scoffed the elf.

“Try me.” Eragon might be inferior to the elves, but he refused to give them the satisfaction of fulfilling their low expectations of him. He would earn their respect through sheer persistence, if nothing else.

He insisted on completing Oromis’s assigned hour, after which Saphira marched up to Vanir and touched him on the chest with the point of one of her ivory talons. *Dead*, she said. Vanir paled. The other elves edged away from him.

Once they were in the air, Saphira said, *Oromis was right.*

About what?

You give more of yourself when you have an opponent.

At Oromis’s hut, the day resumed its usual pattern: Saphira accompanied Glaedr for her instruction while Eragon remained with Oromis.

Eragon was horrified when he discovered that Oromis expected him to do the Rimgar in addition to his earlier exercises. It took all of his courage to obey. His apprehension proved groundless, though, for the Dance of Snake and Crane was too gentle to injure him.

That, coupled with his meditation in the secluded glade, provided Eragon with his first opportunity since the previous day to order his thoughts and consider the question that Oromis had posed him.

While he did, he observed his red ants invade a smaller, rival anthill, overrunning the inhabitants and stealing their resources. By the end of the massacre, only a handful of the rival ants were left alive, alone and purposeless in the vast and hostile pine-needle barrens.

Like the dragons in Alagaësia, thought Eragon. His connection to the ants vanished as he considered the dragons’ unhappy fate. Bit by bit, an answer to his problem revealed itself to him, an answer that he could live with and believe in.

He finished his meditations and returned to the hut. This time Oromis seemed reasonably satisfied with what Eragon had accomplished.

As Oromis served the midday meal, Eragon said, “I know why fighting Galbatorix is worth it, though thousands of people may die.”

“Oh?” Oromis seated himself. “Do tell me.”

“Because Galbatorix has already caused more suffering over the past hundred years than we ever could in a single generation. And unlike a normal tyrant, we cannot wait for him to die. He could rule for

centuries or millennia—persecuting and tormenting people the entire time—unless we stop him. If he became strong enough, he would march on the dwarves and you here in Du Weldenvarden and kill or enslave both races. And …," Eragon rubbed the heel of his palm against the edge of the table, "… because rescuing the two eggs from Galbatorix is the only way to save the dragons."

The strident warble of Oromis's teakettle intruded, escalating in volume until Eragon's ears rang. Standing, Oromis hooked the kettle off the cookfire and poured the water for blueberry tea. The creases around his eyes softened. "Now," he said, "you understand."

"I understand, but I take no pleasure in it."

"Nor should you. But now we can be confident that you won't shrink from the path when you are confronted by the injustices and atrocities that the Varden will inevitably commit. We cannot afford to have you consumed by doubts when your strength and focus are most needed." Oromis steepled his fingers and gazed into the dark mirror of his tea, contemplating whatever he saw in its tenebrous reflection. "Do you believe that Galbatorix is evil?"

"Of course!"

"Do you believe that he considers himself evil?"

"No, I doubt it."

Oromis tapped his forefingers against each other. "Then you must also believe that Durza was evil?"

The fragmented memories Eragon had gleaned from Durza when they fought in Tronjheim returned to him now, reminding him how the young Shade—Carsaib, then—had been enslaved by the wraiths he had summoned to avenge the death of his mentor, Haeg. "He wasn't evil himself, but the spirits that controlled him were."

"And what of the Urgals?" asked Oromis, sipping his tea. "Are they evil?"

Eragon's knuckles whitened as he gripped his spoon. "When I think of death, I see an Urgal's face. They're worse than beasts. The things they have done …" He shook his head, unable to continue.

"Eragon, what kind of opinion would you form of humans if all you knew of them were the actions of your warriors on the field of battle?"

"That's not …" He took a deep breath. "It's different. Urgals deserve to be wiped out, every last one of them."

"Even their females and children? The ones who haven't harmed you and likely never will? The innocents? Would you kill them and condemn an entire race to the void?"

"They wouldn't spare us, given the chance."

"Eragon!" exclaimed Oromis in biting tones. "I never want to hear you use that excuse again, that because someone else has done—or would do—something means that you should too. It's lazy, repugnant,

and indicative of an inferior mind. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Master."

The elf raised his mug to his lips and drank, his bright eyes fixed on Eragon the entire time. "What do you actually know of Urgals?"

"I know their strengths, weaknesses, and how to kill them. It's all I need to know."

"Why do they hate and fight humans, though? What about their history and legends, or the way in which they live?"

"Does it matter?"

Oromis sighed. "Just remember," he said gently, "that at a certain point, your enemies may have to become your allies. Such is the nature of life."

Eragon resisted the urge to argue. He swirled his own tea in its mug, accelerating the liquid into a black whirlpool with a white lens of foam at the bottom of the vortex. "Is that why Galbatorix enlisted the Urgals?"

"That is not an example I would have chosen, but yes."

"It seems strange that he befriended them. After all, they were the ones who killed his dragon. Look what he did to us, the Riders, and we weren't even responsible for his loss."

"Ah," said Oromis, "mad Galbatorix may be, but he's still as cunning as a fox. I guess that he intended to use the Urgals to destroy the Varden and the dwarves—and others, if he had triumphed in Farthen Dûr—thereby removing two of his enemies while simultaneously weakening the Urgals so that he could dispose of them at his leisure."

Study of the ancient language devoured the afternoon, whereupon they took up the practice of magic. Much of Oromis's lectures concerned the proper way in which to control various forms of energy, such as light, heat, electricity, and even gravity. He explained that since these forces consumed strength faster than any other type of spell, it was safer to find them already in existence in nature and then shape them with gramarye, instead of trying to create them from nothing.

Abandoning the subject, Oromis asked, "How would you kill with magic?"

"I've done it many ways," said Eragon. "I've hunted with a pebble—moving and aiming it with magic—as well as using the word *jierda* to break Urgals' legs and necks. Once, with *thrysta*, I stopped a man's heart."

"There are more efficient methods," revealed Oromis. "What does it take to kill a man, Eragon? A sword through the chest? A broken neck? The loss of blood? All it takes is for a single artery in the brain to be pinched off, or for certain nerves to be severed. With the right

spell, you could obliterate an army."

"I should have thought of that in Farthen Dûr," said Eragon, disgusted with himself. *Not just Farthen Dûr either, but also when the Kull chased us from the Hadarac Desert*. "Again, why didn't Brom teach me this?"

"Because he did not expect you to face an army for months or years to come; it is not a tool given to untested Riders."

"If it's so easy to kill people, though, what's the point of us or Galbatorix raising an army?"

"To be succinct, *tactics*. Magicians are vulnerable to physical attack when they are embroiled in their mental struggles. Therefore, they need warriors to protect them. And the warriors must be shielded, at least in part, from magical attacks, else they would be slain within minutes. These limitations mean that when armies confront one another, their magicians are scattered throughout the bulk of their forces, close to the edge but not so close as to be in danger. The magicians on both sides open their minds and attempt to sense if anyone is using or is about to use magic. Since their enemies might be beyond their mental reach, magicians also erect wards around themselves and their warriors to stop or lessen long-range attacks, such as a pebble sent flying toward their head from a mile away."

"Surely one man can't defend an entire army," said Eragon.

"Not alone, but with enough magicians, you can provide a reasonable amount of protection. The greatest danger in this sort of conflict is that a clever magician may think of a unique attack that can bypass your wards without tripping them. That itself could be enough to decide a battle.

"Also," said Oromis, "you must keep in mind that the ability to use magic is exceedingly rare among the races. We elves are no exception, although we have a greater allotment of spellweavers than most, as a result of oaths we bound ourselves with centuries ago. The majority of those blessed with magic have little or no appreciable talent; they struggle to heal even so much as a bruise."

Eragon nodded. He had encountered magicians like that in the Varden. "But it still takes the same amount of energy to accomplish a task."

"Energy, yes, but lesser magicians find it harder than you or I do to feel the flow of magic and immerse themselves in it. Few magicians are strong enough to pose a threat to an entire army. And those who are usually spend the bulk of their time during battles evading, tracking, or fighting their opposites, which is fortunate from the standpoint of ordinary warriors, else they would all soon be killed."

Troubled, Eragon said, "The Varden don't have many magicians."

"That is one reason why you are so important."

A moment passed as Eragon reflected on what Oromis had told him. “These wards, do they only drain energy from you when they are activated?”

“Aye.”

“Then, given enough time, you could acquire countless layers of wards. You could make yourself …” He struggled with the ancient language as he attempted to express himself. “… untouchable? … impregnable? … impregnable to any assault, magical or physical.”

“Wards,” said Oromis, “rely upon the strength of your body. If that strength is exceeded, you die. No matter how many wards you have, you will only be able to block attacks so long as your body can sustain the output of energy.”

“And Galbatorix’s strength has been increasing each year.… How is that possible?”

It was a rhetorical question, yet when Oromis remained silent, his almond eyes fixed on a trio of swallows pirouetting overhead, Eragon realized that the elf was considering how best to answer him. The birds chased each other for several minutes. When they flitted from view, Oromis said, “It is not appropriate to have this discussion at the present.”

“Then you know?” exclaimed Eragon, astonished.

“I do. But that information must wait until later in your training. You are not ready for it.” Oromis looked at Eragon, as if expecting him to object.

Eragon bowed. “As you wish, Master.” He could never prize the information out of Oromis until the elf was willing to share it, so why try? Still, he wondered what could be so dangerous that Oromis dared not tell him, and why the elves had kept it secret from the Varden. Another thought presented itself to him, and he said, “If battles with magicians are conducted like you said, then why did Ajihad let me fight without wards in Farthen Dûr? I didn’t even know that I needed to keep my mind open for enemies. And why didn’t Arya kill most or all of the Urgals? No magicians were there to oppose her except for Durza, and he couldn’t have defended his troops when he was underground.”

“Did not Ajihad have Arya or one of Du Vrangr Gata set defenses around you?” demanded Oromis.

“No, Master.”

“And you fought thus?”

“Yes, Master.”

Oromis’s eyes unfocused, withdrawing into himself as he stood motionless on the greensward. He spoke without warning: “I have consulted Arya, and she says that the Twins of the Varden were ordered to assess your abilities. They told Ajihad you were competent

in all magic, including wards. Neither Ajihad nor Arya doubted their judgment on that matter."

"Those smooth-tongued, bald-pated, tick-infested, treacherous dogs," swore Eragon. "They tried to get me killed!" Reverting to his own language, he indulged in several more pungent oaths.

"Do not befoul the air," said Oromis mildly. "It ill becomes you.… In any case, I suspect the Twins allowed you into battle unprotected *not* so you would be killed, but so that Durza could capture you."

"What?"

"By your own account, Ajihad suspected that the Varden had been betrayed when Galbatorix began persecuting their allies in the Empire with near-perfect accuracy. The Twins were privy to the identities of the Varden's collaborators. Also, the Twins lured you to the heart of Tronjheim, thereby separating you from Saphira and placing you within Durza's reach. That they were traitors is the logical explanation."

"If they *were* traitors," said Eragon, "it doesn't matter now; they're long dead."

Oromis inclined his head. "Even so. Arya said that the Urgals did have magicians in Farthen Dûr and that she fought many of them. None of them attacked you?"

"No, Master."

"More evidence that you and Saphira were left for Durza to capture and take to Galbatorix. The trap was well laid."

Over the next hour, Oromis taught Eragon twelve methods to kill, none of which took more energy than lifting an ink-laden pen. As he finished memorizing the last one, a thought struck Eragon that caused him to grin. "The Ra'zac won't stand a chance the next time they cross my path."

"You must still be wary of them," cautioned Oromis.

"Why? Three words and they'll be dead."

"What do ospreys eat?"

Eragon blinked. "Fish, of course."

"And if a fish were slightly faster and more intelligent than its brethren, would it be able to escape a hunting osprey?"

"I doubt it," said Eragon. "At least not for very long."

"Just as ospreys are designed to be the best possible hunters of fish, wolves are designed to be the best hunters of deer and other large game, and every animal is gifted to best suit its purpose. So too are the Ra'zac designed to prey upon humans. They are the monsters in the dark, the dripping nightmares that haunt your race."

The back of Eragon's neck prickled with horror. "What manner of creatures are they?"

"Neither elf; man; dwarf; dragon; furred, finned, or feathered beast;

reptile; insect; nor any other category of animal."

Eragon forced a laugh. "Are they plants, then?"

"Nor that either. They reproduce by laying eggs, like dragons. When they hatch, the young—or pupae—grow black exoskeletons that mimic the human form. It's a grotesque imitation, but convincing enough to let the Ra'zac approach their victims without undo alarm. All areas where humans are weak, the Ra'zac are strong. They can see on a cloudy night, track a scent like a bloodhound, jump higher, and move faster. However, bright light pains them and they have a morbid fear of deep water, for they cannot swim. Their greatest weapon is their evil breath, which fogs the minds of humans—incapacitating many—though it is less potent on dwarves, and elves are immune altogether."

Eragon shivered as he remembered his first sight of the Ra'zac in Carvahall and how he had been unable to flee once they noticed him. "It felt like a dream where I wanted to run but I couldn't move, no matter how hard I tried."

"As good a description as any," said Oromis. "Though the Ra'zac cannot use magic, they are not to be underestimated. If they know that you hunt them, they will not reveal themselves but keep to the shadows, where they are strong, and plot to ambush you as they did by Dras-Leona. Even Brom's experience could not protect him from them. Never grow overconfident, Eragon. Never grow arrogant, for then you will be careless and your enemies will exploit your weakness."

"Yes, Master."

Oromis fixed Eragon with a steady gaze. "The Ra'zac remain pupae for twenty years while they mature. On the first full moon of their twentieth year, they shed their exoskeletons, spread their wings, and emerge as adults ready to hunt all creatures, not just humans."

"Then the Ra'zac's mounts, the ones they fly on, are really …"

"Aye, their parents."

IMAGE OF PERFECTION

At last I understand the nature of my enemies, thought Eragon. He had feared the Ra'zac ever since they first appeared in Carvahall, not only because of their villainous deeds but because he knew so little about the creatures. In his ignorance, he credited the Ra'zac with more powers than they actually possessed and regarded them with an almost superstitious dread. *Nightmares indeed.* But now that Oromis's explanation had stripped away the Ra'zac's aura of mystery, they no longer seemed quite so formidable. The fact that they were vulnerable to light and water strengthened Eragon's conviction that when next they met, he would destroy the monsters that had killed Garrow and Brom.

"Are their parents called Ra'zac as well?" he asked.

Oromis shook his head. "Lethrblaka, we named them. And whereas their offspring are narrow-minded, if cunning, Lethrblaka have all the intelligence of a dragon. A cruel, vicious, and twisted dragon."

"Where do they come from?"

"From whatever land your ancestors abandoned. Their depredations may have been what forced King Palancar to emigrate. When we, the Riders, became aware of the Ra'zac's foul presence in Alagaësia, we did our best to eradicate them, as we would leaf blight. Unfortunately, we were only partially successful. Two Lethrblaka escaped, and they along with their pupae are the ones who have caused you so much grief. After he killed Vrael, Galbatorix sought them out and bargained for their services in return for his protection and a guaranteed amount of their favorite food. That is why Galbatorix allows them to live by Dras-Leona, one of the Empire's largest cities."

Eragon's jaw tightened. "They have much to answer for." *And they will, if I have my way.*

"That they do," Oromis agreed. Returning to the hut, he stepped through the black shadow of the doorway, then reappeared carrying a half-dozen slate tablets about a half-foot wide and a foot high. He presented one to Eragon. "Let us abandon such unpleasant topics for a time. I thought you might enjoy learning how to make a fairth. It is an excellent device for focusing your thoughts. The slate is impregnated with enough ink to cover it with any combination of colors. All you need do is concentrate upon the image that you wish to capture and then say, 'Let that which I see in my mind's eye be replicated on the

surface of this tablet.' " As Eragon examined the clay-smooth slate, Oromis gestured at the clearing. "Look about you, Eragon, and find something worth preserving."

The first objects that Eragon noticed seemed too obvious, too banal to him: a yellow lily by his feet, Oromis's overgrown hut, the white stream, and the landscape itself. None were unique. None would give an observer an insight into the subject of the fairth or he who had created it. *Things that change and are lost, that is what's worth preserving*, he thought. His eye alighted upon the pale green nubs of spring growth at the tip of a tree's branches and then the deep, narrow wound that seamed the trunk where a storm had broken a bough, tearing off a rope of bark with it. Translucent orbs of sap encrusted the seam, catching and refracting the light.

Eragon positioned himself alongside the trunk so that the rotund galls of the tree's congealed blood bulged out in silhouette and were framed by a cluster of shiny new needles. Then he fixed the scene in his mind as best he could and uttered the spell.

The surface of the gray tablet brightened as splashes of color bloomed across it, blending and mixing to produce the proper array of hues. When the pigments at last stopped moving, Eragon found himself looking at a strange copy of what he had wanted to reproduce. The sap and needles were rendered with vibrant, razor-sharp detail, while all else was slurred and bleary, as if seen through half-opened eyes. It was far removed from the universal clarity of Oromis's fairth of Ilirea.

At a sign from Oromis, Eragon handed the tablet to him. The elf studied it for a minute, then said, "You have an unusual way of thinking, Eragon-finiarel. Most humans have difficulty achieving the proper concentration to create a recognizable image. You, on the other hand, seem to observe nearly everything about whatever interests you. It's a narrow focus, though. You have the same problem here that you do with your meditation. You must relax, broaden your field of vision, and allow yourself to absorb everything around you without judging what is important or not." Setting aside the picture, Oromis took a second, blank tablet from the grass and gave it to Eragon. "Try again with what I—"

"Hail, Rider!"

Startled, Eragon turned and saw Orik and Arya emerge side by side from the forest. The dwarf raised his arm in greeting. His beard was freshly trimmed and braided, his hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail, and he wore a new tunic—courtesy of the elves—that was red and brown and embroidered with gold thread. His appearance gave no indication of his condition the previous night.

Eragon, Oromis, and Arya exchanged the traditional greeting, then,

abandoning the ancient language, Oromis asked, “To what may I attribute this visit? You are both welcome to my hut, but as you can see, I am in the midst of working with Eragon, and that is of paramount importance.”

“I apologize for disturbing you, Oromis-elda,” said Arya, “but—”

“The fault is mine,” said Orik. He glanced at Eragon before continuing: “I was sent here by Hrothgar to ensure that Eragon receives the instruction he is due. I have no doubt that he is, but I am obliged to see his training with my own eyes so that when I return to Tronjheim, I may give my king a true account of events.”

Oromis said, “That which I teach Eragon is not to be shared with anyone else. The secrets of the Riders are for him alone.”

“And I understand that. However, we live in uncertain times; the stone that once was fixed and solid is now unstable. We must adapt to survive. So much depends on Eragon, we dwarves have a right to verify that his training proceeds as promised. Do you believe our request is an unreasonable one?”

“Well spoken, Master Dwarf,” said Oromis. He tapped his fingers together, inscrutable as always. “May I assume, then, that this is a matter of duty for you?”

“Duty and honor.”

“And neither will allow you to yield on this point?”

“I fear not, Oromis-elda,” said Orik.

“Very well. You may stay and watch for the duration of this lesson. Will that satisfy you?”

Orik frowned. “Are you near the end of the lesson?”

“We have just begun.”

“Then yes, I will be satisfied. For the moment, at least.”

While they spoke, Eragon tried to catch Arya’s eye, but she kept her attention centered on Oromis.

“… Eragon!”

He blinked, jolted out of his reverie. “Yes, Master?”

“Don’t wander, Eragon. I want you to make another fairth. Keep your mind open, like I told you before.”

“Yes, Master.” Eragon hefted the tablet, his hands slightly damp at the thought of having Orik and Arya there to judge his performance. He wanted to do well in order to prove that Oromis was a good teacher. Even so, he could not concentrate on the pine needles and sap; Arya tugged at him like a lodestone, drawing his attention back to her whenever he thought of something else.

At last he realized that it was futile for him to resist the attraction. He composed an image of her in his head—which took but a heartbeat, since he knew her features better than his own—and voiced the spell in the ancient language, pouring all of his adoration, love,

and fear of her into the currents of fey magic.

The result left him speechless.

The fairth depicted Arya's head and shoulders against a dark, indistinct background. She was bathed in firelight on her right side and gazed out at the viewer with knowing eyes, appearing not just as she was but as he thought of her: mysterious, exotic, and the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. It was a flawed, imperfect picture, but it possessed such intensity and passion that it evoked a visceral response from Eragon. *Is this how I really see her?* Whoever this woman was, she was so wise, so powerful, and so hypnotic, she could consume any lesser man.

From a great distance, he heard Saphira whisper, *Be careful.…*

"What have you wrought, Eragon?" demanded Oromis.

"I … I don't know." Eragon hesitated as Oromis extended his hand for the fairth, reluctant to let the others examine his work, especially Arya. After a long, terrifying pause, Eragon pried his fingers off the tablet and released it to Oromis.

The elf's expression grew stern as he looked at the fairth, then back at Eragon, who quailed under the weight of his stare. Without a word, Oromis handed the tablet to Arya.

Her hair obscured her face as she bowed over the tablet, but Eragon saw cords and veins ridge her hands as she clenched the slate. It shook in her grip.

"Well, what is it?" asked Orik.

Raising the fairth over her head, Arya hurled it against the ground, shattering the picture into a thousand pieces. Then she drew herself upright and, with great dignity, walked past Eragon, across the clearing, and into the tangled depths of Du Weldenvarden.

Orik picked up one of the fragments of slate. It was blank. The image had vanished when the tablet broke. He tugged his beard. "In all the decades I've known her, Arya has never lost her temper like that. Never. What did you do, Eragon?"

Dazed, Eragon said, "A portrait of her."

Orik frowned, obviously puzzled. "A portrait? Why would that—"

"I think it would be best if you left now," said Oromis. "The lesson is over, in any case. Come back tomorrow or the day after if you want a better idea of Eragon's progress."

The dwarf squinted at Eragon, then nodded and brushed the dirt from his palms. "Yes, I believe I'll do that. Thank you for your time, Oromis-elda. I appreciate it." As he headed back toward Ellesméra, he said over his shoulder to Eragon, "I'll be in the common room of Tialdarí Hall, if you want to talk."

When Orik was gone, Oromis lifted the hem of his tunic, knelt, and began to gather up the remains of the tablet. Eragon watched him,

unable to move.

"Why?" he asked in the ancient language.

"Perhaps," said Oromis, "Arya was frightened by you."

"Frightened? She never gets frightened." Even as he said it, Eragon knew that it was not true. She just concealed her fear better than most. Dropping to one knee, he took a piece of the fairth and pressed it into Oromis's palm. "Why would I frighten her?" he asked. "Please, tell me."

Oromis stood and walked to the edge of the stream, where he scattered the fragments of slate over the bank, letting the gray flakes trickle through his fingers. "Fairths only show what you want them to. It's possible to lie with them, to create a false image, but to do so requires more skill than you yet have. Arya knows this. She also knows, then, that your fairth was an accurate representation of your feelings for her."

"But why would that frighten her?"

Oromis smiled sadly. "Because it revealed the depth of your infatuation." He pressed his fingertips together, forming a series of arches. "Let us analyze the situation, Eragon. While you are old enough to be considered a man among your people, in our eyes, you are no more than a child." Eragon frowned, hearing echoes of Saphira's words from the previous night. "Normally, I would not compare a human's age to an elf's, but since you share our longevity, you must also be judged by our standards.

"And you are a Rider. We rely upon you to help us defeat Galbatorix; it could be disastrous for everyone in Alagaësia if you are distracted from your studies.

"Now then," said Oromis, "how should Arya have responded to your fairth? It's clear that you see her in a romantic light, yet—while I have no doubt Arya is fond of you—a union between the two of you is impossible due to your own youth, culture, race, and responsibilities. Your interest has placed Arya in an uncomfortable position. She dare not confront you, for fear of disrupting your training. But, as the queen's daughter, she cannot ignore you and risk offending a Rider—especially one upon which so much depends.… Even if you were a fit match, Arya would refrain from encouraging you so that you could devote all of your energy to the task at hand. She would sacrifice her happiness for the greater good." Oromis's voice thickened: "You must understand, Eragon, that slaying Galbatorix is more important than any one person. Nothing else matters." He paused, his gaze gentle, then added, "Given the circumstances, is it so strange Arya was frightened that your feelings for her could endanger everything we have worked for?"

Eragon shook his head. He was ashamed that his behavior had

caused Arya distress, and dismayed by how reckless and juvenile he had been. *I could have avoided this entire mess if I'd just kept better control of myself*.

Touching him on the shoulder, Oromis guided him back inside the hut. "Think not that I am devoid of sympathy, Eragon. Everyone experiences ardor like yours at one point or another during their lives. It's part of growing up. I also know how hard it is for you to deny yourself the usual comforts of life, but it's necessary if we are to prevail."

"Yes, Master."

They sat at the kitchen table, and Oromis began to lay out writing materials for Eragon to practice the Liduen Kvaedhí. "It would be unreasonable of me to expect you to forget your fascination with Arya, but I do expect you to prevent it from interfering with my instruction again. Can you promise me that?"

"Yes, Master. I promise."

"And Arya? What would be the honorable thing to do about her predicament?"

Eragon hesitated. "I don't want to lose her friendship."

"No."

"Therefore … I will go to her, I will apologize, and I will reassure her that I never intend to cause her such hardship again." It was difficult for him to say, but once he did, he felt a sense of relief, as if acknowledging his mistake cleansed him of it.

Oromis appeared pleased. "By that alone, you prove that you have matured."

The sheets of paper were smooth underneath Eragon's hands as he pressed them flat against the tabletop. He stared at the blank white expanse for a moment, then dipped a quill in ink and began to transcribe a column of glyphs. Each barbed line was like a streak of night against the paper, an abyss into which he could lose himself and try to forget his confused feelings.

THE OBLITERATOR

The following morn, Eragon went looking for Arya in order to apologize. He searched for over an hour without success. It seemed as if she had vanished among the many hidden nooks within Ellesméra. He caught a glimpse of her once as he paused by the entrance to Tialdarí Hall and called out to her, but she slipped away before he could reach her side. *She's avoiding me,* he finally realized.

As the days rolled by, Eragon embraced Oromis's training with a zeal that the elder Rider praised, devoting himself to his studies in order to distract himself from thoughts of Arya.

Night and day, Eragon strove to master his lessons. He memorized the words of making, binding, and summoning; learned the true names of plants and animals; and studied the perils of transmutation, how to call upon the wind and the sea, and the myriad skills needed to understand the forces of the world. At spells that dealt with the great energies—such as light, heat, and magnetism—he excelled, for he possessed the talent to judge nigh exactly how much strength a task required and whether it would exceed that of his body.

Occasionally, Orik would come and watch, standing without comment by the edge of the clearing while Oromis tutored Eragon, or while Eragon struggled alone with a particularly difficult spell.

Oromis set many challenges before him. He had Eragon cook meals with magic, in order to teach him finer control of his gramarye; Eragon's first attempts resulted in a blackened mess. The elf showed Eragon how to detect and neutralize poisons of every sort and, from then on, Eragon had to inspect his food for the different venoms Oromis was liable to slip into it. More than once Eragon went hungry when he could not find the poison or was unable to counteract it. Twice he became so sick, Oromis had to heal him. And Oromis had Eragon cast multiple spells simultaneously, which required tremendous concentration to keep the spells directed at their intended targets and prevent them from shifting among the items Eragon wanted to affect.

Oromis devoted long hours to the craft of imbuing matter with energy, either to be released at a later time or to give an object certain attributes. He said, "This is how Rhunön charmed the Riders' swords so they never break or dull; how we sing plants into growing as we desire; how a trap might be set in a box, only to be triggered when the

box is opened; how we and the dwarves make the Erisdar, our lanterns; and how you may heal one who is injured, to name but a few uses. These are the most potent of spells, for they can lie dormant for a thousand years or more and are difficult to perceive or avert. They permeate much of Alagaësia, shaping the land and the destiny of those who live here."

Eragon asked, "You could use this technique to alter your body, couldn't you? Or is that too dangerous?"

Oromis's lips quirked in a faint smile. "Alas, you have stumbled upon elves' greatest weakness: our vanity. We love beauty in all its forms, and we seek to represent that ideal in our appearance. That is why we are known as the Fair Folk. Every elf looks exactly as he or she wishes to. When elves learn the spells for growing and molding living things, they often choose to modify their appearance to better reflect their personalities. A few elves have gone beyond mere aesthetic changes and altered their anatomy to adapt to various environments, as you will see during the Blood-oath Celebration. Oftentimes, they are more animal than elf.

"However, transferring power to a living creature is different from transferring power to an inanimate object. Very few materials are suitable for storing energy; most either allow it to dissipate or become so charged with force that when you touch the object, a bolt of lightning drives through you. The best materials we have found for this purpose are gemstones. Quartz, agates, and other lesser stones are not as efficient as, say, a diamond, but any gem will suffice. That is why Riders' swords always have a jewel set in their pommels. It is also why your dwarf necklace—which is entirely metal—must sap your strength to fuel its spell, since it can hold no energy of its own."

When not with Oromis, Eragon supplemented his education by reading the many scrolls the elf gave him, a habit he soon became addicted to. Eragon's rearing—limited as it was by Garrow's scant tutelage—had exposed him only to the knowledge needed to run a farm. The information he discovered on the miles of paper flooded into him like rain on parched desert, sating a previously unknown thirst. He devoured texts on geography, biology, anatomy, philosophy, and mathematics, as well as memoirs, biographies, and histories. More important than mere facts was his introduction to alternative ways of thinking. They challenged his beliefs and forced him to reexamine his assumptions about everything from the rights of an individual within society to what caused the sun to move across the sky.

He noticed that a number of scrolls concerned Urgals and their culture. Eragon read them and made no mention of it, nor did Oromis broach the topic.

From his studies, Eragon learned much about the elves, a subject

that he avidly pursued, hoping that it would help him to better understand Arya. To his surprise, he discovered that the elves did not practice marriage, but rather took mates for however long they wanted, whether it be for a day or a century. Children were rare, and having a child was considered by the elves to be the ultimate vow of love.

Eragon also learned that since their two races had first met, only a handful of elf-human couples had existed: mainly human Riders who found appropriate mates among the elves. However, as best he could tell from the cryptic records, most such relationships ended in tragedy, either because the lovers were unable to relate to one another or because the humans aged and died while the elves escaped the ravages of time.

In addition to nonfiction, Oromis presented Eragon with copies of the elves' greatest songs, poems, and epics, which captured Eragon's imagination, for the only stories he was familiar with were the ones Brom had recited in Carvahall. He savored the epics as he might a well-cooked meal, lingering over *The Deed of Gëda* or *The Lay of Umhodan* so as to prolong his enjoyment of the tales.

Saphira's own training proceeded apace. Linked as he was to her mind, Eragon got to watch as Glaedr put her through an exercise regimen every bit as strenuous as his. She practiced hovering in the air while lifting boulders, as well as sprints, dives, and other acrobatics. To increase her endurance, Glaedr had her breathe fire for hours upon a natural stone pillar in an attempt to melt it. At first Saphira could only maintain the flames for a few minutes at a time, but before long the blistering torch roared from her maw for over a half hour uninterrupted, heating the pillar white-hot. Eragon was also privy to the dragon lore Glaedr imparted to Saphira, details about the dragons' lives and history that complemented her instinctual knowledge. Much of it was incomprehensible to Eragon, and he suspected that Saphira concealed even more from him, secrets of her race that dragons shared with no one but themselves. One thing he did glean, and that Saphira treasured, was the name of her sire, Iormúngr, and her dam, Vervada, which meant Storm-cleaver in the old speech. While Iormúngr had been bound to a Rider, Vervada was a wild dragon who had laid many eggs but entrusted only one to the Riders: Saphira. Both dragons perished in the Fall.

Some days Eragon and Saphira would fly with Oromis and Glaedr, practicing aerial combat or visiting crumbling ruins hidden within Du Weldenvarden. Other days they would reverse the usual order of things, and Eragon would accompany Glaedr while Saphira remained on the Crags of Tel'naeír with Oromis.

Each morning Eragon sparred with Vanir, which, without exception,

ignited one or more of Eragon's seizures. To make matters worse, the elf continued to treat Eragon with haughty condescension. He delivered oblique slights that, on the surface, never exceeded the bounds of politeness, and he refused to be drawn to anger no matter how Eragon needled him. Eragon hated him and his cool, mannered bearing. It seemed as if Vanir was insulting him with every movement. And Vanir's companions—who, as best Eragon could tell, were of a younger generation of elves—shared his veiled distaste for Eragon, though they never displayed aught but respect for Saphira.

Their rivalry came to a head when, after defeating Eragon six times in a row, Vanir lowered his sword and said, "Dead yet again, Shadeslayer. How repetitive. Do you wish to continue?" His tone indicated that he thought it would be pointless.

"Aye," grunted Eragon. He had already suffered an episode with his back and was in no mood to bandy words.

Still, when Vanir said, "Tell me, as I am curious: How did you kill Durza when you are so slow? I cannot fathom how you managed it," Eragon felt compelled to reply: "I caught him by surprise."

"Forgive me; I should have guessed trickery was involved."

Eragon fought the impulse to grind his teeth. "If I were an elf or you a human, you would not be able to match my blade."

"Perhaps," said Vanir. He assumed his ready position and, within the span of three seconds and two blows, disarmed Eragon. "But I think not. You should not boast to a better swordsman, else he may decide to punish your temerity."

Eragon's temper broke then, and he reached deep within himself and into the torrent of magic. He released the pent-up energy with one of the twelve minor words of binding, crying "Malthinae!" to chain Vanir's legs and arms in place and hold his jaw shut so that he could not utter a counterspell. The elf's eyes bulged with outrage.

Eragon said, "And you should not boast to one who is more skilled in magic than you."

Vanir's dark eyebrows met.

Without warning or a whisper of a sound, an invisible force clouted Eragon on the chest and threw him ten yards across the grass, where he landed upon his side, driving the wind from his lungs. The impact disrupted Eragon's control of the magic and freed Vanir.

How did he do that?

Advancing upon him, Vanir said, "Your ignorance betrays you, human. You do not know whereof you speak. To think that you were chosen to succeed Vrael, that you were given his quarters, that you have had the honor to serve the Mourning Sage …" He shook his head. "It sickens me that such gifts are bestowed upon one so unworthy. You do not even understand what magic is or how it

works."

Eragon's anger resurged like a crimson tide. "What," he said, "have I ever done to wrong you? Why do you despise me so? Would you prefer it if no Rider existed to oppose Galbatorix?"

"My opinions are of little consequence."

"I agree, but I would hear them."

"Listening, as Nuala wrote in *Convocations*, is the path to wisdom only when the result of a conscious decision and not a void of perception."

"Straighten your tongue, Vanir, and give me an honest answer!"

Vanir smiled coldly. "As you command, O Rider." Drawing near so that only Eragon could hear his soft voice, the elf said, "For eighty years after the fall of the Riders, we held no hope of victory. We survived by hiding ourselves through deceit and magic, which is but a temporary measure, for eventually Galbatorix will be strong enough to march upon us and sweep aside our defenses. Then, long after we had resigned ourselves to our fate, Brom and Jeod rescued Saphira's egg, and once again a chance existed to defeat the foul usurper. Imagine our joy and celebration. We knew that in order to withstand Galbatorix, the new Rider had to be more powerful than any of his predecessors, more powerful than even Vrael. Yet how was our patience rewarded? With another human like Galbatorix. Worse … a cripple. You doomed us all, Eragon, the instant you touched Saphira's egg. Do not expect us to welcome your presence." Vanir touched his lips with his first and second finger, then sidestepped Eragon and walked off the sparring field, leaving Eragon rooted in place.

He's right, thought Eragon. *I'm ill suited for this task. Any of these elves, even Vanir, would make a better Rider than me*.

Emanating outrage, Saphira broadened the contact between them. *Do you think so little of my judgment, Eragon? You forget that when I was in my egg, Arya exposed me to each and every one of these elves—as well as many of the Varden's children—and that I rejected them all. I wouldn't have chosen someone to be my Rider unless they could help your race, mine, and the elves, for the three of us share an intertwined fate. You were the right person, at the right place, at the right time. Never forget that*.

If ever that were true, he said, *it was before Durza injured me. Now I see naught but darkness and evil in our future. I won't give up, but I despair that we may not prevail. Perhaps our task is not to overthrow Galbatorix but to prepare the way for the next Rider chosen by the remaining eggs*.

At the Crags of Tel'naeír, Eragon found Oromis at the table in his hut, painting a landscape with black ink along the bottom edge of a scroll he had finished writing.

Eragon bowed and knelt. "Master."

Fifteen minutes elapsed before Oromis finished limning the tufts of needles on a gnarled juniper tree, laid aside his ink, cleaned his sable brush with water from a clay pot, and then addressed Eragon, saying, "Why have you come so early?"

"I apologize for disturbing you, but Vanir abandoned our contest partway through and I did not know what to do with myself."

"Why did Vanir leave, Eragon-vodhr?"

Oromis folded his hands in his lap while Eragon described the encounter, ending with: "I should not have lost control, but I did, and I looked all the more foolish because of it. I have failed you, Master."

"You have," agreed Oromis. "Vanir may have goaded you, but that was no reason to respond in kind. You must keep a better hold over your emotions, Eragon. It could cost you your life if you allow your temper to sway your judgment during battle. Also, such childish displays do nothing but vindicate those elves who are opposed to you. Our machinations are subtle and allow little room for such errors."

"I am sorry, Master. It won't happen again."

As Oromis seemed content to wait in his chair until the time when they normally performed the Rimgar, Eragon seized the opportunity to ask, "How could Vanir have worked magic without speaking?"

"Did he? Perhaps another elf decided to assist him."

Eragon shook his head. "During my first day in Ellesméra, I also saw Islanzadí summon a downpour of flowers by clapping her hands, nothing more. And Vanir said that I didn't understand how magic works. What did he mean?"

"Once again," said Oromis, resigned, "you grasp at knowledge that you are not prepared for. Yet, because of our circumstances, I cannot deny it to you. Only know this: that which you ask for was not taught to Riders—and is not taught to our magicians—until they had, and have, mastered every other aspect of magic, for this is the secret to the true nature of magic and the ancient language. Those who know it may acquire great power, yes, but at a terrible risk." He paused for a moment. "How is the ancient language bound to magic, Eragon-vodhr?"

"The words of the ancient language can release the energy stored within your body and thus activate a spell."

"Ah. Then you mean that certain sounds, certain vibrations in the air, somehow tap into this energy? Sounds that might be produced at random by any creature or thing?"

"Yes, Master."

"Does not that seem absurd?"

Confused, Eragon said, "It doesn't matter if it seems absurd, Master; it just is. Should I think it absurd that the moon wanes and waxes, or that the seasons turn, or that birds fly south in the winter?"

“Of course not. But how could mere sound do so much? Can particular patterns of pitch and volume really trigger reactions that allow us to manipulate energy?”

“But they do.”

“Sound has no control over magic. Saying a word or phrase in this language is not what’s important, it’s *thinking* them in this language.” With a flick of his wrist, a golden flame appeared over Oromis’s palm, then disappeared. “However, unless the need is dire, we still utter our spells out loud to prevent stray thoughts from disrupting them, which is a danger to even the most experienced magic user.”

The implications staggered Eragon. He thought back to when he almost drowned under the waterfall of the lake Kóstha-mérna and how he had been unable to access magic because of the water surrounding him. *If I had known this then, I could have saved myself*, he thought. “Master,” he said, “if sound does not affect magic, why, then, do thoughts?”

Now Oromis smiled. “Why indeed? I must point out that we ourselves are not the source of magic. Magic can exist on its own, independent of any spell, such as the werelights in the bogs by Aroughs, the dream well in Mani’s Caves in the Beor Mountains, and the floating crystal on Eoam. Wild magic such as this is treacherous, unpredictable, and often stronger than any we can cast.

“Eons ago, all magic was thus. To use it required nothing but the ability to sense magic with your mind—which every magician must possess—and the desire and strength to use it. Without the structure of the ancient language, magicians could not govern their talent and, as a result, loosed many evils upon the land, killing thousands. Over time they discovered that stating their intentions in their language helped them to order their thoughts and avoid costly errors. But it was no foolproof method. Eventually, an accident occurred so horrific that it almost destroyed every living being in the world. We know of the event from fragments of manuscripts that survived the era, but who or what cast the fatal spell is hidden from us. The manuscripts say that, afterward, a race called the Grey Folk—not elves, for we were young then—gathered their resources and wrought an enchantment, perhaps the greatest that was or ever shall be. Together the Grey Folk changed the nature of magic itself. They made it so that their language, the ancient language, could control what a spell does … could actually limit the magic so that if you said *burn that door* and by chance looked at me and thought of me, the magic would still burn the door, not me. And they gave the ancient language its two unique traits, the ability to prevent those who speak it from lying and the ability to describe the true nature of things. How they did this remains a mystery.

“The manuscripts differ on what happened to the Grey Folk when

they completed their work, but it seems that the enchantment drained them of their power and left them but a shadow of themselves. They faded away, choosing to live in their cities until the stones crumbled to dust or to take mates among the younger races and so pass into darkness."

"Then," said Eragon, "it is still possible to use magic without the ancient language?"

"How do you think Saphira breathes fire? And, by your own account, she used no word when she turned Brom's tomb to diamond nor when she blessed the child in Farthen Dûr. Dragons' minds are different from ours; they need no protection from magic. They cannot use it consciously, aside from their fire, but when the gift touches them, their strength is unparalleled.… You look troubled, Eragon. Why?"

Eragon stared down at his hands. "What does this mean for me, Master?"

"It means that you will continue to study the ancient language, for you can accomplish much with it that would be too complex or too dangerous otherwise. It means that if you are captured and gagged, you can still call upon magic to free yourself, as Vanir did. It means that if you are captured and drugged and cannot recall the ancient language, yes, even then, you may cast a spell, though only in the gravest circumstances. And it means that if you would cast a spell for that which has no name in the ancient language, you can." He paused. "But beware the temptation to use these powers. Even the wisest among us hesitate to trifle with them for fear of death or worse."

The next morning, and every morning thereafter so long as he stayed in Ellesméra, Eragon dueled with Vanir, but he never lost his temper again, no matter what the elf did or said.

Nor did Eragon feel like devoting energy to their rivalry. His back pained him more and more frequently, driving him to the limits of his endurance. The debilitating attacks sensitized him; actions that previously had caused him no trouble could now leave him writhing on the ground. Even the Rimgar began to trigger the seizures as he advanced to more strenuous poses. It was not uncommon for him to suffer three or four such episodes in one day.

Eragon's face grew haggard. He walked with a shuffle, his movements slow and careful as he tried to preserve his strength. It became hard for him to think clearly or to pay attention to Oromis's lessons, and gaps began to appear in his memory that he could not account for. In his spare time, he took up Orik's puzzle ring again, preferring to concentrate upon the baffling interlocked rings rather than his condition. When she was with him, Saphira insisted that he

ride upon her back and did everything that she could to make him comfortable and to save him effort.

One morning, as he clung to a spike on her neck, Eragon said, *I have a new name for pain.*

What's that?

The Obliterator. Because when you're in pain, nothing else can exist. Not thought. Not emotion. Only the drive to escape the pain. When it's strong enough, the Obliterator strips us of everything that makes us who we are, until we're reduced to creatures less than animals, creatures with a single desire and goal: escape. A good name, then.

I'm falling apart, Saphira, like an old horse that's plowed too many fields. Keep hold of me with your mind, or I may drift apart and forget who I am.

I will never let go of you.

Soon afterward, Eragon fell victim to three bouts of agony while fighting Vanir and then two more during the Rimgar. As he uncurled from the clenched ball he had rolled into, Oromis said, "Again, Eragon. You must perfect your balance."

Eragon shook his head and growled in an undertone, "No." He crossed his arms to hide his tremors.

"What?"

"No."

"Get up, Eragon, and try again."

"No! Do the pose yourself; I won't."

Oromis knelt beside Eragon and placed a cool hand on his cheek. Holding it there, he gazed at Eragon with such kindness, Eragon understood the depth of the elf's compassion for him, and that, if it were possible, Oromis would willingly assume Eragon's pain to relieve his suffering. "Don't abandon hope," said Oromis. "Never that." A measure of strength seemed to flow from him to Eragon. "We are the Riders. We stand between the light and the dark, and keep the balance between the two. Ignorance, fear, hate: these are our enemies. Deny them with all your might, Eragon, or we will surely fail." He stood and extended a hand toward Eragon. "Now rise, Shadeslayer, and prove you can conquer the instincts of your flesh!"

Eragon took a deep breath and pushed himself upright on one arm, wincing from the effort. He got his feet underneath himself, paused for a moment, then straightened to his full height and looked Oromis in the eye.

The elf nodded with approval.

Eragon remained silent until they finished the Rimgar and went to bathe in the stream, whereupon he said, "Master."

"Yes, Eragon?"

"Why must I endure this torture? You could use magic to give me

the skills I need, to shape my body as you do the trees and plants."

"I could, but if I did, you would not understand how you got the body you had, your own abilities, nor how to maintain them. No shortcuts exist for the path you walk, Eragon."

Cold water rushed over the length of Eragon's body as he lowered himself into the stream. He ducked his head under the surface, holding a rock so that he would not float away, and lay stretched out along the streambed, feeling like an arrow flying through the water.

NARDA

Roran leaned on one knee and scratched his new beard as he looked down at Narda.

The small town was dark and compact, like a crust of rye bread tamped into a crevasse along the coast. Beyond it, the wine-red sea glimmered with the last rays of the dying sunset. The water fascinated him; it was utterly different from the landscape he was accustomed to.

We made it.

Leaving the promontory, Roran walked back to his makeshift tent, enjoying deep breaths of the salty air. They had camped high in the foothills of the Spine in order to avoid detection by anyone who might alert the Empire as to their whereabouts.

As he strode among the clumps of villagers huddled beneath the trees, Roran surveyed their condition with sorrow and anger. The trek from Palancar Valley had left people sick, battered, and exhausted; their faces gaunt from lack of food; their clothes tattered. Most everyone wore rags tied around their hands to ward off frostbite during the frigid mountain nights. Weeks of carrying heavy packs had bowed once-proud shoulders. The worst sight was the children: thin and unnaturally still.

They deserve better, thought Roran. *I'd be in the clutches of the Ra'zac right now if they hadn't protected me*.

Numerous people approached Roran, most of whom wanted nothing more than a touch on the shoulder or a word of comfort. Some offered him bits of food, which he refused or, when they insisted, gave to someone else. Those who remained at a distance watched with round, pale eyes. He knew what they said about him, that he was mad, that spirits possessed him, that not even the Ra'zac could defeat him in battle.

Crossing the Spine had been even harder than Roran expected. The only paths in the forest were game trails, which were too narrow, steep, and meandering for their group. As a result, the villagers were often forced to chop their way through the trees and underbrush, a painstaking task that everyone despised, not least because it made it easy for the Empire to track them. The one advantage to the situation was that the exercise restored Roran's injured shoulder to its previous level of strength, although he still had trouble lifting his arm at certain angles.

Other hardships took their toll. A sudden storm trapped them on a bare pass high above the timberline. Three people froze in the snow: Hida, Brenna, and Nesbit, all of whom were quite old. That night was the first time Roran was convinced that the entire village would die because they had followed him. Soon after, a boy broke his arm in a fall, and then Southwell drowned in a glacier stream. Wolves and bears preyed upon their livestock on a regular basis, ignoring the watchfires that the villagers lit once they were concealed from Palancar Valley and Galbatorix's hated soldiers. Hunger clung to them like a relentless parasite, gnawing at their bellies, devouring their strength, and sapping their will to continue.

And yet they survived, displaying the same obstinacy and fortitude that kept their ancestors in Palancar Valley despite famine, war, and pestilence. The people of Carvahall might take an age and a half to reach a decision, but once they did, nothing could deter them from their course.

Now that they had reached Narda, a sense of hope and accomplishment permeated the camp. No one knew what would happen next, but the fact that they had gotten so far gave them confidence.

We won't be safe until we leave the Empire, thought Roran. *And it's up to me to ensure that we aren't caught. I've become responsible for everyone here.*... A responsibility that he had embraced wholeheartedly because it allowed him to both protect the villagers from Galbatorix and pursue his goal of rescuing Katrina. *It's been so long since she was captured. How can she still be alive?* He shuddered and pushed the thoughts away. True madness awaited him if he allowed himself to brood over Katrina's fate.

At dawn Roran, Horst, Baldor, Loring's three sons, and Gertrude set out for Narda. They descended from the foothills to the town's main road, careful to stay hidden until they emerged onto the lane. Here in the lowlands, the air seemed thick to Roran; it felt as if he were trying to breathe underwater.

Roran gripped the hammer at his belt as they approached Narda's gate. Two soldiers guarded the opening. They examined Roran's group with hard eyes, lingering on their ragged clothes, then lowered their poleaxes and barred the entrance.

"Where'd you be from?" asked the man on the right. He could not have been older than twenty-five, but his hair was already pure white.

Swelling his chest, Horst crossed his arms and said, "Roundabouts Teirm, if it please you."

"What brings you here?"

"Trade. We were sent by shopkeepers who want to buy goods

directly from Narda, instead of through the usual merchants."

"That so, eh? What goods?"

When Horst faltered, Gertrude said, "Herbs and medicine on my part. The plants I've received from here have either been too old or moldy and spoiled. I have to procure a fresh supply."

"And my brothers and I," said Darmmen, "came to bargain with your cobblers. Shoes made in the northern style are fashionable in Dras-Leona and Urû'baen." He grimaced. "At least they were when we set out."

Horst nodded with renewed confidence. "Aye. And I'm here to collect a shipment of ironwork for my master."

"So you say. What about that one? What does he do?" asked the soldier, motioning toward Roran with his ax.

"Pottery," said Roran.

"Pottery?"

"Pottery."

"Why the hammer, then?"

"How do you think the glaze on a bottle or jar gets cracked? It doesn't happen by itself, you know. You have to hit it." Roran returned the white-haired man's stare of disbelief with a blank expression, daring him to challenge the statement.

The soldier grunted and ran his gaze over them again. "Be as that may, you don't look like tradesmen to me. Starved alley cats is more like it."

"We had difficulty on the road," said Gertrude.

"That I'd believe. If you came from Teirm, where be your horses?"

"We left them at our camp," supplied Hamund. He pointed south, opposite where the rest of the villagers were actually hidden.

"Don't have the coin to stay in town, eh?" With a scornful chuckle, the soldier raised his ax and gestured for his companion to do likewise. "All right, you can pass, but don't cause trouble or you'll be off to the stocks or worse."

Once through the gate, Horst pulled Roran to the side of the street and growled in his ear, "That was a fool thing to do, making up something as ridiculous as that. Cracking the glaze! Do you *want* a fight? We can't—" He stopped as Gertrude plucked at his sleeve.

"Look," murmured the healer.

To the left of the entrance stood a six-foot-wide message board with a narrow shingle roof to protect the yellowing parchment underneath. Half the board was devoted to official notices and proclamations. On the other half hung a block of posters displaying sketches of various criminals. Foremost among them was a drawing of Roran without a beard.

Startled, Roran glanced around to make sure that no one in the

street was close enough to compare his face to the illustration, then devoted his attention to the poster. He had expected the Empire to pursue them, but it was still a shock to encounter proof of it. *Galbatorix must be expending an enormous amount of resources trying to catch us*. When they were in the Spine, it was easy to forget that the outside world existed. *I bet posters of me are nailed up throughout the Empire*. He grinned, glad that he had stopped shaving and that he and the others had agreed to use false names while in Narda.

A reward was inked at the bottom of the poster. Garrow never taught Roran and Eragon to read, but he did teach them their figures because, as he said, "You have to know how much you own, what it's worth, and what you're paid for it so you don't get rooked by some two-faced knave." Thus, Roran could see that the Empire had offered ten thousand crowns for him, enough to live in comfort for several decades. In a perverse way, the size of the reward pleased him, giving him a sense of importance.

Then his gaze drifted to the next poster in line.

It was Eragon.

Roran's gut clenched as if he had been struck, and for a few seconds he forgot to breathe.

He's alive!

After his initial relief subsided, Roran felt his old anger about Eragon's role in Garrow's death and the destruction of their farm take its place, accompanied by a burning desire to know why the Empire was hunting Eragon. *It must have something to do with that blue stone and the Ra'zac's first visit to Carvahall*. Once again, Roran wondered what kind of fiendish machinations he and the rest of Carvahall had become entangled in.

Instead of a reward, Eragon's poster bore two lines of runes. "What crime is he accused of?" Roran asked Gertrude.

The skin around Gertrude's eyes wrinkled as she squinted at the board. "Treason, the both of you. It says Galbatorix will bestow an earldom on whoever captures Eragon, but that those who try should take care because he's extremely dangerous."

Roran blinked with astonishment. *Eragon?* It seemed inconceivable until Roran considered how he himself had changed in the past few weeks. *The same blood runs in our veins. Who knows, Eragon may have accomplished as much or more than I have since he left*.

In a low voice, Baldor said, "If killing Galbatorix's men and defying the Ra'zac only earns you ten thousand crowns—large as that is—what makes you worth an earldom?"

"Buggering the king himself," suggested Larne.

"That's enough of that," said Horst. "Guard your tongue better, Baldor, or we'll end up in irons. And, Roran, don't draw attention to

yourself again. With a reward like that, people are bound to be watching strangers for anyone who matches your description." Running a hand through his hair, Horst pulled up his belt and said, "Right. We all have jobs to do. Return here at noon to report on your progress."

With that their party split into three. Darmmen, Larne, and Hamund set out together to purchase food for the villagers, both to meet present needs and to sustain them through the next stage of their journey. Gertrude—as she had told the guard—went to replenish her stock of herbs, unguents, and tinctures. And Roran, Horst, and Baldor headed down the sloping streets to the docks, where they hoped to charter a ship that could transport the villagers to Surda or, at the very least, Teirm.

When they reached the weathered boardwalk that covered the beach, Roran halted and stared out at the ocean, which was gray from low clouds and dotted with whitecaps from erratic wind. He had never imagined that the horizon could be so perfectly flat. The hollow boom of water knocking against the piles beneath his feet made it feel as if he stood upon the surface of a huge drum. The odor of fish—fresh, gutted, and rotting—overwhelmed every other smell.

Glancing from Roran to Baldor, who was likewise entranced, Horst said, "Quite a sight, isn't it?"

"Aye," said Roran.

"Makes you feel rather small, doesn't it?"

"Aye," said Baldor.

Horst nodded. "I remember when I first saw the ocean, it had a similar effect on me."

"When was that?" asked Roran. In addition to the flocks of seagulls whirling over the cove, he noticed an odd type of bird perched upon the piers. The animal had an ungainly body with a striped beak that it kept tucked against its breast like a pompous old man, a white head and neck, and a sooty torso. One of the birds lifted its beak, revealing a leathery pouch underneath.

"Bartram, the smith who came before me," said Horst, "died when I was fifteen, a year before the end of my apprenticeship. I had to find a smith who was willing to finish another man's work, so I traveled to Ceunon, which is built along the North Sea. There I met Kelton, a vile old man but good at what he did. He agreed to teach me." Horst laughed. "By the time we were done, I wasn't sure if I should thank him or curse him."

"Thank him, I should think," said Baldor. "You never would have married Mother otherwise."

Roran scowled as he studied the waterfront. "There aren't many ships," he observed. Two craft were berthed at the south end of the

port and a third at the opposite side with nothing but fishing boats and dinghies in between. Of the southern pair, one had a broken mast. Roran had no experience with ships but, to him, none of the vessels appeared large enough to carry almost three hundred passengers.

Going from one ship to the next, Roran, Horst, and Baldor soon discovered that they were all otherwise engaged. It would take a month or more to repair the ship with the broken mast. The vessel beside it, the *Waverunner*, was rigged with leather sails and was about to venture north to the treacherous islands where the Seithr plant grew. And the *Albatross*, the last ship, had just arrived from distant Feinster and was getting its seams recaulked before departing with its cargo of wool.

A dockworker laughed at Horst's questions. "You're too late and too early at the same time. Most of the spring ships came and left two, three weeks ago. An' another month, the nor'westers will start gusting, an' then the seal and walrus hunters will return and we'll get ships from Teirm and the rest of the Empire to take the hides, meat, and oil. Then you might have a chance of hiring a captain with an empty hold. Meanwhile, we don't see much more traffic than this."

Desperate, Roran asked, "Is there no other way to get goods from here to Teirm? It doesn't have to be fast or comfortable."

"Well," said the man, hefting the box on his shoulder, "if it doesn't have to be fast an' you're only going to Teirm, then you might try Clovis over there." He pointed to a line of sheds that floated between two piers where boats could be stored. "He owns some barges that he ships grain on in the fall. The rest of the year, Clovis fishes for a living, like most everybody in Narda." Then he frowned. "What kind of goods do you have? The sheep have already been shorn, an' no crops are in as of yet."

"This and that," said Horst. He tossed the man a copper.

The dockworker pocketed it with a wink and a nudge. "Right you are, sir. This an' that. I know a dodge when I see one. But no need to fear old Ulric; mum's th' word, it is. Be seeing you, then, sir." He strolled off, whistling.

As it turned out, Clovis was absent from the docks. After getting directions, it took them a half hour to walk to his house on the other side of Narda, where they found Clovis planting iris bulbs along the path to his front door. He was a stout man with sunburned cheeks and a salt-and-pepper beard. An additional hour passed before they could convince the mariner that they really were interested in his barges, despite the season, and then troop back to the sheds, which he unlocked to reveal three identical barges, the *Merrybell, Edeline*, and *Red Boar*.

Each barge was seventy-five feet long, twenty feet wide, and

painted rust red. They had open holds that could be covered with tarpaulins, a mast that could be erected in the center for a single square sail, and a block of above-decks cabins at the rear—or aft, as Clovis called it—of the craft.

"Their draft be deeper than that of an inland scow," explained Clovis, "so you needn't fear them capsizing in rough weather, though you'd do well to avoid being caught in a real tempest. These barges aren't meant for the open sea. They're meant to stay within sight of land. And now be the worst time to launch them. By my honor, we've had nothing but thunderstorms every afternoon for a month."

"Do you have crews for all three?" asked Roran.

"Well now … see, there's a problem. Most of the men I employ left weeks ago to hunt seals, as they're wont to do. Since I need them only after the harvest, they're free to come and go as they please for the rest of the year.… I'm sure you fine gentlemen understand my position." Clovis tried to smile, then glanced between Roran, Horst, and Baldor as if uncertain whom to address.

Roran walked the length of the *Edeline*, examining it for damage. The barge looked old, but the wood was sound and the paint was fresh. "If we replace the missing men in your crews, how much would it cost to go to Teirm with all three barges?"

"That depends," said Clovis. "The sailors earn fifteen coppers per day, plus as much good food as they can eat and a dram of whisky besides. What your men earn be your own business. I won't put them on my payroll. Normally, we also hire guards for each barge, but they're—"

"They're off hunting, yes," said Roran. "We'll provide guards as well."

The knob in Clovis's tanned throat jumped as he swallowed. "That'd be more than reasonable … so it would. In addition to the crew's wages, I charge a fee of two hundred crowns, plus recompense for any damage to the barges on account of your men, plus—as both owner and captain—twelve percent of the total profit from sale of the cargo."

"Our trip will have no profit."

That, more than anything, seemed to unnerve Clovis. He rubbed the dimple in his chin with his left thumb, began to talk twice, stopped, then finally said, "If that be the case, another four hundred crowns upon completion of the voyage. What—if I may make so bold as to inquire—do you wish to transport?"

We frighten him, thought Roran. "Livestock."

"Be it sheep, cattle, horses, goats, oxen …?"

"Our herds contain an assortment of animals."

"And why do you want to take them to Teirm?"

"We have our reasons." Roran almost smiled at Clovis's confusion.

“Would you consider sailing past Teirm?”

“No! Teirm’s my limit, it is. I don’t know the waters beyond, nor would I want to be gone any longer from my wife and daughter.”

“When could you be ready?”

Clovis hesitated and executed two little steps. “Mayhap five or six days. No … no, you’d better make it a week; I have affairs that I must attend to before departing.”

“We’d pay an additional ten crowns to leave day after tomorrow.”

“I don’t—”

“Twelve crowns.”

“Day after tomorrow it is,” vowed Clovis. “One way or another, I’ll be ready by then.”

Trailing his hand along the barge’s gunwale, Roran nodded without looking back at Clovis and said, “May I have a minute alone to confer with my associates?”

“As you wish, sir. I’ll just go for a turn about the docks until you’re done.” Clovis hurried to the door. Just as he exited the shed, he asked, “I’m sorry, but what’d be your name again? I fear I missed it earlier, an’ my memory can be something dreadful.”

“Stronghammer. My name is Stronghammer.”

“Ah, of course. A good name, that.”

When the door closed, Horst and Baldor converged on Roran. Baldor said, “We can’t afford to hire him.”

“We can’t afford *not* to,” replied Roran. “We don’t have the gold to buy the barges, nor do I fancy teaching myself to handle them when everyone’s lives depend on it. It’ll be faster and safer to pay for a crew.”

“It’s still too expensive,” said Horst.

Roran drummed his fingers against the gunwale. “We can pay Clovis’s initial fee of two hundred crowns. Once we reach Teirm, though, I suggest that we either steal the barges using the skills we learn during the trip or incapacitate Clovis and his men until we can escape through other means. That way, we avoid paying the extra four hundred crowns, as well as the sailors’ wages.”

“I don’t like cheating a man out of honest work,” said Horst. “It goes against my fiber.”

“I don’t like it either, but can you think of an alternative?”

“How would you get everyone onto the barges?”

“Have them meet Clovis a league or so down the coast, out of sight of Narda.”

Horst sighed. “Very well, we’ll do it, but it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Call Clovis back in, Baldor, and we’ll seal this pact.”

That evening, the villagers gathered around a small banked fire in

order to hear what had transpired in Narda. From where he knelt on the ground, Roran stared at the pulsing coals while he listened to Gertrude and the three brothers describe their separate adventures. The news about Roran's and Eragon's posters caused murmurs of unease among the audience.

When Darmmen finished, Horst took his place and, with short, brisk sentences, related the lack of proper ships in Narda, how the dockworker recommended Clovis, and the deal that was brokered thereafter. However, the moment Horst mentioned the word *barges*, the villagers' cries of ire and discontent blotted out his voice.

Marching to the forefront of the group, Loring raised his arms for attention. "Barges?" said the cobbler. "Barges? We don't want no *stinking* barges!" He spat by his foot as people clamored with agreement.

"Everyone, be quiet!" said Delwin. "We'll be heard if we keep this up." When the crackling fire was the loudest noise, he continued at a slower pace: "I agree with Loring. Barges are unacceptable. They're slow and vulnerable. And we'd be crammed together with a complete lack of privacy and no shelter to speak of for who knows how long. Horst, Elain is six months pregnant. You can't expect her and others who are sick and infirm to sit under the blazing sun for weeks on end."

"We can lash tarpaulins over the holds," replied Horst. "It's not much, but it'll shield us from the sun and the rain."

Birgit's voice cut through the crowd's low babble: "I have another concern." People moved aside as she walked to the fire. "What with the two hundred crowns Clovis is due and the money Darmmen and his brothers spent, we've used up most of our coin. Unlike those in cities, our wealth lies not in gold but in animals and property. Our property is gone and few animals are left. Even if we turn pirate and steal these barges, how can we buy supplies at Teirm or passage farther south?"

"The important thing," rumbled Horst, "is to get to Teirm in the first place. Once we're there, then we can worry about what to do next.… It's possible that we may have to resort to more drastic measures."

Loring's bony face crumpled into a mass of wrinkles. "Drastic? What do you mean, *drastic?* We've already done drastic. This whole *venture* is drastic. I don't care what you say; I won't use those confounded barges, not after what we've gone through in the Spine. Barges are for grain and animals. What we want is a ship with cabins and bunks where we can sleep in comfort. Why not wait another week or so and see if a ship arrives that we can bargain passage on? Where's the harm in that, eh? Or why not—" He continued to rail for over fifteen minutes, amassing a mountain of objections before ceding to Thane

and Ridley, who built upon his arguments.

The conversation halted as Roran unfolded his legs and rose to his full height, silencing the villagers through his presence. They waited, breathless, hoping for another of his visionary speeches.

“It’s this or walk,” he said.

Then he went to bed.

THE HAMMER FALLS

The moon floated high among the stars when Roran left the makeshift tent he shared with Baldor, padded to the edge of the camp, and replaced Albriech on watch.

"Nothing to report," whispered Albriech, then slipped off.

Roran strung his bow and planted three goose-feather arrows upright in the loam, within easy reach, then wrapped himself in a blanket and curled against the rockface to his left. His position afforded him a good view down and across the dark foothills.

As was his habit, Roran divided the landscape into quadrants, examining each one for a full minute, always alert for the flash of movement or the hint of light that might betray the approach of enemies. His mind soon began to wander, drifting from subject to subject with the hazy logic of dreams, distracting him from his task. He bit the inside of his cheek to force himself to concentrate. Staying awake was difficult in such mild weather….

Roran was just glad that he had escaped drawing lots for the two watches preceding dawn, because they gave you no opportunity to catch up on lost sleep afterward and you felt tired for the rest of the day.

A breath of wind ghosted past him, tickling his ear and making the skin on the back of his neck prickle with an apprehension of evil. The intrusive touch frightened Roran, obliterating everything but the conviction that he and the rest of the villagers were in mortal danger. He quaked as if with the ague, his heart pounded, and he had to struggle to resist the urge to break cover and flee.

What's wrong with me? It required an effort for him to even nock an arrow.

To the east, a shadow detached itself from the horizon. Visible only as a void among the stars, it drifted like a torn veil across the sky until it covered the moon, where it remained, hovering. Illuminated from behind, Roran could see the translucent wings of one of the Ra'zac's mounts.

The black creature opened its beak and uttered a long, piercing shriek. Roran grimaced with pain at the cry's pitch and frequency. It stabbed at his eardrums, turned his blood to ice, and replaced hope and joy with despair. The ululation woke the entire forest. Birds and beasts for miles around exploded into a yammering chorus of panic,

including, to Roran's alarm, what remained of the villagers' herds.

Staggering from tree to tree, Roran returned to the camp, whispering, "The Ra'zac are here. Be quiet and stay where you are," to everyone he encountered. He saw the other sentries moving among the frightened villagers, spreading the same message.

Fisk emerged from his tent with a spear in hand and roared, "Are we under attack? What's set off those blasted—" Roran tackled the carpenter to silence him, uttering a muffled bellow as he landed on his right shoulder and pained his old injury.

"Ra'zac," Roran groaned to Fisk.

Fisk went still and in an undertone asked, "What should I do?"

"Help me to calm the animals."

Together they picked their way through the camp to the adjacent meadow where the goats, sheep, donkeys, and horses were bedded. The farmers who owned the bulk of the herds slept with their charges and were already awake and working to soothe the beasts. Roran thanked his paranoia that he had insisted on having the animals scattered along the edge of the meadow, where the trees and brush helped to camouflage them from unfriendly eyes.

As he tried to pacify a clump of sheep, Roran glanced up at the terrible black shadow that still obscured the moon, like a giant bat. To his horror, it began to move toward their hiding place. *If that creature screams again, we're doomed.*

By the time the Ra'zac circled overhead, most of the animals had quieted, except for one donkey, who insisted upon loosing a grating *hee-haw*. Without hesitation, Roran dropped to one knee, fit arrow to string, and shot the ass between the ribs. His aim was true, and the animal dropped without a sound.

He was too late, though; the braying had already alerted the Ra'zac. The monster swung its head in the direction of the clearing and descended toward it with outstretched claws, preceded by its fetid stench.

Now the time has come to see if we can slay a nightmare, thought Roran. Fisk, who was crouched beside him in the grass, hefted his spear, preparing to hurl it once the brute was in range.

Just as Roran drew his bow—in an attempt to begin and end the battle with a well-placed shaft—he was distracted by a commotion in the forest.

A mass of deer burst through the underbrush and stampeded across the meadow, ignoring villagers and livestock alike in their frantic desire to escape the Ra'zac. For almost a minute, the deer bounded past Roran, mincing the loam with their sharp hooves and catching the moonlight with their white-rimmed eyes. They came so close, he heard the soft gasps of their labored breathing.

The multitude of deer must have hidden the villagers because, after one last circuit over the meadow, the winged monster turned to the south and glided farther down the Spine, melding into the night.

Roran and his companions remained frozen in place, like hunted rabbits, afraid that the Ra'zac's departure might be a ruse to flush them into the open or that the creature's twin might be close behind. They waited for hours, tense and anxious, barely moving except to string a bow.

When the moon was about to set, the Ra'zac's bone-chilling shriek echoed far in the distance … then nothing.

✷ ✷ ✷

We were lucky, decided Roran when he woke the next morning. *And we can't count on luck to save us the next time*.

After the Ra'zac's appearance, none of the villagers objected to traveling by barge. On the contrary, they were so eager to be off, many of them asked Roran if it was possible to set sail that day instead of the next.

"I wish we could," he said, "but too much has to be done."

Forgoing breakfast, he, Horst, and a group of other men hiked into Narda. Roran knew that he risked being recognized by accompanying them, but their mission was too important for him to neglect. Besides, he was confident that his current appearance was different enough from his portrait on the Empire's poster that no one would equate one with the other.

They had no difficulty gaining entrance, as a different set of soldiers guarded the town gate, whereupon they went to the docks and delivered the two hundred crowns to Clovis, who was busy overseeing a gang of men as they readied the barges for sea.

"Thank'ee, Stronghammer," he said, tying the bag of coins to his belt. "There be nothing like yellow gold to brighten a man's day." He led them to a worktable and unrolled a chart of the waters surrounding Narda, complete with notations on the strength of various currents; locations of rocks, sandbars, and other hazards; and decades' worth of sounding measurements. Drawing a line with his finger from Narda to a small cove directly south of it, Clovis said, "Here's where we'll meet your livestock. The tides are gentle this time o' year, but we still don't want to fight them an' no bones about it, so we'll have to be on our way directly after the high tide."

"High tide?" said Roran. "Wouldn't it be easier to wait until low tide and let it carry us out?"

Clovis tapped his nose with a twinkle in his eye. "Aye, it would, an' so I've begun many a cruise. What I don't want, though, is to be slung

up on the beach, loading your animals, when the tide comes a-rushing back in and pushes us farther inland. There be no danger of that this way, but we'll have to move smart so as we're not left high an' dry when the waters recede. Assuming we do, the sea'll work for us, eh?"

Roran nodded. He trusted Clovis's experience. "And how many men will you need to fill out your crews?"

"Well, I managed to dig up seven lads—strong, true, an' good seamen all—who have agreed to this venture, odd as it is. Mind you, most of the boys were at the bottom of their tankards when I cornered them last night, drinking off the pay from their last voyage, but they'll be sober as spinsters come morn; that I promise you. Seeing as seven were all I could find, I'd like four more."

"Four it is," said Roran. "My men don't know much about sailing, but they're able-bodied and willing to learn."

Clovis grunted. "I usually take on a brace of new lads each trip anyway. So long as they follow orders, they'll do fine; otherwise, they'll get a belaying pin upsides the head, mark my words. As for guards, I'd like to have nine—three per boat. An' they'd better not be as green as your sailors, or I won't budge from the dock, not for all the whisky in the world."

Roran allowed himself a grim smile. "Every man who rides with me has proved himself in battle many times over."

"An' they all answer to you, eh, young Stronghammer?" said Clovis. He scratched his chin, eyeing Gedric, Delwin, and the others who were new to Narda. "How many are with you?"

"Enough."

"Enough, you say. I wonder." He waved a hand. "Never you mind me; my tongue runs a league before my own common sense, or so my father used to tell me. My first mate, Torson, is at the chandler's now, overseeing the purchase of goods and equipment. I understand you have feed for your livestock?"

"Among other things."

"Then you'd best fetch them. We can load them into the holds once the masts are up."

Throughout the rest of the morning and afternoon, Roran and the villagers with him labored to ferry the supplies—which Loring's sons had procured—from the warehouse where it was stored into the sheds with the barges.

As Roran trudged across the gangplank to the *Edeline* and lowered his bag of flour to the sailor waiting in the hold, Clovis observed, "Most of this t'aint feed, Stronghammer."

"No," said Roran. "But it's needed." He was pleased that Clovis had the sense not to inquire further.

When the last item had been stored away, Clovis beckoned to

Roran. “You might as well go. Me and the boys will handle the rest. Just you remember to be at the docks three hours after dawn with every man jack you promised me, or we’ll lose the tide.”

“We’ll be there.”

Back in the foothills, Roran helped Elain and the others prepare for departure. It did not take long, as they were accustomed to breaking camp each morning. Then he picked twelve men to accompany him to Narda the next day. They were all good fighters, but he asked the best, like Horst and Delwin, to remain with the rest of the villagers in case soldiers found them or the Ra’zac returned.

Once night fell, the two groups parted. Roran crouched on a boulder and watched Horst lead the column of people down through the foothills toward the cove where they would wait for the barges.

Orval came up beside him and crossed his arms. “Do you think they’ll be safe, Stronghammer?” Anxiety ran through his voice like a taut bowstring.

Though he too was worried, Roran said, “I do. I’d bet you a barrel of cider that they’ll still be asleep when we put ashore tomorrow. You can have the pleasure of waking up Nolla. How does that sound?” Orval smiled at the mention of his wife and nodded, appearing reassured.

I hope I’m right. Roran remained on the boulder, hunched like a bleak gargoyle, until the dark line of villagers vanished from his sight.

They woke an hour before sunrise, when the sky had just begun to brighten with pale green and the damp night air numbed their fingers. Roran splashed his face with water and then outfitted himself with his bow and quiver, his ever-present hammer, one of Fisk’s shields, and one of Horst’s spears. The others did likewise, with the addition of swords obtained during the skirmishes in Carvahall.

Running as fast as they dared down the hummocky hills, the thirteen men soon arrived at the road to Narda and, shortly after that, the town’s main gate. To Roran’s dismay, the same two soldiers who had troubled them earlier stood guard by the entrance. As before, the soldiers lowered their poleaxes to block the way.

“There be quite a bit more of you this time,” observed the white-haired man. “And not all the same ones either. Except for you.” He focused on Roran. “I suppose you expect me to believe that the spear and shield be for pottery as well?”

“No. We’ve been hired by Clovis to protect his barges from attack on the way to Teirm.”

“You? Mercenaries?” The soldiers burst out laughing. “You said you were tradesmen.”

“This pays better.”

The white-haired man scowled. “You lie. I tried my hand at being a gentleman of fortune once. I spent more nights hungry than not. How large be your company of *tradesmen* anyway? Seven yesterday and twelve today—thirteen counting you. It seems too large for an expedition from a bunch of shopkeepers.” His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized Roran’s face. “You look familiar. What’d be your name, eh?”

“Stronghammer.”

“It wouldn’t happen to be *Roran*, would—”

Roran jabbed forward with his spear, catching the white-haired soldier in the throat. Scarlet blood fountained. Releasing the spear, Roran drew his hammer and twisted round as he blocked the second soldier’s poleax with his shield. Swinging his hammer up and around, Roran crushed the man’s helm.

He stood panting between the two corpses. *Now I have killed ten.*

Orval and the other men stared at Roran with shock. Unable to bear their gazes, Roran turned his back on them and gestured at the culvert that ran beneath the road. “Hide the bodies before anyone sees,” he ordered, brusque and harsh. As they hurried to obey, he examined the parapet on top of the wall for sentries. Fortunately, no one was visible there or in the street through the gate. He bent and pulled his spear free, wiping the blade clean on a tuft of grass.

“Done,” said Mandel, clambering out of the ditch. Despite his beard, the young man appeared pale.

Roran nodded and, steeling himself, faced his band. “Listen. We will walk to the docks at a quick but reasonable pace. We will not run. When the alarm is sounded—and someone may have heard the clash just now—act surprised and interested but not afraid. Whatever you do, give people no reason to suspect us. The lives of your families and friends depend on it. If we are attacked, your only duty is to see the barges launched. Nothing else matters. Am I clear?”

“Aye, Stronghammer,” they answered.

“Then follow me.”

As he strode through Narda, Roran felt so tense, he feared he might snap and explode into a thousand pieces. *What have I made of myself?* he wondered. He glanced from man to woman, child to man, man to dog in an effort to identify potential enemies. Everything around him appeared unnaturally bright and filled with detail; it seemed as if he could see the individual threads in people’s clothing.

They reached the docks without incident, whereupon Clovis said, “You be early, Stronghammer. I like that in a man. It’ll give us the

opportunity to put things nice an' shipshape before we head out."

"Can we leave now?" asked Roran.

"You should know better'n that. Have to wait till the tide's finished coming in, so we do." Clovis paused then, taking his first good look at the thirteen of them, and said, "Why, what'd be the matter, Stronghammer? The lot of you look as if you saw the ghost of old Galbatorix himself."

"Nothing a few hours of sea air won't cure," said Roran. In his current state, he could not smile, but he did let his features assume a more pleasant expression in order to reassure the captain.

With a whistle, Clovis summoned two sailors from the boats. Both men were tanned the color of hazelnuts. "This'd be Torson, my first mate," said Clovis, indicating the man to his right. Torson's bare shoulder was decorated with a coiled tattoo of a flying dragon. "He'll be skipper of the *Merrybell*. And this black dog is Flint. He's in command of the *Edeline*. While you are on board, their word is law, as is mine on the *Red Boar*. You'll answer to them and me, not Stronghammer.… Well, give me a proper *aye, aye* if you heard me."

"Aye, aye," said the men.

"Now, which of you be my hands and which be my men-at-arms? For the life of me, I can't tell you apart."

Ignoring Clovis's admonishment that he was their commander, not Roran, the villagers looked at Roran to see if they should obey. He nodded his approval, and they divided into two factions, which Clovis proceeded to partition into even smaller groups as he assigned a certain number of villagers to each barge.

For the next half hour, Roran worked alongside the sailors to finish preparing the *Red Boar* for departure, ears open for the first hint of alarm. *We're going to be captured or killed if we stay much longer*, he thought, checking the height of the water against the piers. He mopped sweat from his brow.

Roran started as Clovis gripped his forearm.

Before he could stop himself, Roran pulled his hammer halfway out of his belt. The thick air clogged his throat.

Clovis raised an eyebrow at his reaction. "I've been watching you, Stronghammer, and I'd be interested to know how you won such loyalty from your men. I've served with more captains than I care to recall, an' not one commanded the level of obedience you do without raising his pipes."

Roran could not help it; he laughed. "I'll tell you how I did it; I saved them from slavery and from being eaten."

Clovis's eyebrows rose almost to his hairline. "Did you now? There's a story I'd like to hear."

"No, you wouldn't."

After a minute, Clovis said, “No, maybe I wouldn’t at that.” He glanced overboard. “Why, I’ll be hanged. I do believe we can be on our way. Ah, and here’s my little Galina, punctual as ever.”

The burly man sprang onto the gangplank and, from there, onto the docks, where he embraced a dark-haired girl of perhaps thirteen and a woman who Roran guessed was her mother. Clovis ruffled the girl’s hair and said, “Now, you’ll be good while I’m gone, won’t you, Galina?”

“Yes, Father.”

As he watched Clovis bid his family farewell, Roran thought of the two soldiers dead by the gate. *They might have had families as well. Wives and children who loved them and a home they returned to each day* … He tasted bile and had to wrench his thoughts back to the pier to avoid being sick.

On the barges, the men appeared anxious. Afraid that they might lose their nerve, Roran made a show of walking about the deck, stretching, and doing whatever he could to seem relaxed. At last Clovis jumped back onto the *Red Boar* and cried, “Cast off, me lads! It’s the briny deep for us.”

In short order, the gangplanks were pulled aboard, the mooring ropes untied, and the sails raised on the three barges. The air rang with shouted orders and chants of heave-ho as the sailors pulled on ropes.

Behind them, Galina and her mother remained watching as the barges drew away, still and silent, hooded and grave.

“We’re lucky, Stronghammer,” said Clovis, clapping him on the shoulder. “We’ve a bit o’ wind to push us along today. We may not have to row in order to reach the cove before the tide changes, eh!”

When the *Red Boar* was in the middle of Narda’s bay and still ten minutes from the freedom of the open sea, that which Roran dreaded occurred: the sound of bells and trumpets floated across the water from among the stone buildings.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“I don’t rightly know,” said Clovis. He frowned as he stared at the town, his hands planted on his hips. “It could be a fire, but no smoke is in the air. Maybe some Urgals were discovered in the area.…” Concern grew upon his face. “Did you perchance spy anyone on the road this morning?”

Roran shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

Flint drew alongside them and shouted from the deck of the *Edeline*, “Should we turn back, sir?” Roran gripped the gunwale so hard that he drove splinters under his nails, ready to intercede but afraid to appear too anxious.

Tearing his gaze from Narda, Clovis bellowed in return, “No. We’d

miss the tide then."

"Aye, aye, sir! But I'd give a day's pay to find out what caused that clamor."

"So would I," muttered Clovis.

As the houses and buildings shrank behind them, Roran crouched at the rear port of the barge, wrapped his arms around his knees, and leaned against the cabins. He looked at the sky, struck by its depth, clarity, and color, then into the *Red Boar*'s roiling green wake, where ribbons of seaweed fluttered. The pitch of the barge lulled him like the rock of a cradle. *What a beautiful day it is*, he thought, grateful he was there to observe it.

After they escaped the cove—to his relief—Roran climbed the ladder to the poop deck behind the cabins, where Clovis stood with his hand on the tiller, guiding their course. The captain said, "Ah, there's something exhilarating about the first day of a voyage, before you realize how bad the food is an' start longing for home."

Mindful of his need to learn what he could about the barge, Roran asked Clovis the names and functions of various objects on board, at which point he was treated to an enthusiastic lecture on the workings of barges, ships, and the art of sailing in general.

Two hours later, Clovis pointed at a narrow peninsula that lay before them. "The cove be on the far side of that." Roran straightened off the railing and craned his neck, eager to confirm that the villagers were safe.

As the *Red Boar* rounded the rocky spit of land, a white beach was revealed at the apex of the cove, upon which were assembled the refugees from Palancar Valley. The crowd cheered and waved as the barges emerged from behind the rocks.

Roran relaxed.

Beside him, Clovis uttered a dreadful oath. "I knew something were amiss the moment I clapped eyes upon you, Stronghammer. Livestock indeed. Bah! You played me like a fool, you did."

"You wrong me," replied Roran. "I did not lie; this is my flock and I am their shepherd. Is it not within my right to call them 'livestock' if I want?"

"Call them what you will, I didn't agree to haul people to Teirm. *Why* you didn't tell me the true nature of your cargo, I might wonder, an' the only answer on the horizon is that whatever venture you're engaged in means trouble … trouble for you an' trouble for me. I should toss the lot of you overboard an' return to Narda."

"But you won't," said Roran, deadly quiet.

"Oh? An' why not?"

"Because I need these barges, Clovis, and I'll do anything to keep them. Anything. Honor our bargain and you'll have a peaceful trip and

you'll get to see Galina again. If not …" The threat sounded worse than it was; Roran had no intention of killing Clovis, though if he had to, he would abandon him somewhere along the coast.

Clovis's face reddened, but he surprised Roran by grunting and saying, "Fair enough, Stronghammer." Pleased with himself, Roran returned his attention to the beach.

Behind him, he heard a *snick*.

Acting on instinct, Roran recoiled, crouching, twisting, and covering his head with his shield. His arm vibrated as a belaying pin broke across the shield. He lowered the shield and gazed at a dismayed Clovis, who retreated across the deck.

Roran shook his head, never taking his eyes off his opponent. "You can't defeat me, Clovis. I'll ask you again: Will you honor our bargain? If you don't, I'll put you ashore, commandeer the barges, and press your crew into service. I don't want to ruin your livelihood, but I will if you force me.… Come now. This can be a normal, uneventful voyage if you choose to help us. Remember, you've already been paid."

Drawing himself up with great dignity, Clovis said, "If I agree, then you must do me the courtesy of explaining why this ruse were necessary, an' why these people are here an' where they're from. No matter how much gold you offer me, I won't assist an undertaking that contradicts my principles; no, I won't. Are you bandits? Or do you serve the blasted king?"

"The knowledge may place you in greater danger."

"I insist."

"Have you heard of Carvahall in Palancar Valley?" asked Roran.

Clovis waved a hand. "Once or twice. What of it?"

"You see it now on the beach. Galbatorix's soldiers attacked us without provocation. We fought back and, when our position became untenable, we crossed the Spine and followed the coast to Narda. Galbatorix has promised that every man, woman, and child from Carvahall will be killed or enslaved. Reaching Surda is our only hope of survival." Roran left out mention of the Ra'zac; he did not want to frighten Clovis too badly.

The weathered seaman had gone gray. "Are you still pursued?"

"Aye, but the Empire has yet to discover us."

"An' are you why the alarm was sounded?"

Very softly, Roran said, "I killed two soldiers who recognized me." The revelation startled Clovis: his eyes widened, he stepped back, and the muscles in his forearms rippled as he clenched his fists. "Make your choice, Clovis; the shore draws near."

He knew he had won when the captain's shoulders drooped and the bravado faded from his bearing. "Ah, the plague take you,

Stronghammer. I'm no friend of the king; I'll get you to Teirm. But then I want nothing more to do with you."

"Will you give me your word that you won't attempt to slip away in the night or any similar deception?"

"Aye. You have it."

Sand and rocks grated across the bottom of the *Red Boar*'s hull as the barge drove itself up onto the beach, followed on either side by its two companions. The relentless, rhythmic surge of water dashing itself against the land sounded like the breathing of a gigantic monster. Once the sails were furled and the gangplanks extended, Torson and Flint both strode over to the *Red Boar* and accosted Clovis, demanding to know what was going on.

"There's been a change of plans," said Clovis.

Roran left him to explain the situation—skirting the exact reasons why the villagers left Palancar Valley—and jumped onto the sand, whereupon he set out to find Horst among the milling knots of people. When he spotted the smith, Roran pulled him aside and told him about the deaths in Narda. "If it's discovered that I left with Clovis, they may send soldiers on horses after us. We have to get everyone onto the barges as fast as possible."

Horst met his eye for a long minute. "You've become a hard man, Roran, harder than I'll ever be."

"I've had to."

"Mind that you don't forget who you are."

Roran spent the next three hours moving and packing the villagers' belongings in the *Red Boar* until Clovis expressed his satisfaction. The bundles had to be secured so that they would not shift unexpectedly and injure someone, as well as distributed so that the barge rode level in the water, which was no easy task as the bundles were of irregular size and density. Then the animals were coaxed on board—much to their displeasure—and immobilized by tethers lashed to iron rings in the hold.

Last of all came the people, who, like the rest of the cargo, had to be organized into a symmetrical pattern within the barge to keep it from capsizing. Clovis, Torson, and Flint each ended up standing at the fore of their barges, shouting directions to the mass of villagers below.

What now? thought Roran as he heard an argument break out on the beach. Pushing his way to the source of the disturbance, he saw Calitha kneeling beside her stepfather, Wayland, trying to calm the old man.

"No! I won't go on that *beast*! You can't make me," cried Wayland. He thrashed his withered arms and beat his heels in an attempt to free

himself from Calitha's embrace. Spittle flew from his lips. "Let me *go*, I say. Let me go!"

Wincing from his blows, Calitha said, "He's been unreasonable ever since we made camp last night."

It would have been better for all concerned if he had died in the Spine, what with the trouble he's caused, thought Roran. He joined Calitha, and together they managed to soothe Wayland so that he no longer screamed and hit. As a reward for his good behavior, Calitha gave him a piece of jerky, which occupied his entire attention. While Wayland concentrated on gumming the meat, she and Roran were able to guide him onto the *Edeline* and get him settled in a deserted corner where he would not be a nuisance.

"Move your backsides, you lubbers," shouted Clovis. "The tide's about to turn. Hop to, hop to."

After a final flurry of activity, the gangplanks were withdrawn, leaving a cluster of twenty men standing on the beach before each barge. The three groups gathered around the prows and prepared to push them back into the water.

Roran led the effort on the *Red Boar*. Chanting in unison, he and his men strained against the weight of the huge barge, the gray sand giving beneath their feet, the timbers and cables creaking, and the smell of sweat in the air. For a moment, their efforts seemed to be in vain, then the *Red Boar* lurched and slid back a foot.

"Again!" shouted Roran. Foot by foot, they advanced into the sea, until the frigid water surged about their waists. A breaker crashed over Roran, filling his mouth with seawater, which he spat out vigorously, disgusted by the taste of salt; it was far more intense than he expected.

When the barge lifted free of the seabed, Roran swam alongside the *Red Boar* and pulled himself up with one of the ropes draped over the gunwale. Meanwhile, the sailors deployed long poles that they used to propel the *Red Boar* into ever deeper water, as did the crews of the *Merrybell* and *Edeline*.

The instant they were a reasonable distance from shore, Clovis ordered the poles stowed away and oars broken out, with which the sailors aimed the *Red Boar*'s prow toward the cove's entrance. They hoisted the sail, aligned it to catch the light wind, and, at the vanguard of the trio of barges, set forth for Teirm upon the uncertain expanse of the bounding main.

✦ ✦ ✦

The Beginning of Wisdom

The days Eragon spent in Ellesméra blended together without distinction; time seemed to have no hold in the pinewood city. The season aged not, even as the afternoons and evenings lengthened, barring the forest with rich shadows. Flowers of all months bloomed at the urging of the elves' magic, nourished by the enchantments spun through the air.

Eragon came to love Ellesméra with its beauty and its quiet, the graceful buildings that flowed out of the trees, the haunting songs that echoed at twilight, the works of art hidden within the mysterious dwellings, and the introspection of the elves themselves, which they mixed with outbursts of merriment.

The wild animals of Du Weldenvarden had no fear of hunters. Often Eragon would look from his eyrie to see an elf petting a stag or a gray fox or murmuring to a shy bear that trundled along the edge of a clearing, reluctant to expose himself. Some animals had no recognizable form. They appeared at night, moving and grunting in the bushes and fleeing if Eragon dared approach. Once he glimpsed a creature like a furred snake and once a white-robed woman whose body wavered and disappeared to reveal a grinning she-wolf in her place.

Eragon and Saphira continued to explore Ellesméra when they had the chance. They went alone or with Orik, for Arya no longer accompanied them, nor had Eragon spoken to her since she broke his fairth. He saw her now and then, flitting between the trees, but whenever he approached—intending to apologize—she withdrew, leaving him alone among the ancient pines. At last Eragon realized that he had to take the initiative if he were to ever have a chance of mending his relationship with her. So one evening, he picked a bouquet from the flowers along the path by his tree and hobbled to Tialdarí Hall, where he asked directions to Arya's quarters from an elf in the common room.

The screen door was open when he reached her chambers. No one answered when he knocked. He stepped inside, listening for approaching footsteps as he glanced around the spacious vine-covered living room, which opened to a small bedroom on one side and a study on the other. Two fairths decorated the walls: a portrait of a stern, proud elf with silver hair, who Eragon guessed was King

Evandar, and that of a younger male elf whom he did not recognize.

Eragon wandered through the apartment, looking but not touching, savoring his glimpse into Arya's life, gleaning what he could about her interests and hobbies. By her bed, he saw a glass sphere with a preserved blossom of the black morning glory embedded within it; on her desk, neat rows of scrolls with titles like *Osilon: Harvest Report* and *Activity Noted by Gil'ead Watchtower;* on the sill of an open bay window, three miniature trees grown in the shape of glyphs from the ancient language, the glyphs for *peace, strength*, and *wisdom;* and by the trees, a scrap of paper with an unfinished poem, covered with crossed-out words and scribbled marks. It read:

Under the moon, the bright white moon,
Lies a pool, a flat silver pool,
Among the brakes and brambles,
And black-heart pines.

Falls a stone, a living stone,
Cracks the moon, the bright white moon,
Among the brakes and brambles,
And black-heart pines.

Shards of light, swords of light,
Ripple 'cross the pool,
The quiet mere, the still tarn,
The lonely lake there.

In the night, the dark and heavy night,
Flutter shadows, confused shadows,
Where once …

Going to the small table by the entrance, Eragon laid his bouquet upon it and turned to leave. He froze as he saw Arya standing in the doorway. She looked startled by his presence, then concealed her emotions behind an impassive expression.

They stared at each other in silence.

He lifted the bouquet, half offering it to her. "I don't know how to make a blossom for you, like Fäolin did, but these are honest flowers and the best I could find."

"I cannot accept them, Eragon."

"They're not … they're not that sort of gift." He paused. "It's no

excuse, but I didn't realize beforehand that my fairth would put you in such a difficult situation. For that, I'm sorry, and I cry your pardon.… I was just trying to make a fairth, not cause trouble. I understand the importance of my studies, Arya, and you needn't fear I will neglect them in order to moon after you." He swayed and leaned against the wall, too dizzy to remain on his feet without support. "That's all."

She regarded him for a long moment, then slowly reached out and took the bouquet, which she held beneath her nose. Her eyes never left his. "They are honest flowers," she conceded. Her gaze flickered down to his feet and back up again. "Have you been ill?"

"No. My back."

"I had heard, but I did not think …"

He pushed himself away from the wall. "I should go."

"Wait." Arya hesitated, then guided him to the bay window, where he sat on the padded bench that curved from the wall. Removing two goblets from a cupboard, Arya crumbled dried nettle leaves into them, then filled the goblets with water and—saying "Boil"—heated the water for tea.

She gave a goblet to Eragon, who held it with both hands so the warmth seeped into him. He glanced out the window to the ground twenty feet below, where elves walked among the royal gardens, talking and singing, and fireflies floated through the dusky air.

"I wish …," said Eragon, "I wish it could always be like this. It's so perfect and quiet."

Arya stirred her tea. "How fares Saphira?"

"The same. And you?"

"I have been preparing to return to the Varden."

Alarm shot through him. "When?"

"After the Blood-oath Celebration. I have tarried here far too long as it is, but I have been loath to leave and Islanzadí wished me to stay. Also … I have never attended a Blood-oath Celebration and it is the most important of our observances." She considered him over the rim of her goblet. "Is there nothing Oromis can do for you?"

Eragon forced a weary shrug. "He tried everything he knows."

They sipped their tea and watched the groups and couples meander along the garden paths. "Your studies go well, though?" she asked.

"They do." In the lull that followed, Eragon picked up the scrap of paper from between the trees and examined her stanzas, as if reading them for the first time. "Do you often write poetry?"

Arya extended her hand for the paper and, when he gave it to her, rolled it into a tube so that the words were no longer visible. "It is custom that everyone who attends the Blood-oath Celebration should bring a poem, a song, or some other piece of art that they have made and share it with those assembled. I have but begun to work on mine."

"I think it's quite good."

"If you had read much poetry—"

"I have."

Arya paused, then dipped her head and said, "Forgive me. You are not the person I first met in Gil'ead."

"No. I …" He stopped and twisted the goblet between his hands while he searched for the right words. "Arya … you'll be leaving soon enough. I would count it a shame if this is the last I see of you between now and then. Could we not meet occasionally, as we did before, and you could show Saphira and me more of Ellesméra?"

"It would not be wise," she said in a gentle but firm voice.

He looked up at her. "Must the price of my indiscretion be our friendship? I cannot help how I feel toward you, but I would rather suffer another wound from Durza than allow my foolishness to destroy the companionship that existed between us. I value it too highly."

Lifting her goblet, Arya finished the last of her tea before responding. "Our friendship shall endure, Eragon. As for us spending time together …" Her lips curved with a hint of a smile. "Perhaps. However, we shall have to wait and see what the future brings, for I am busy and can promise nothing."

He knew her words were the closest thing to a conciliation he was likely to receive, and he was grateful for them. "Of course, Arya Svit-kona," he said, and bowed his head.

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, but it was clear that Arya had gone as far as she was willing to go that day, so Eragon returned to Saphira, his hope restored by what he had accomplished. *Now it's up to fate to decide the outcome*, he thought as he settled before Oromis's latest scroll.

Reaching into the pouch at his belt, Eragon withdrew a soapstone container of nalgask—beeswax melted with hazelnut oil—and smeared it over his lips to protect them against the cold wind that scoured his face. He closed the pouch, then wrapped his arms around Saphira's neck and buried his face in the crook of his elbow to reduce the glare from the wimpled clouds beneath them. The tireless beat of Saphira's wings dominated his hearing, higher and faster than that of Glaedr's, whom she followed.

They flew southwest from dawn until early afternoon, often pausing for enthusiastic sparring bouts between Saphira and Glaedr, during which Eragon had to strap his arms onto the saddle to prevent himself from being thrown off by the stomach-turning acrobatics. He then would free himself by pulling on slipknots with his teeth.

The trip ended at a cluster of four mountains that towered over the forest, the first mountains Eragon had seen in Du Weldenvarden.

White-capped and windswept, they pierced the veil of clouds and bared their crevassed brows to the beating sun, which was heatless at such altitude.

They look so small compared to the Beors, said Saphira.

As had become his habit during weeks of meditation, Eragon extended his mind in every direction, touching upon the consciousnesses around him in search of any who might mean him harm. He felt a marmot warm in her burrow, ravens, nuthatches, and hawks, numerous squirrels running among the trees, and, farther down the mountain, rock snakes undulating through the brush in search of the mice that were their prey, as well as the hordes of ubiquitous insects.

When Glaedr descended to a bare ridge on the first mountain, Saphira had to wait until he folded his massive wings before there was enough room for her to land. The field of boulder-strewn talus they alighted upon was brilliant yellow from a coating of hard, crenulated lichen. Above them loomed a sheer black cliff. It acted as buttress and dam for a cornice of blue ice that groaned and split under the wind, loosing jagged slabs that shattered on the granite below.

This peak is known as Fionula, said Glaedr. *And her brothers are Ethrundr, Merogoven, and Griminsmal. Each has its own tale, which I shall recount on the flight back. But for now, I shall address the purpose of this trip, namely the nature of the bond forged between dragons and elves and, later, humans. You both know something of it—and I have hinted at its full implications to Saphira—but the time has come to learn the solemn and profound meaning of your partnership so that you may uphold it when Oromis and I are no more*.

"Master?" asked Eragon, wrapping his cloak around himself to stay warm.

Yes, Eragon.

"Why is Oromis not here with us?"

Because, rumbled Glaedr, *it is my duty—as was always the duty of an elder dragon in centuries past—to ensure that the newest generation of Riders understands the true importance of the station they have assumed. And because Oromis is not as well as he appears*.

The rocks cracked with muffled reports as Glaedr coiled up, nestling himself among the scree and placing his majestic head upon the ground lengthwise to Eragon and Saphira. He examined them with one gold eye as large as a polished roundshield and twice as brilliant. A gray smudge of smoke drifted from his nostrils and was blown to tatters by the wind. *Parts of what I am about to reveal were common knowledge among the elves, Riders, and learned humans, but much of it was known only to the leader of the Riders, a mere handful of elves, the humans' current potentate, and, of course, the dragons*.

Listen now, my hatchlings. When peace was made between dragons and elves at the end of our war, the Riders were created to ensure that such conflict would never again arise between our two races. Queen Tarmunora of the elves and the dragon who had been selected to represent us, whose name—he paused and conveyed a series of impressions to Eragon: long tooth, white tooth, chipped tooth; fights won, fights lost; countless eaten Shrrg and Nagra; seven-and-twenty eggs sired and nineteen offspring grown to maturity—*cannot be expressed in any language, decided that a common treaty would not suffice. Signed paper means nothing to a dragon. Our blood runs hot and thick and, given enough time, it was inevitable that we would clash with the elves again, as we had with the dwarves over the millennia. But unlike with the dwarves, neither we nor the elves could afford another war. We were both too powerful, and we would have destroyed each other. The one way to prevent that and to forge a meaningful accord was to link our two races with magic*.

Eragon shivered, and with a touch of amusement, Glaedr said, *Saphira, if you are wise, you will heat one of these rocks with the fire from your belly so that your Rider does not freeze*.

Thereupon Saphira arched her neck, and a jet of blue flame emanated from between her serrated fangs and splashed against the scree, blackening the lichen, which released a bitter smell as it burned. The air grew so hot that Eragon was forced to turn away. He felt the insects underneath the rocks being crisped in the inferno. After a minute, Saphira clapped shut her jaws, leaving a circle of stones five feet across glowing cherry red.

Thank you, Eragon said to her. He hunched by the edge of the scorched rocks and warmed his hands over them.

Remember, Saphira, to use your tongue to direct the stream, admonished Glaedr. *Now … it took nine years for the elves' wisest magicians to devise the needed spell. When they had, they and the dragons gathered together at Ilirea. The elves provided the structure of the enchantment, the dragons provided the strength, and together they melded the souls of elves and dragons*.

The joining changed us. We dragons gained the use of language and other trappings of civilization, while the elves shared in our longevity, since before that moment, their lives were as short as humans'. In the end, the elves were the most affected. Our magic, dragons' magic—which permeates every fiber of our being—was transmitted to the elves and, in time, gave them their much-vaunted strength and grace. Humans have never been influenced as strongly, since you were added to the spell after its completion and it has not had as much time to work upon you as with the elves. Still—and here Glaedr's eye gleamed—*it has already gentled your race from the rough barbarians who first landed in Alagaësia, though you have begun to regress since the Fall*.

"Were dwarves ever part of this spell?" asked Eragon.

No, and that is why there has never been a dwarf Rider. They do not care for dragons, nor we for them, and they found the idea of being joined with us repellent. Perhaps it is fortunate that they did not enter into our pact, for they have escaped the decline of humans and elves.

Decline, Master? queried Saphira in what Eragon would have sworn was a teasing tone of voice.

Aye, decline. If one or another of our three races suffer, so do they all. By killing dragons, Galbatorix harmed his own race as well as the elves. The two of you have not seen this, for you are new to Ellesméra, but the elves are on the wane; their power is not what it once was. And humans have lost much of their culture and been consumed by chaos and corruption. Only by righting the imbalance between our three races shall order return to the world.

The old dragon kneaded the scree with his talons, crumbling it into gravel so that he was more comfortable. *Layered within the enchantment Queen Tarmunora oversaw was the mechanism that allows a hatchling to be linked with his or her Rider. When a dragon decides to give an egg to the Riders, certain words are said over the egg—which I shall teach you later—that prevent the dragon inside from hatching until it is brought into contact with the person with whom it decides to bond. As dragons can remain in their eggs indefinitely, time is of no concern, nor is the infant harmed. You yourself are an example of this, Saphira.*

The bond that forms between a Rider and dragon is but an enhanced version of the bond that already exists between our races. The human or elf becomes stronger and fairer, while some of the dragon's fiercer traits are tempered by a more reasoned outlook.… I see a thought biting at your tongue, Eragon. What is it?

"It's just …" He hesitated. "I have a hard time imagining you or Saphira being any fiercer. Not," he added anxiously, "that that's a bad thing."

The ground shook as if with an avalanche as Glaedr chuckled, rolling his great big staring eye behind its horny lid and back again. *If ever you met an unbonded dragon, you would not say so. A dragon alone answers to no one and no thing, takes whatever pleases it, and bears no thought of kindness for aught but its kith and kin. Fierce and proud were the wild dragons, even arrogant.… The females were so formidable, it was accounted a great accomplishment among the Riders' dragons to mate with one.*

The lack of this bond is why Galbatorix's partnership with Shruikan, his second dragon, is such a perverted union. Shruikan did not choose Galbatorix as his partner; he was twisted by certain black magics into serving Galbatorix's madness. Galbatorix has constructed a depraved imitation of the relationship that you, Eragon, and you, Saphira, possess

and that he lost when the Urgals murdered his original dragon.

Glaedr paused and looked between the two of them. His eye was all that moved. *That which links you exceeds any simple connection between minds. Your very souls, your identities—call it what you will—have been welded on a primal level*. His eye flicked to Eragon. *Do you believe that a person's soul is separate from his body?*

"I don't know," said Eragon. "Saphira once took me out of my body and let me see the world through her eyes.… It *seemed* like I was no longer connected to my body. And if the wraiths that a sorcerer calls upon can exist, then maybe our consciousness is independent of flesh as well."

Extending the needle-sharp tip of his foreclaw, Glaedr flipped over a rock to expose a woodrat cowering in its nest. He snapped up the rat with a flash of his red tongue; Eragon winced as he felt the animal's life extinguished.

When the flesh is destroyed, so is the soul, said Glaedr.

"But an animal isn't a person," protested Eragon.

After your meditations, do you truly believe that any of us are so different from a woodrat? That we are gifted with a miraculous quality that other creatures do not enjoy and that somehow preserves our beings after death?

"No," muttered Eragon.

I thought not. Because we are so closely joined, when a dragon or Rider is injured, they must harden their hearts and sever the connection between them in order to protect each other from unnecessary suffering, even insanity. And since the soul cannot be torn from the flesh, you must resist the temptation to try to take your partner's soul into your own body and shelter it there, as that will result in both your deaths. Even if it were possible, it would be an abomination to have multiple consciousnesses in one body.

"How terrible," said Eragon, "to die alone, separate even from the one who is closest to you."

Everyone dies alone, Eragon. Whether you are a king on a battlefield or a lowly peasant lying in bed among your family, no one can accompany you into the void.… Now I will have you practice separating your consciousnesses. Start by …

Eragon stared at the tray of dinner left in the anteroom of the tree house. He cataloged the contents: bread with hazelnut butter, berries, beans, a bowl of leafy greens, two hard-boiled eggs—which, in accordance with the elves' beliefs, were unfertilized—and a stoppered jug of fresh spring water. He knew that each dish was prepared with the utmost care, that the elves lavished all of their culinary skill upon his meals, and that not even Islanzadí ate better than him.

He could not bear the sight of the tray.

I want meat, he growled, stomping back into the bedroom. Saphira looked up at him from her dais. *I'd even settle for fish or fowl, anything besides this never-ending stream of vegetables. They don't fill up my stomach. I'm not a horse; why should I be fed like one?*

Saphira unfolded her legs, walked to the edge of the teardrop gap overlooking Ellesméra, and said, *I have needed to eat these past few days. Would you like to join me? You can cook as much meat as you like and the elves will never know*.

That I would, he said, brightening. *Should I get the saddle?*

We won't go that far.

Eragon fetched his supply of salt, herbs, and other seasonings from his bags and then, careful not to overexert himself, climbed into the gap between the spikes along Saphira's spine.

Launching herself off the ground, Saphira let an updraft waft her high above the city, whereupon she glided off the column of warm air, slipping down and sideways as she followed a braided stream through Du Weldenvarden to a pond some miles thence. She landed and hunched low to the ground, making it easier for Eragon to dismount.

She said, *There are rabbits in the grass by the edge of the water. See if you can catch them. In the meantime, I go to hunt deer*.

What, you don't want to share your own prey?

No, I don't, she replied grumpily. *Though I will if those oversized mice elude you.*

He grinned as she took off, then faced the tangled clumps of grass and cow parsnip that surrounded the pond and set about procuring his dinner.

Less than a minute later, Eragon collected a brace of dead rabbits from their nest. It had taken him but an instant to locate the rabbits with his mind and then kill them with one of the twelve death words. What he had learned from Oromis had drained the challenge and excitement from the chase. *I didn't even have to stalk them*, he thought, remembering the years he had spent honing his tracking abilities. He grimaced with sour amusement. *I can finally bag any game I want and it seems meaningless to me. At least when I hunted with a pebble with Brom, it was still a challenge, but this … this is slaughter*.

The warning of the sword-shaper Rhunön returned to him then: "When you can have anything you want by uttering a few words, the goal matters not, only the journey to it."

I should have paid more attention to her, realized Eragon.

With practiced movements, he drew his old hunting knife, skinned and gutted the rabbits, and then—putting aside the hearts, lungs, kidneys, and livers—buried the viscera so that the scent would not attract scavengers. Next he dug a pit, filled it with wood, and lit a

small blaze with magic, since he had not thought to bring his flint and steel. He tended the fire until he had a bed of coals. Cutting a wand of dogwood, he stripped the bark and seared the wood over the coals to burn off the bitter sap, then spitted the carcasses on the wand and suspended them between two forked branches pounded into the ground. For the organs, he placed a flat stone upon a section of the coals and greased it with fat for a makeshift frying pan.

Saphira found him crouched by the fire, slowly turning the wand to cook the meat evenly. She landed with a limp deer hanging from her jaws and the remains of a second deer clutched in her talons. Measuring her length out in the fragrant grass, she proceeded to gorge upon her prey, eating the entire deer, including the hide. Bones cracked between her razor teeth, like branches snapping in a gale.

When the rabbits were ready, Eragon waved them in the air to cool them, then stared at the glistening, golden meat, the smell of which he found almost unbearably enticing.

As he opened his mouth to take the first bite, his thoughts turned unbidden to his meditations. He remembered his excursions into the minds of birds and squirrels and mice, how full of energy they felt and how vigorously they fought for the right to exist in the face of danger. *And if this life is all they have …*

Gripped by revulsion, Eragon thrust the meat away, as appalled by the fact that he had killed the rabbits as if he had murdered two people. His stomach churned and threatened to make him purge himself.

Saphira paused in her feast to eye him with concern.

Taking a long breath, Eragon pressed his fists against his knees in an attempt to master himself and understand why he was so strongly affected. His entire life he had eaten meat, fish, and fowl. He *enjoyed* it. And yet it now made him physically ill to consider dining upon the rabbits. He looked at Saphira. *I can't do it*, he said.

It is the way of the world that everything eats everything else. Why do you resist the order of things?

He pondered her question. He did not condemn those who did partake of flesh—he knew that it was the only means of survival for many a poor farmer. But he could no longer do so himself unless faced with starvation. Having been inside of a rabbit and having felt what a rabbit feels … eating one would be akin to eating himself. *Because we can better ourselves*, he answered Saphira. *Should we give in to our impulses to hurt or kill any who anger us, to take whatever we want from those who are weaker, and, in general, to disregard the feelings of others? We are made imperfect and must guard against our flaws lest they destroy us*. He gestured at the rabbits. *As Oromis said, why should we cause unnecessary suffering?*

Would you deny all of your desires, then?

I would deny those that are destructive.

You are adamant on this?

Aye.

In that case, said Saphira, advancing upon him, *these will make a fine dessert*. In a blink, she gulped down the rabbits and then licked clean the stone with the organs, abrading the slate with the barbs on her tongue. *I, at least, cannot live on plants alone—that is food for prey, not a dragon. I refuse to be ashamed about how I must sustain myself. Everything has its place in the world. Even a rabbit knows that*.

I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, he said, patting her on the leg. *This is a personal decision. I won't force my choice upon anyone*.

Very wise, she said with a touch of sarcasm.

Broken Egg and Scattered Nest

"Concentrate, Eragon," said Oromis, though not unkindly.

Eragon blinked and rubbed his eyes in an attempt to focus on the glyphs that decorated the curling parchment paper before him. "Sorry, Master." Weariness dragged upon him like lead weights tied to his limbs. He squinted at the curved and spiked glyphs, raised his goose-feather quill, and began to copy them again.

Through the window behind Oromis, the green shelf on top of the Crags of Tel'naeír was streaked with shadows from the descending sun. Beyond, feathery clouds banded the sky.

Eragon's hand jerked as a line of pain shot up his leg, and he broke the nib of the quill and sprayed ink across the paper, ruining it. Across from him, Oromis also started, clutching his right arm.

Saphira! cried Eragon. He reached for her with his mind and, to his bewilderment, was deflected by impenetrable barriers that she had erected around herself. He could barely feel her. It was as if he were trying to grasp an orb of polished granite coated with oil. She kept slipping away from him.

He looked at Oromis. "Something's happened to them, hasn't it?"

"I know not. Glaedr returns, but he refuses to talk to me." Taking his blade, Naegling, from the wall, Oromis strode outside and stood upon the edge of the crags, head uplifted as he waited for the gold dragon to appear.

Eragon joined him, thinking of everything—probable and improbable—that might have befallen Saphira. The two dragons had left at noon, flying north to a place called the Stone of Broken Eggs, where the wild dragons had nested in ages past. It was an easy trip. *It couldn't be Urgals; the elves don't allow them into Du Weldenvarden*, he told himself.

At last Glaedr came into view high above as a winking speck among the darkening clouds. As he descended to land, Eragon saw a wound on the back of the dragon's right foreleg, a tear in his lapped scales as wide as Eragon's hand. Scarlet blood laced the grooves between the surrounding scales.

The moment Glaedr touched the ground, Oromis rushed toward him, only to stop when the dragon growled at him. Hopping on his injured leg, Glaedr crawled to the edge of the forest, where he curled up beneath the outstretched boughs, his back to Eragon, and set about

licking clean his wound.

Oromis went and knelt in the clover by Glaedr, keeping his distance with calm patience. It was obvious that he would wait as long as need be. Eragon fidgeted as the minutes elapsed. Finally, by some unspoken signal, Glaedr allowed Oromis to draw near and inspect his leg. Magic glowed from Oromis's gedwëy ignasia as he placed his hand over the rent in Glaedr's scales.

"How is he?" asked Eragon when Oromis withdrew.

"It looks a fearsome wound, but it is no more than a scratch for one so large as Glaedr."

"What about Saphira, though? I still can't contact her."

"You must go to her," said Oromis. "She is hurt, in more ways than one. Glaedr said little of what transpired, but I have guessed much, and you would do well to hurry."

Eragon glanced about for any means of transportation and groaned with anguish when he confirmed that none existed. "How can I reach her? It's too far to run, there's no trail, and I can't—"

"Calm thyself, Eragon. What was the name of the steed who bore you hence from Sílthrim?"

It took Eragon a moment to recall. "Folkvír."

"Then summon him with your skill at gramarye. Name him and your need in this, the most powerful of languages, and he will come to your assistance."

Letting the magic suffuse his voice, Eragon cried out for Folkvír, sending his plea echoing over the forested hills toward Ellesméra with all the urgency he could muster.

Oromis nodded, satisfied. "Well done."

Twelve minutes later, Folkvír emerged like a silver ghost from the dark shadows among the trees, tossing his mane and snorting with excitement. The stallion's sides heaved from the speed of his journey.

Throwing a leg over the small elven horse, Eragon said, "I'll return as soon as I can."

"Do what you must," said Oromis.

Then Eragon touched his heels to Folkvír's ribs and shouted, "Run, Folkvír! Run!" The horse leaped forward and bounded into Du Weldenvarden, threading his way with incredible dexterity between the gnarled pines. Eragon guided him toward Saphira with images from his mind.

Lacking a trail through the underbrush, a horse like Snowfire would have taken three or four hours to reach the Stone of Broken Eggs. Folkvír managed the trip in a bit over an hour.

At the base of the basalt monolith—which ascended from the forest floor like a mottled green pillar and stood a good hundred feet higher than the trees—Eragon murmured, "Halt," then slid to the ground. He

looked at the distant top of the Stone of Broken Eggs. Saphira was up there.

He walked around the perimeter, searching for a means to achieve the pinnacle, but in vain, for the weathered formation was impregnable. It possessed no fissures, crevices, or other faults near enough to the ground that he could use to climb its sides.

This might hurt, he thought.

"Stay here," he told Folkvír. The horse looked at him with intelligent eyes. "Graze if you want, but *stay here*, okay?" Folkvír nickered and, with his velvet muzzle, nudged Eragon's arm. "Yes, good boy. You've done well."

Fixing his gaze on the crest of the monolith, Eragon gathered his strength, then said in the ancient language, "Up!"

He realized later that if he had not been accustomed to flying with Saphira, the experience might have proved unsettling enough to cause him to lose control of the spell and plunge to his death. The ground dropped away beneath his feet at a swift clip, while the tree trunks narrowed as he floated toward the underside of the canopy and the fading evening sky beyond. Branches clung like grasping fingers to his face and shoulders as he pushed through into the open. Unlike during one of Saphira's dives, he retained his sense of weight, as if he still stood upon the loam below.

Rising above the edge of the Stone of Broken Eggs, Eragon moved himself forward and released his grip on the magic, alighting upon a mossy patch. He sagged with exhaustion and waited to see if the exertion would pain his back, then sighed with relief when it did not.

The top of the monolith was composed of jagged towers divided by deep and wide gullies where naught but a few scattered wild-flowers grew. Black caves dotted the towers, some natural, others clawed out of the basalt by talons as thick as Eragon's leg. Their floors were blanketed with a deep layer of lichen-ridden bones, remnants of the dragons' ancient kills. Birds now nested where dragons once had—hawks and falcons and eagles, who watched him from their perches, ready to attack if he should threaten their eggs.

Eragon picked his way across the forbidding landscape, careful not to twist an ankle on the loose flakes of stone or to get too close to the occasional rifts that split the column. If he fell down one, it would send him tumbling out into empty space. Several times he had to climb over high ridges, and twice more he had to lift himself with magic.

Evidence of the dragons' habitation was visible everywhere, from deep scratches in the basalt to puddles of melted rock to a number of dull, colorless scales caught in nooks, along with other detritus. He even stepped upon a sharp object that, when he bent to examine it,

proved to be a fragment of a green dragon egg.

On the eastern face of the monolith stood the tallest tower, in the center of which, like a black pit turned on its side, was the largest cave. It was there that Eragon finally beheld Saphira, curled in a hollow against the far wall, her back to the opening. Tremors ran her length. The walls of the cave bore fresh scorch marks, and the piles of brittle bones were scattered about as if from a fight.

"Saphira," said Eragon, speaking out loud since her mind was closed to him.

Her head whipped up, and she stared at him as if he were a stranger, her pupils contracting to thin black slits as her eyes adjusted to the light from the setting sun behind him. She snarled once, like a feral dog, and then twisted away. As she did, she lifted her left wing and exposed a long, ragged gash along her upper thigh. His heart caught at the sight.

Eragon knew that she would not let him approach, so he did as Oromis had with Glaedr; he knelt among the crushed bones and waited. He waited without word or motion until his legs were numb and his hands were stiff with cold. Yet he did not resent the discomfort. He paid the price gladly if it meant he could help Saphira.

After a time, she said, *I have been a fool.*

We are all fools sometimes.

That makes it no easier when it is your turn to play dunce.

I suppose not.

I have always known what to do. When Garrow died, I knew it was the right thing to pursue the Ra'zac. When Brom died, I knew that we should go to Gil'ead and thence to the Varden. And when Ajihad died, I knew that you should pledge yourself to Nasuada. The path has always been clear to me. Except now. In this issue alone, I am lost.

What is it, Saphira?

Instead of answering, she turned the subject and said, *Do you know why this is called the Stone of Broken Eggs?*

No.

Because during the war between dragons and elves, the elves tracked us to this location and killed us while we slept. They tore apart our nests, then shattered our eggs with their magic. That day, it rained blood in the forest below. No dragon has lived here since.

Eragon remained silent. That was not why he was here. He would wait until she could bring herself to address the situation at hand.

Say something! demanded Saphira.

Will you let me heal your leg?

Leave well enough alone.

Then I shall remain as mute as a statue and sit here until I turn to dust, for I have the patience of a dragon from you.

When they came, her words were halting, bitter, and self-mocking: *It shames me to admit it. When we first came here and I saw Glaedr, I felt such joy that another member of my race survived besides Shruikan. I had never even seen another dragon before, except in Brom's memories. And I thought … I thought that Glaedr would be as pleased by my existence as I was by his.*

But he was.

You don't understand. I thought that he would be the mate I never expected to have and that together we could rebuild our race. She snorted, and a burst of flame escaped her nostrils. *I was mistaken. He does not want me.*

Eragon chose his response with care to avoid offending her and to provide a modicum of comfort. *That's because he knows you are destined for someone else: one of the two remaining eggs. Nor would it be proper for him to mate with you when he is your mentor.*

Or perhaps he does not find me comely enough.

Saphira, no dragon is ugly, and you are the fairest of dragons.

I am a fool, she said. But she raised her left wing and kept it in the air as permission for him to tend to her injury.

Eragon limped to Saphira's side, where he examined the crimson wound, glad that Oromis had given him so many scrolls on anatomy to read. The blow—by claw or tooth, he was not sure—had torn the quadriceps muscle beneath Saphira's hide, but not so much as to bare the bone. Merely closing the surface of the wound, as Eragon had done so many times, would not be enough. The muscle had to be knitted back together.

The spell Eragon used was long and complex, and even he did not understand all its parts, for he had memorized it from an ancient text that offered little explanation beyond the statement that, given no bones were broken and the internal organs were whole, "this charm will heal any ailment of violent origins, excepting that of grim death." Once he uttered it, Eragon watched with fascination as Saphira's muscle writhed beneath his hand—veins, nerves, and fibers weaving together—and became whole once more. The wound was big enough that, in his weakened state, he dared not heal it with just the energy from his body, so he drew upon Saphira's strength as well.

It itches, said Saphira when he finished.

Eragon sighed and leaned his back against the rough basalt, looking at the sunset through his eyelashes. *I fear that you will have to carry me off this rock. I'm too tired to move.*

With a dry rustle, she twisted in place and laid her head on the bones beside him. *I have treated you poorly ever since we came to Ellesméra. I ignored your advice when I should have listened. You warned me about Glaedr, but I was too proud to see the truth in your words.… I*

have failed to be a good companion for you, betrayed what it means to be a dragon, and tarnished the honor of the Riders.

No, never that, he said vehemently. *Saphira, you haven't failed your duty. You may have made a mistake, but it was an honest one, and one that anyone might have committed in your position*.

That does not excuse my behavior toward you.

He tried to meet her eye, but she avoided his gaze until he touched her upon the neck and said, *Saphira, family members forgive one another, even if they don't always understand why someone acts in a certain way.… You are as much my family as Roran—more. Nothing you can do will ever change that. Nothing*. When she did not respond, he reached behind her jaw and tickled the patch of leathery skin below one of her ears. *Do you hear me, eh? Nothing!*

She coughed low in her throat with reluctant amusement, then arched her neck and lifted her head to escape his dancing fingers. *How can I face Glaedr again? He was in a terrible rage.… The entire stone shook with the force of his anger*.

At least you held your own when he attacked you.

It was the other way around.

Caught by surprise, Eragon raised his eyebrows. *Well, in any case, the only thing to do is to apologize*.

Apologize!

Aye. Go tell him that you are sorry, that this won't happen again, and that you want to continue your training with him. I'm sure he will be sympathetic if you give him the chance.

Very well, she said in a low voice.

You'll feel better once you do. He grinned. *I know from experience*.

She grunted and padded to the edge of the cave, where she crouched and surveyed the rolling forest. *We should go. Soon it will be dark*. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself upright—every movement costing him effort—and climbed onto her back, taking twice the time he usually did. *Eragon? … Thank you for coming. I know what you risked with your back*.

He patted her on the shoulder. *Are we one again?*

We are one.

The Gift of Dragons

The days leading up to the Agaetí Blödhren were the best and worst of times for Eragon. His back troubled him more than ever, battering down his health and endurance and destroying his calm of mind; he lived in constant fear of triggering an episode. Yet, in contrast, he and Saphira had never been so close. They lived as much in each other's minds as in their own. And every now and then Arya would visit the tree house and walk through Ellesméra with Eragon and Saphira. She never came alone, though, always bringing either Orik or Maud the werecat.

Over the course of their wanderings, Arya introduced Eragon and Saphira to elves of distinction: great warriors, poets, and artists. She took them to concerts held under the thatched pines. And she showed them many hidden wonders of Ellesméra.

Eragon seized every opportunity to talk with her. He told her about his upbringing in Palancar Valley, about Roran, Garrow, and his aunt Marian, stories of Sloan, Ethlbert, and the other villagers, and his love of the mountains surrounding Carvahall and the flaming sheets of light that adorned the winter sky at night. He told her about the time a vixen fell into Gedric's tanning vats and had to be fished out with a net. He told her about the joy he found in planting a crop, weeding and nurturing it, and watching the tender green shoots grow under his care—a joy that he knew she, of all people, could appreciate.

In turn, Eragon gleaned occasional insights into her own life. He heard mentions of her childhood, her friends and family, and her experiences among the Varden, which she spoke about most freely, describing raids and battles she participated in, treaties she helped to negotiate, her disputes with the dwarves, and the momentous events she witnessed during her tenure as ambassador.

Between her and Saphira, a measure of peace entered Eragon's heart, but it was a precarious balance that the slightest influence might disrupt. Time itself was an enemy, for Arya was destined to leave Du Weldenvarden after the Agaetí Blödhren. Thus, Eragon treasured his moments with her and dreaded the arrival of the forthcoming celebration.

The entire city bustled with activity as the elves prepared for the Agaetí Blödhren. Eragon had never seen them so excited before. They decorated the forest with colored bunting and lanterns, especially

around the Menoa tree, while the tree itself was adorned with a lantern upon the tip of each branch, where they hung like glowing teardrops. Even the plants, Eragon noticed, took on a festive appearance with a collection of bright new flowers. He often heard the elves singing to them late at night.

Each day hundreds of elves arrived in Ellesméra from their cities scattered throughout the woods, for no elf would willingly miss the centennial observance of their treaty with the dragons. Eragon guessed that many of them also came to meet Saphira. *It seems as if I do nothing but repeat their greeting*, he thought. The elves who were absent because of their responsibilities would hold their own festivities simultaneously and would participate in the ceremonies at Ellesméra by scrying through enchanted mirrors that displayed the likeness of those watching, so that no one felt as if they were being spied upon.

A week before the Agaetí Blödhren, when Eragon and Saphira were about to return to their quarters from the Crags of Tel'naeír, Oromis said, "You should both think about what you can bring to the Blood-oath Celebration. Unless your creations require magic to make or to function, I suggest that you avoid using gramarye. No one will respect your work if it's the product of a spell and not of your own hands. I also suggest you each make a separate piece. That too is custom."

In the air, Eragon asked Saphira, *Do you have any ideas?*

I might have one. But if you don't mind, I'd like to see if it works before I tell you. He caught part of an image from her of a bare knuckle of stone protruding from the forest floor before she concealed it from him.

He grinned. *Won't you give me a hint?*

Fire. Lots of fire.

Back in their tree house, Eragon cataloged his skills and thought, *I know more about farming than anything else, but I don't see how I can turn that to my advantage. Nor can I hope to compete with the elves with magic or match their accomplishments with the crafts I am familiar with. Their talent exceeds that of the finest artisans in the Empire*.

But you possess one quality that no one else does, said Saphira.

Oh?

Your identity. Your history, deeds, and situation. Use those to shape your creation and you will produce something unique. Whatever you make, base it upon that which is most important to you. Only then will it have depth and meaning, and only then will it resonate with others.

He looked at her with surprise. *I never realized that you knew so much about art.*

I don't, she said. *You forget I spent an afternoon watching Oromis paint his scrolls while you flew with Glaedr. Oromis discussed the topic quite a*

bit.

Ah, yes. I had forgotten.

After Saphira left to pursue her project, Eragon paced along the edge of the open portal in the bedroom, pondering what she had said. *What's important to me?* he asked himself. *Saphira and Arya, of course, and being a good Rider, but what can I say about those subjects that isn't blindingly obvious? I appreciate beauty in nature, but, again, the elves have already expressed everything possible on that topic. Ellesméra itself is a monument to their devotion.* He turned his gaze inward and scrutinized himself to determine what struck the deepest, darkest chords within him. What stirred him with enough passion—of either love or hate—that he burned to share it with others?

Three things presented themselves to him: his injury at the hands of Durza, his fear of one day fighting Galbatorix, and the elves' epics that so engrossed him.

A rush of excitement flared within Eragon as a story combining those elements took form in his mind. Light on his feet, he ran up the twisting stairs—two at a time—to the study, where he sat before the writing desk, dipped quill in ink, and held it trembling over a pale sheet of paper.

The nib rasped as he made the first stroke:

In the kingdom by the sea,
In the mountains mantled blue …

The words flowed from his pen seemingly of their own accord. He felt as if he were not inventing his tale, but merely acting as a conduit to transport it fully formed into the world. Having never composed a work of his own before, Eragon was gripped by the thrill of discovery that accompanies new ventures—especially since, previously, he had not suspected that he might enjoy being a bard.

He labored in a frenzy, not stopping for bread or drink, his tunic sleeves rolled past his elbows to protect them from the ink flicked from his quill by the wild force of his writing. So intense was his concentration, he heard nothing but the beat of his poem, saw nothing but the empty paper, and thought of nothing but the phrases etched in lines of fire behind his eyes.

An hour and a half later, he dropped the quill from his cramped hand, pushed his chair away from the desk, and stood. Fourteen pages lay before him. It was the most he had ever written at one time. Eragon knew that his poem could not match those of the elves' and dwarves' great authors, but he hoped it was honest enough that the elves would not laugh at his effort.

He recited the poem to Saphira when she returned. Afterward, she said, *Ah, Eragon, you have changed much since we left Palancar Valley. You would not recognize the untested boy who first set out for vengeance, I think. That Eragon could not have written a lay after the style of the elves. I look forward to seeing who you become in the next fifty or a hundred years.*

He smiled. *If I live that long.*

"Rough but true," was what Oromis said when Eragon read him the poem.

"Then you like it?"

" 'Tis a good portrait of your mental state at the present and an engaging read, but no masterpiece. Did you expect it to be?"

"I suppose not."

"However, I am surprised that you can give voice to it in this tongue. No barrier exists to *writing* fiction in the ancient language. The difficulty arises when one attempts to speak it, for that would require you to tell untruths, which the magic will not allow."

"I can say it," replied Eragon, "because I believe it's true."

"And that gives your writing far more power.... I am impressed, Eragon-finiarel. Your poem will be a worthy addition to the Blood-oath Celebration." Raising a finger, Oromis reached within his robe and gave Eragon a scroll tied shut with ribbon. "Inscribed on that paper are nine wards I want you to place about yourself and the dwarf Orik. As you discovered at Sílthrim, our festivities are potent and not for those with constitutions weaker than ours. Unprotected, you risk losing yourself in the web of our magic. I have seen it happen. Even with these precautions, you must take care you are not swayed by fancies wafted on the breeze. Be on your guard, for during this time, we elves are apt to go mad—wonderfully, gloriously mad, but mad all the same."

✷ ✷ ✷

On the eve of the Agaetí Blödhren—which was to last three days—Eragon, Saphira, and Orik accompanied Arya to the Menoa tree, where a host of elves were assembled, their black and silver hair flickering in the lamplight. Islanzadí stood upon a raised root at the base of the trunk, as tall, pale, and fair as a birch tree. Blagden roosted on the queen's left shoulder, while Maud, the werecat, lurked behind her. Glaedr was there, as well as Oromis garbed in red and black, and other elves Eragon recognized, such as Lifaen and Narí and, to his distaste, Vanir. Overhead, the stars glittered in the velvet sky.

"Wait here," said Arya. She slipped through the crowd and returned

leading Rhunön. The smith blinked like an owl at her surroundings. Eragon greeted her, and she nodded to him and Saphira. “Well met, Brightscales and Shadeslayer.” Then she spied Orik and addressed him in Dwarvish, to which Orik replied with enthusiasm, obviously delighted to converse with someone in the rough speech of his native land.

“What did she say?” asked Eragon, bending down.

“She invited me to her home to view her work and discuss metal working.” Awe crossed Orik’s face. “Eragon, she first learned her craft from Fûthark himself, one of the legendary grimstborithn of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum! What I would give to have met him.”

Together they waited until the stroke of midnight, when Islanzadí raised her bare left arm so that it pointed toward the new moon like a marble spear. A soft white orb gathered itself above her palm from the light emitted by the lanterns that dotted the Menoa tree. Then Islanzadí walked along the root to the massive trunk and placed the orb in a hollow in the bark, where it remained, pulsing.

Eragon turned to Arya. “Is it begun?”

“It is begun!” She laughed. “And it will end when the werelight expends itself.”

The elves divided themselves into informal camps throughout the forest and clearing that encircled the Menoa tree. Seemingly out of nowhere, they produced tables laden high with fantastic dishes, which from their unearthly appearance were as much the result of the spellweavers’ handiwork as the cooks’.

Then the elves began to sing in their clear, flutelike voices. They sang many songs, yet each was but part of a larger melody that wove an enchantment over the dreamy night, heightening senses, removing inhibitions, and burnishing the revels with fey magic. Their verses concerned heroic deeds and quests by ship and horse to forgotten lands and the sorrow of lost beauty. The throbbing music enveloped Eragon, and he felt a wild abandon take hold of him, a desire to run free of his life and dance through elven glades forever more. Beside him, Saphira hummed along with the tune, her glazed eyes lidded halfway.

What transpired afterward, Eragon was never able to adequately recall. It was as if he had a fever and faded in and out of consciousness. He could remember certain incidents with vivid clarity —bright, pungent flashes filled with merriment—but it was beyond him to reconstruct the order in which they occurred. He lost track of whether it was day or night, for no matter the time, dusk seemed to pervade the forest. Nor could he ever say if he had slumbered, or needed sleep, during the celebration.…

He remembered spinning in circles while holding the hands of an elf-maid with cherry lips, the taste of honey on his tongue and the smell of juniper in the air.…

He remembered elves perched on the outstretched branches of the Menoa tree, like a flock of starlings. They strummed golden harps and called riddles to Glaedr below and, now and then, pointed a finger at the sky, whereupon a burst of colored embers would appear in various shapes before fading away.…

He remembered sitting in a dell, propped against Saphira, and watching the same elf-maid sway before a rapt audience while she sang:

Away, away, you shall fly away,
O'er the peaks and vales
To the lands beyond.
Away, away, you shall fly away,
And never return to me.

Gone! Gone you shall be from me,
And I will never see you again.
Gone! Gone you shall be from me,
Though I wait for you evermore.

He remembered endless poems, some mournful, others joyful—most both. He heard Arya's poem in full and thought it fine indeed, and Islanzadí's, which was longer but of equal merit. All the elves gathered to listen to those two works.…

He remembered the wonders the elves had made for the celebration, many of which he would have deemed impossible beforehand, even with the assistance of magic. Puzzles and toys, art and weapons, and items whose function escaped him. One elf had charmed a glass ball so that every few seconds a different flower bloomed within its heart. Another elf had spent decades traveling Du Weldenvarden and memorizing the sounds of the elements, the most beautiful of which he now played from the throats of a hundred white lilies.

Rhunön contributed a shield that would not break, a pair of gloves woven from steel thread that allowed the wearer to handle molten lead and other such items without harm, and a delicate sculpture of a wren in flight chiseled from a solid block of metal and painted with

such skill that the bird seemed alive.

A tiered wood pyramid eight inches high and constructed of fifty-eight interlocking pieces was Orik's offering, much to the elves' delight, who insisted upon disassembling and reassembling the pyramid as often as he would allow. "Master Longbeard," they called him, and said, "Clever fingers mean a clever mind." …

He remembered Oromis pulling him aside, away from the music, and asking the elf, "What's wrong?"

"You need to clear your mind." Oromis guided him to a fallen log and had him sit. "Stay here for a few minutes. You will feel better."

"I'm fine. I don't need to rest," protested Eragon.

"You are in no position to judge yourself right now. Stay here until you can list the spells of changing, great and minor, and then you may rejoin us. Promise me this." …

He remembered creatures dark and strange, drifting in from the depths of the forest. The majority were animals who had been altered by the accumulated spells in Du Weldenvarden and were now drawn to the Agaetí Blödhren as a starving man is drawn to food. They seemed to find nourishment in the presence of the elves' magic. Most dared reveal themselves only as pairs of glowing eyes on the outskirts of the lantern light. One animal that did expose itself was the she-wolf —in the form of a white-robed woman—that Eragon had encountered before. She lurked behind a dogwood bush, dagger teeth bared in an amused grin, her yellow eyes darting from point to point.

But not all the creatures were animals. Some few were elves who had altered their original forms for functionality or in pursuit of a different ideal of beauty. An elf covered in brindled fur leaped over Eragon and continued to gambol about, as often on all fours as on his feet. His head was narrow and elongated with ears like a cat, his arms hung to his knees, and his long-fingered hands had rough pads on the palm.

Later, two identical elf women presented themselves to Saphira. They moved with languid grace and, when they touched their hands to their lips in the traditional greeting, Eragon saw that their fingers were joined by translucent webbing. "We have come far," they whispered. As they spoke, three rows of gills pulsed on each side of their slender necks, exposing pink flesh underneath. Their skin glistened as if with oil. Their lank hair hung past their narrow shoulders.

He met an elf armored in imbricated scales like a dragon, with a bony crest upon his head, a line of spikes that ran down his back, and two pallid flames that ever flickered in the pits of his flared nostrils.

And he met others who were not so recognizable: elves whose outlines wavered as if seen through water; elves who, when motionless, were indistinguishable from trees; tall elves with eyes of black, even where the whites should have been, who possessed an awful beauty that frightened Eragon and, when they chanced to touch something, passed through it like shadows.

The ultimate example of this phenomenon was the Menoa tree, which was once the elf Linnëa. The tree seemed to quicken with life at the activity in the clearing. Its branches stirred, though no breeze touched them, at times the creaks of its trunk could be heard to match the flow of music, and an air of gentle benevolence emanated from the tree and lay upon those in the vicinity.…

And he remembered two attacks from his back, screaming and groaning in the shadows while the mad elves continued their revels around him and only Saphira came to guard over him.…

On the third day of the Agaetí Blödhren, or so Eragon later learned, he delivered his verses to the elves. He stood and said, “I am no smith, nor skilled at carving or weaving or pottery or painting or any of the arts. Nor can I rival your accomplishments with spells. Thus, all that remains to me are my own experiences, which I have attempted to interpret through the lens of a story, though I am also no bard.” Then, in the manner that Brom had performed lays in Carvahall, Eragon chanted:

In the kingdom by the sea,
In the mountains mantled blue,
On frigid winter’s final day
Was born a man with but one task:

To kill the foe in Durza,
In the land of shadows.

Nurtured by the kind and wise
Under oaks as old as time,
He ran with deer and wrestled bears,
And from his elders learned the skills,

To kill the foe in Durza,
In the land of shadows.
Taught to spy the thief in black

When he grabs the weak and strong;

To block his blows and fight the fiend
With rag and rock and plant and bone;

And kill the foe in Durza,
In the land of shadows.

Quick as thought, the years did turn,
'Til the man had come of age,
His body burned with fevered rage,
While youth's impatience seared his veins.

Then he met a maiden fair,
Who was tall and strong and wise,
Her brow adorned with Gëda's Light,
Which shone upon her trailing gown.

In her eyes of midnight blue,
In those enigmatic pools,
Appeared to him a future bright,
Together, where they would not have

To fear the foe in Durza,
In the land of shadows.

So Eragon told of how the man voyaged to the land of Durza, where he found and fought the foe, despite the cold terror within his heart. Yet though at last he triumphed, the man withheld the fatal blow, for now that he had defeated his enemy, he did not fear the doom of mortals. He did not need to kill the foe in Durza. Then the man sheathed his sword and returned home and wed his love on summer's eve. With her, he spent his many days content until his beard was long and white. But:

In the dark before the dawn,
In the room where slept the man,
The foe, he crept and loomed above
His mighty rival now so weak.

From his pillow did the man
Raise his head and gaze upon
The cold and empty face of Death,
The king of everlasting night.

Calm acceptance filled the man's
Aged heart; for long ago,
He'd lost all fear of Death's embrace,
The last embrace a man will know.

Gentle as a morning breeze,
Bent the foe and from the man
His glowing, pulsing spirit took,
And thence in peace they went to dwell,

Forevermore in Durza,
In the land of shadows.

Eragon fell quiet and, conscious of the eyes upon him, ducked his head and quickly found his seat. He felt embarrassed that he had revealed so much of himself.

The elf lord, Däthedr, said, "You underestimate yourself, Shadeslayer. It seems that you have discovered a new talent."

Islanzadí raised one pale hand. "Your work shall be added to the great library in Tialdarí Hall, Eragon-finiarel, so that all who wish can appreciate it. Though your poem is allegory, I believe that it has helped many of us to better understand the hardships you have faced since Saphira's egg appeared to you, for which we are, in no small way, responsible. You must read it to us again so we may think upon this further."

Pleased, Eragon bowed his head and did as she commanded. Afterward was time for Saphira to present her work to the elves. She flew off into the night and returned with a black stone thrice the size of a large man clutched in her talons. Landing on her hind legs, she placed the stone upright in the middle of the bare greensward, in full view of everyone. The glossy rock had been melted and somehow molded into intricate curves that wound about each other, like frozen waves. The striated tongues of rock twisted in such convoluted patterns that the eye had difficulty following a single piece from base to tip, but rather flitted from one coil to the next.

As it was his first time seeing the sculpture, Eragon gazed at it with as much interest as the elves. *How did you make this?*

Saphira's eyes twinkled with amusement. *By licking the molten rock*. Then she bent and breathed fire long upon the stone, bathing it in a golden pillar that ascended toward the stars and clawed at them with lucent fingers. When Saphira closed her jaws, the paper-thin edges of the sculpture glowed cherry red, while small flames flickered in the dark hollows and recesses throughout the rock. The flowing strands of rock seemed to move under the hypnotic light.

The elves exclaimed with wonder, clapping their hands and dancing about the piece. An elf cried, "Well wrought, Brightscales!"

It's beautiful, said Eragon.

Saphira touched him on the arm with her nose. *Thank you, little one*.

Then Glaedr brought out his offering: a slab of red oak that he had carved with the point of one talon into a likeness of Ellesméra as seen from high above. And Oromis revealed his contribution: the completed scroll that Eragon had often watched him illustrate during their lessons. Along the top half of the scroll marched columns of glyphs—a copy of "The Lay of Vestarí the Mariner"—while along the bottom half ran a panorama of a fantastic landscape, rendered with breathtaking artistry, detail, and skill.

Arya took Eragon's hand then and drew him through the forest and toward the Menoa tree, where she said, "Look how the werelight dims. We have but a few hours left to us before dawn arrives and we must return to the world of cold reason."

Around the tree, the host of elves gathered, their faces bright with eager anticipation. With great dignity, Islanzadí emerged from within their midst and walked along a root as wide as a pathway until it angled upward and doubled back on itself. She stood upon the gnarled shelf overlooking the slender, waiting elves. "As is our custom, and as was agreed upon at the end of The Dragon War by Queen Tarmunora, the first Eragon, and the white dragon who represented his race—he whose name cannot be uttered in this or any language—when they bound the fates of elves and dragons together, we have met to honor our blood-oath with song and dance and the fruits of our labor. Last this celebration occurred, many long years ago, our situation was desperate indeed. It has improved somewhat since, the result of our efforts, the dwarves', and the Varden's, though Alagaësia still lies under the black shadow of the Wyrdfell and we must still live with our shame of how we have failed the dragons.

"Of the Riders of eld, only Oromis and Glaedr remain. Brom and many others entered the void this past century. However, new hope has been granted to us in the form of Eragon and Saphira, and it is only right and proper that they should be here now, as we reaffirm the oath between our races three."

At the queen's signal, the elves cleared a wide expanse at the base

of the Menoa tree. Around the perimeter, they staked a ring of lanterns mounted upon carved poles, while musicians with flutes, harps, and drums assembled along the ridge of one long root. Guided by Arya to the edge of the circle, Eragon found himself seated between her and Oromis, while Saphira and Glaedr crouched on either side of them like gem-studded bluffs.

To Eragon and Saphira, Oromis said, "Watch you carefully, for this is of great importance to your heritage as Riders."

When all the elves were settled, two elf-maids walked to the center of the space in the host and stood with their backs to each other. They were exceedingly beautiful and identical in every respect, except for their hair: one had tresses as black as a forgotten pool, while the other's hair gleamed like burnished silver wire.

"The Caretakers, Iduna and Nëya," whispered Oromis.

From Islanzadí's shoulder, Blagden shrieked, *"Wyrda!"*

Moving in unison, the two elves raised their hands to the brooches at their throats, unclasped them, and allowed their white robes to fall away. Though they wore no garments, the women were clad in an iridescent tattoo of a dragon. The tattoo began with the dragon's tail wrapped around the left ankle of Iduna, continued up her leg and thigh, over her torso, and then across Nëya's back, ending with the dragon's head on Nëya's chest. Every scale on the dragon was inked a different color; the vibrant hues gave the tattoo the appearance of a rainbow.

The elf-maids twined their hands and arms together so that the dragon appeared to be a continuous whole, rippling from one body to the next without interruption. Then they each lifted a bare foot and brought it down on the packed ground with a soft *thump*.

And again: *thump*.

On the third *thump*, the musicians struck their drums in rhythm. A *thump* later, the harpists plucked the strings of their gilt instruments, and a moment after that, those elves with flutes joined the throbbing melody.

Slowly at first, but with gathering speed, Iduna and Nëya began to dance, marking time with the stamp of their feet on the dirt and undulating so that it was not they who seemed to move but the dragon upon them. Round and round they went, and the dragon flew endless circles across their skin.

Then the twins added their voices to the music, building upon the pounding beat with their fierce cries, their lyrics verses of a spell so complex that its meaning escaped Eragon. Like the rising wind that precedes a storm, the elves accompanied the incantation, singing with one tongue and one mind and one intent. Eragon did not know the words but found himself mouthing them along with the elves, swept

along by the inexorable cadence. He heard Saphira and Glaedr hum in concordance, a deep pulse so strong that it vibrated within his bones and made his skin tingle and the air shimmer.

Faster and faster spun Iduna and Nëya until their feet were a dusty blur and their hair fanned about them and they glistened with a film of sweat. The elf-maids accelerated to an inhuman speed and the music climaxed in a frenzy of chanted phrases. Then a flare of light ran the length of the dragon tattoo, from head to tail, and the dragon stirred. At first Eragon thought his eyes had deceived him, until the creature blinked, raised his wings, and clenched his talons.

A burst of flame erupted from the dragon's maw and he lunged forward and pulled himself free of the elves' skin, climbing into the air, where he hovered, flapping his wings. The tip of his tail remained connected to the twins below, like a glowing umbilical cord. The giant beast strained toward the black moon and loosed an untamed roar of ages past, then turned and surveyed the assembled elves.

As the dragon's baleful eye fell upon him, Eragon knew that the creature was no mere apparition but a conscious being bound and sustained by magic. Saphira and Glaedr's humming grew ever louder until it blocked all other sound from Eragon's ears. Above, the specter of their race looped down over the elves, brushing them with an insubstantial wing. It came to a stop before Eragon, engulfing him in an endless, whirling gaze. Bidden by some instinct, Eragon raised his right hand, his palm tingling.

In his mind echoed a voice of fire: *Our gift so you may do what you must.*

The dragon bent his neck and, with his snout, touched the heart of Eragon's gedwëy ignasia. A spark jumped between them, and Eragon went rigid as incandescent heat poured through his body, consuming his insides. His vision flashed red and black, and the scar on his back burned as if branded. Fleeing to safety, he fell deep within himself, where darkness grasped him and he had not the strength to resist it.

Last, he again heard the voice of fire say, *Our gift to you.*

In a Starry Glade

Eragon was alone when he woke.

He opened his eyes to stare at the carved ceiling in the tree house he and Saphira shared. Outside, night still reigned and the sounds of the elves' revels drifted from the glittering city below.

Before he noticed more than that, Saphira leaped into his mind, radiating concern and anxiety. An image passed to him of her standing beside Islanzadí at the Menoa tree, then she asked, *How are you?*

I feel … good. Better than I've felt in a long time. How long have I—

Only an hour. I would have stayed with you, but they needed Oromis, Glaedr, and me to complete the ceremony. You should have seen the elves' reaction when you fainted. Nothing like this has occurred before.

Did you cause this, Saphira?

It was not my work alone, nor Glaedr's. The memories of our race, which were given form and substance by the elves' magic, anointed you with what skill we dragons possess, for you are our best hope to avoid extinction.

I don't understand.

Look in a mirror, she suggested. *Then rest and recover and I shall rejoin you at dawn.*

She left, and Eragon got to his feet and stretched, amazed by the sense of well-being that pervaded him. Going to the wash closet, he retrieved the mirror he used for shaving and brought it into the light of a nearby lantern.

Eragon froze with surprise.

It was as if the numerous physical changes that, over time, alter the appearance of a human Rider—and which Eragon had already begun to experience since bonding with Saphira—had been completed while he was unconscious. His face was now as smooth and angled as an elf's, with ears tapered like theirs and eyes slanted like theirs, and his skin was as pale as alabaster and seemed to emit a faint glow, as if with the sheen of magic. *I look like a princeling.* Eragon had never before applied the term to a man, least of all himself, but the only word that described him now was *beautiful.* Yet he was not entirely an elf. His jaw was stronger, his brow thicker, his face broader. He was fairer than any human and more rugged than any elf.

With trembling fingers, Eragon reached around the nape of his neck in search of his scar.

He felt nothing.

Eragon tore off his tunic and twisted in front of the mirror to examine his back. It was as smooth as it had been before the battle of Farthen Dûr. Tears sprang to Eragon's eyes as he slid his hand over the place where Durza had maimed him. He knew that his back would never trouble him again.

Not only was the savage blight he had elected to keep gone, but every other scar and blemish had vanished from his body, leaving him as unmarked as a newborn babe. Eragon traced a line upon his wrist where he had cut himself while sharpening Garrow's scythe. No evidence of the wound remained. The blotchy scars on the insides of his thighs, remnants from his first flight with Saphira, had also disappeared. For a moment, he missed them as a record of his life, but his regret was short-lived as he realized that the damage from every injury he had ever suffered, no matter how small, had been repaired.

I have become what I was meant to be, he thought, and took a deep breath of the intoxicating air.

He dropped the mirror on the bed and garbed himself in his finest clothes: a crimson tunic stitched with gold thread; a belt studded with white jade; warm, felted leggings; a pair of the cloth boots favored by the elves; and upon his forearms, leather vambraces the dwarves had given him.

Descending from the tree, Eragon wandered the shadows of Ellesméra and observed the elves carousing in the fever of the night. None of them recognized him, though they greeted him as one of their own and invited him to share in their saturnalias.

Eragon floated in a state of heightened awareness, his senses thrumming with the multitude of new sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that assailed him. He could see in darkness that would have blinded him before. He could touch a leaf and, by touch alone, count the individual hairs that grew upon it. He could identify the odors wafting about him as well as a wolf or a dragon. And he could hear the patter of mice in the underbrush and the noise a flake of bark makes as it falls to earth; the beating of his heart was as a drum to him.

His aimless path led him past the Menoa tree, where he paused to watch Saphira among the festivities, though he did not reveal himself to those in the glade.

Where go you, little one? she asked.

He saw Arya rise from her mother's side, make her way through the gathered elves, and then, like a forest sprite, glide underneath the trees beyond. *I walk between the candle and the dark*, he replied, and followed Arya.

Eragon tracked Arya by her delicate scent of crushed pine needles,

by the feathery touch of her foot upon the ground, and by the disturbance of her wake in the air. He found her standing alone on the edge of a clearing, poised like a wild creature as she watched the constellations turn in the sky above.

As Eragon emerged in the open, Arya looked at him, and he felt as if she saw him for the first time. Her eyes widened, and she whispered, "Is that you, Eragon?"

"Aye."

"What have they done to you?"

"I know not."

He went to her, and together they wandered the dense woods, which echoed with fragments of music and voices from the festivities. Changed as he was, Eragon was acutely conscious of Arya's presence, of the whisper of her clothes over her skin, of the soft, pale exposure of her neck, and of her eyelashes, which were coated with a layer of oil that made them glisten and curl like black petals wet with rain.

They stopped on the bank of a narrow stream so clear, it was invisible in the faint light. The only thing that betrayed its presence was the throaty gurgle of water pouring over rocks. Around them, the thick pines formed a cave with their branches, hiding Eragon and Arya from the world and muffling the cool, still air. The hollow seemed ageless, as if it were removed from the world and protected by some magic against the withering breath of time.

In that secret place, Eragon felt suddenly close to Arya, and all his passion for her sprang to the fore of his mind. He was so intoxicated with the strength and vitality coursing through his veins—as well as the untamed magic that filled the forest—he ignored caution and said, "How tall the trees, how bright the stars … and how beautiful you are, O Arya Svit-kona." Under normal circumstances, he would have considered his deed the height of folly, but in that fey, madcap night, it seemed perfectly sane.

She stiffened. "Eragon …"

He ignored her warning. "Arya, I'll do anything to win your hand. I would follow you to the ends of the earth. I would build a palace for you with nothing but my bare hands. I would—"

"Will you stop pursuing me? Can you promise me that?" When he hesitated, she stepped closer and said, low and gentle, "Eragon, this cannot be. You are young and I am old, and that shall never change."

"Do you feel nothing for me?"

"My feelings for you," she said, "are those of a friend and nothing more. I am grateful to you for rescuing me from Gil'ead, and I find your company pleasant. That is all.… Relinquish this quest of yours—it will only bring you heartache—and find someone your own age to spend the long years with."

His eyes brimmed with tears. “How can you be so cruel?”

“I am not cruel, but kind. You and I are not meant for each other.”

In desperation, he suggested, “You could give me your memories, and then I would have the same amount of experience and knowledge as you.”

“It would be an abomination.” Arya lifted her chin, her face grave and solemn and brushed with silver from the glimmering stars. A hint of steel entered her voice: “Hear me well, Eragon. This cannot, nor ever shall be. And until you master yourself, our friendship must cease to exist, for your emotions do nothing but distract us from our duty.” She bowed to him. “Goodbye, Eragon Shadeslayer.” Then she strode past and vanished into Du Weldenvarden.

Now the tears spilled down Eragon’s cheeks and dropped to the moss below, where they lay unabsorbed, like pearls strewn across a blanket of emerald velvet. Numb, Eragon sat upon a rotting log and buried his face in his hands, weeping that his affection for Arya was doomed to remain unrequited, and weeping that he had driven her further away.

Within moments, Saphira joined him. *Oh, little one*. She nuzzled him. *Why did you have to inflict this upon yourself? You knew what would happen if you tried to woo Arya again*.

I couldn’t stop myself. He wrapped his arms around his belly and rocked back and forth on the log, reduced to hiccuping sobs by the strength of his misery. Putting one warm wing over him, Saphira drew him close to her side, like a mother falcon with her offspring. He curled up against her and remained huddled there as night passed into day and the Agaetí Blödhren came to an end.

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LANDFALL

Roran stood upon the poop deck of the *Red Boar*, his arms crossed over his chest and his feet planted wide apart to steady himself on the rolling barge. The salty wind ruffled his hair and tugged at his thick beard and tickled the hairs on his bare forearms.

Beside him, Clovis manned the tiller. The weathered sailor pointed toward the coastline at a seagull-covered rock silhouetted on the crest of a rolling hill that extended into the ocean. “Teirm be right on the far side of that peak.”

Roran squinted into the afternoon sun, which reflected off the ocean in a blindingly bright band. “We’ll stop here for now, then.”

“You don’t want to go on into the city yet?”

“Not all of us at once. Call over Torson and Flint and have them run the barges up on that shore. It looks like a good place to camp.”

Clovis grimaced. “Arrgh. I was hoping t’ get a hot meal tonight.” Roran understood; the fresh food from Narda had long since been eaten, leaving them with naught but salt pork, salted herring, salted cabbage, sea biscuits the villagers had made from their purchased flour, pickled vegetables, and the occasional fresh meat when the villagers slaughtered one of their few remaining animals or managed to catch game when they landed.

Clovis’s rough voice echoed over the water as he shouted to the skippers of the other two barges. When they drew near, he ordered them to pull ashore, much to their vociferous displeasure. They and the other sailors had counted on reaching Teirm that day and lavishing their pay on the city’s delights.

After the barges were beached, Roran walked among the villagers and helped them by pitching tents here and there, unloading equipment, fetching water from a nearby stream, and otherwise lending his assistance until everyone was settled. He paused to give Morn and Tara a word of encouragement, for they appeared despondent, and received a guarded response in turn. The tavern owner and his wife had been aloof to him ever since they left Palancar Valley. On the whole, the villagers were in better condition than when they arrived at Narda due to the rest they had garnered on the barges, but constant worry and exposure to the harsh elements had prevented them from recuperating as well as Roran hoped.

“Stronghammer, will you sup at our tent tonight?” asked Thane,

coming up to Roran.

Roran declined with as much grace as he could and turned to find himself confronted by Felda, whose husband, Byrd, had been murdered by Sloan. She bobbed a quick curtsy, then said, “May I speak with you, Roran Garrowsson?”

He smiled at her. “Always, Felda. You know that.”

“Thank you.” With a furtive expression, she fingered the tassels that edged her shawl and glanced toward her tent. “I would ask a favor of you. It’s about Mandel—” Roran nodded; he had chosen her eldest son to accompany him into Narda on that fateful trip when he killed the two guards. Mandel had performed admirably then, as well as in the weeks since while he crewed the *Edeline* and learned what he could about piloting the barges. “He’s become quite friendly with the sailors on our barge and he’s started playing dice with those lawless men. Not for money—we have none—but for small things. Things we need.”

“Have you asked him to stop?”

Felda twisted the tassels. “I fear that, since his father died, he no longer respects me as he once did. He has grown wild and willful.”

We have all grown wild, thought Roran. “And what would you have me do about it?” he asked gently.

“You have ever dealt generously with Mandel. He admires you. If you talk with him, he will listen.”

Roran considered the request, then said, “Very well, I will do what I can.” Felda sagged with relief. “Tell me, though, what has he lost at dice?”

“Food mostly.” Felda hesitated and then added, “But I know he once risked my grandmother’s bracelet for a rabbit those men snared.”

Roran frowned. “Put your heart at ease, Felda. I will tend to the matter as soon as I can.”

“Thank you.” Felda curtsied again, then slipped away between the makeshift tents, leaving Roran to mull over what she had said.

Roran absently scratched his beard as he walked. The problem with Mandel and the sailors was a problem that cut both ways; Roran had noticed that during the trip from Narda, one of Torson’s men, Frewin, had become close to Odele—a young friend of Katrina. *They could cause trouble when we leave Clovis*.

Taking care not to attract undue attention, Roran went through the camp and gathered the villagers he trusted the most and had them accompany him to Horst’s tent, where he said, “The five we agreed upon will leave now, before it gets much later. Horst will take my place while I’m gone. Remember that your most important task is to ensure Clovis doesn’t leave with the barges or damage them in any way. They may be our only means to reach Surda.”

“That, and make sure we aren’t discovered,” commented Orval.

“Exactly. If none of us have returned by nightfall day after tomorrow, assume we were captured. Take the barges and set sail for Surda, but don’t stop in Kuasta to buy provisions; the Empire will probably be lying in wait there. You’ll have to find food elsewhere.”

While his companions readied themselves, Roran went to Clovis’s cabin on the *Red Boar*. “Just the five of you be going?” demanded Clovis after Roran explained their plan.

“That’s right.” Roran let his iron gaze bore into Clovis until the man fidgeted with unease. “And when I get back, I expect you, these barges, and every one of your men to still be here.”

“You dare impugn my honor after how I’ve kept our bargain?”

“I impugn nothing, only tell you what I expect. Too much is at stake. If you commit treachery now, you condemn our entire village to death.”

“That I know,” muttered Clovis, avoiding his eyes.

“My people will defend themselves during my absence. So long as breath remains in their lungs, they’ll not be taken, tricked, or abandoned. And if misfortune *were* to befall them, I’d avenge them even if I had to walk a thousand leagues and fight Galbatorix himself. Heed my words, Master Clovis, for I speak the truth.”

“We’re not so fond of the Empire as you seem to believe,” protested Clovis. “I wouldn’t do them a favor more than the next man.”

Roran smiled with grim amusement. “Men will do anything to protect their families and homes.”

As Roran lifted the door latch, Clovis asked, “And what will you do once you reach Surda?”

“We will—”

“Not we: *you*. What will you do? I’ve watched you, Roran. I’ve listened to you. An’ you seem a good enough sort, even if I don’t care for how you dealt with me. But I cannot fit it in my head, you dropping that hammer of yours and taking up the plow again, just because you’ve arrived in Surda.”

Roran gripped the latch until his knuckles turned white. “When I have delivered the village to Surda,” he said in a voice as empty as a blackened desert, “then I shall go hunting.”

“Ah. After that redheaded lass of yours? I heard some talk of that, but I didn’t put—”

The door slammed behind Roran as he left the cabin. He let his anger burn hot and fast for a moment—enjoying the freedom of the emotion—before he began to subdue his unruly passions. He marched to Felda’s tent, where Mandel was throwing a hunting knife at a stump.

Felda’s right; someone has to talk some sense into him. “You’re wasting your time,” said Roran.

Mandel whirled around with surprise. “Why do you say that?”

“In a real fight, you’re more likely to put out your own eye than injure your enemy. If you don’t know the exact distance between you and your target …” Roran shrugged. “You might as well throw rocks.”

He watched with detached interest as the younger man bristled with pride. “Gunnar told me about a man he knew in Cithrí who could hit a flying crow with his knife eight times out of ten.”

“And the other two times you get killed. It’s usually a bad idea to throw away your weapon in battle.” Roran waved a hand, forestalling Mandel’s objections. “Get your kit together and meet me on the hill past the stream in fifteen minutes. I’ve decided you should come with us to Teirm.”

“Yes, sir!” With an enthusiastic grin, Mandel dove into the tent and began packing.

As Roran left, he encountered Felda, her youngest daughter balanced on one hip. Felda glanced between him and Mandel’s activity in the tent, and her expression tightened. “Keep him safe, Stronghammer.” She set her daughter on the ground and then bustled about, helping to gather the items Mandel would need.

Roran was the first to arrive at the designated hill. He squatted on a white boulder and watched the sea while he readied himself for the task ahead. When Loring, Gertrude, Birgit, and Nolfavrell, Birgit’s son, arrived, Roran jumped off the boulder and said, “We have to wait for Mandel; he’ll be joining us.”

“What for?” demanded Loring.

Birgit frowned as well. “I thought we agreed no one else should accompany us. Especially not Mandel, since he was seen in Narda. It’s dangerous enough having you and Gertrude along, and Mandel only increases the odds that someone will recognize us.”

“I’ll risk it.” Roran met each of their eyes in turn. “He needs to come.” In the end, they listened to him, and, with Mandel, the six of them headed south, toward Teirm.

In that area, the coastline was composed of low, rolling hills verdant with lush grass and occasional briars, willows, and poplars. The soft, muddy ground gave under their feet and made walking difficult. To their right lay the glittering sea. To their left ran the purple outline of the Spine. The ranks of snowcapped mountains were laced with clouds and mist.

As Roran's company wended past the properties surrounding Teirm —some freehold farms, others massive estates—they made every effort to go undetected. When they encountered the road that connected Narda to Teirm, they darted across it and continued farther east, toward the mountains, for several more miles before turning south again. Once they were confident they had circumnavigated the city, they angled back toward the ocean until they found the southern road in.

During his time on the *Red Boar*, it had occurred to Roran that officials in Narda might have deduced that whoever killed the two guards was among the men who left upon Clovis's barges. If so, messengers would have warned Teirm's soldiers to watch for anyone matching the villagers' descriptions. And if the Ra'zac had visited Narda, then the soldiers would also know that they were looking not just for a handful of murderers but Roran Stronghammer and the refugees from Carvahall. Teirm could be one huge trap. Yet they could not bypass the city, for the villagers needed supplies and a new mode of transportation.

Roran had decided that their best precaution against capture was to send no one into Teirm who had been seen in Narda, except for Gertrude and himself—Gertrude because only she understood the ingredients for her medicines, and Roran because, though he was the most likely to be recognized, he trusted no one else to do what was required. He knew he possessed the will to act when others hesitated, like the time he slew the guards. The rest of the group was chosen to minimize suspicion. Loring was old but a tough fighter and an excellent liar. Birgit had proven herself canny and strong, and her son, Nolfavrell, had already killed a soldier in combat, despite his tender age. Hopefully, they would appear as nothing more than an extended family traveling together. *That is, if Mandel doesn't throw the scheme awry*, thought Roran.

It was also Roran's idea to enter Teirm from the south, and thus make it seem even more unlikely that they had come from Narda.

Evening was nigh when Teirm came into view, white and ghostly in the gloaming. Roran stopped to inspect what lay before them. The walled city stood alone upon the edge of a large bay, self-contained and impregnable to any conceivable attack. Torches glowed between the merlons on the battlements, where soldiers with bows patrolled their endless circuits. Above the walls rose a citadel, and then a faceted lighthouse, which swept its hazy beam across the dark waters.

"It's so big," said Nolfavrell.

Loring bobbed his head without taking his eyes off Teirm. "Aye, that it is."

Roran's attention was caught by a ship moored at one of the stone piers jutting from the city. The three-masted vessel was larger than any he had seen in Narda, with a high forecastle, two banks of oarlocks, and twelve powerful ballistae mounted along each side of the deck for shooting javelins. The magnificent craft appeared equally suited for either commerce or war. Even more importantly, Roran thought that it might—*might*—be able to hold the entire village.

"That's what we need," he said, pointing.

Birgit uttered a sour grunt. "We'd have to sell ourselves into slavery to afford passage on that monster."

Clovis had warned them that Teirm's portcullis closed at sunset, so they quickened their pace to avoid spending the night in the countryside. As they neared the pale walls, the road filled with a double stream of people hurrying to and from Teirm.

Roran had not anticipated so much traffic, but he soon realized that it could help shield his party from unwanted attention. Beckoning to Mandel, Roran said, "Drop back a ways and follow someone else through the gate, so the guards don't think you're with us. We'll wait for you on the other side. If they ask, you've come here seeking employment as a seaman."

"Yes, sir."

As Mandel fell behind, Roran hunched one shoulder, allowed a limp to creep into his walk, and began to rehearse the story Loring had concocted to explain their presence at Teirm. He stepped off the road and ducked his head as a man drove a pair of lumbering oxen past, grateful for the shadows that concealed his features.

The gate loomed ahead, washed in uncertain orange from the torches placed in sconces on each side of the entrance. Underneath stood a pair of soldiers with Galbatorix's twisting flame stitched onto the front of their crimson tunics. Neither of the armed men so much as glanced at Roran and his companions as they shuffled underneath the spiked portcullis and through the short tunnel beyond.

Roran squared his shoulders and felt some of his tension ease. He and the others clustered by the corner of a house, where Loring murmured, “So far, so good.”

When Mandel rejoined them, they set out to find an inexpensive hostel where they could let a room. As they walked, Roran studied the layout of the city with its fortified houses—which grew progressively higher toward the citadel—and the gridlike arrangement of streets. Those north to south radiated from the citadel like a starburst, while those east to west curved gently across and formed a spiderweb pattern, creating numerous places where barriers could be erected and soldiers stationed.

If Carvahall had been built like this, he thought, *no one could have defeated us but the king himself*.

By dusk they had acquired lodging at the Green Chestnut, an exceedingly vile tavern with atrocious ale and flea-infested beds. Its sole advantage was that it cost next to nothing. They went to sleep without dinner to save their precious coin, and huddled together to prevent their purses from being filched by one of the tavern’s other guests.

The next day, Roran and his companions left the Green Chestnut before dawn to search for provisions and transportation.

Gertrude said, “I have heard tell of a remarkable herbalist, Angela by name, who lives here and is supposed to work the most amazing cures, perhaps even a touch of magic. I would go see her, for if anyone has what I seek, it would be she.”

“You shouldn’t go alone,” said Roran. He looked at Mandel. “Accompany Gertrude, help her with her purchases, and do your best to protect her if you are attacked. Your nerve may be tested at times, but do nothing to cause alarm, unless you would betray your friends and family.”

Mandel touched his forelock and nodded his obedience. He and Gertrude departed at right angles down a cross street, while Roran and the rest resumed their hunt.

Roran had the patience of a stalking predator, but even he began to thrum with restlessness when morning and afternoon slipped by and they still had not found a ship to carry them to Surda. He learned that the three-masted ship, the *Dragon Wing*, was newly built and about to be launched on her maiden voyage; that they had no chance of hiring it from the Blackmoor Shipping Company unless they could pay a roomful of the dwarves’ red gold; and indeed, that the villagers lacked the coin to engage even the meanest vessel. Nor would taking Clovis’s barges solve their problems, because it still left unanswered the question of what they would eat on their trek.

“It would be hard,” said Birgit, “very hard, to steal goods from this place, what with all the soldiers and how close together the houses are and the watchmen at the gate. If we tried to cart that much stuff out of Teirm, they’d want to know what we were doing.”

Roran nodded. *That too.*

Roran had suggested to Horst that if the villagers were forced to flee Teirm with naught but their remaining supplies, they could raid for their food. However, Roran knew that such an act would mean they had become as monstrous as those he hated. He had no stomach for it. It was one thing to fight and kill those who served Galbatorix—or even to steal Clovis’s barges, since Clovis had other means of supporting himself—but it was quite another to take provisions from innocent farmers who struggled to survive as much as the villagers had in Palancar Valley. That would be murder.

Those hard facts weighed upon Roran like stones. Their venture had always been tenuous at best, sustained in equal parts by fear, desperation, optimism, and last-minute improvisation. Now he feared that he had driven the villagers into the den of their enemies and bound them in place with a chain forged of their own poverty. *I could escape alone and continue my search for Katrina, but what victory would that be if I left my village to be enslaved by the Empire? Whatever our fate in Teirm, I will stand firm with those who trusted me enough to forsake their homes upon my word.*

To relieve their hunger, they stopped at a bakery and bought a loaf of fresh rye bread, as well as a small pot of honey to slather it with. While he paid for the items, Loring mentioned to the baker’s assistant that they were in the market for ships, equipment, and food.

At a tap on his shoulder, Roran turned. A man with coarse black hair and a thick slab of belly said, “Pardon me for overhearing your parley with the young master, but if it’s ships and such you be after, and at a fair price, then I should guess you’d want to attend the auction.”

“What auction is this?” asked Roran.

“Ah, it’s a sad story, it is, but all too common nowadays. One of our merchants, Jeod—Jeod Longshanks, as we call him out of hearing—has had the most abominable run of bad luck. In less than a year, he lost four of his ships, an’ when he tried to send his goods over land, the caravan was ambushed and destroyed by some thieving outlaws. His investors forced him to declare bankruptcy, and now they’re going to sell his property to recoup their losses. I don’t know ’bout food, but you’d be sure to find most everything else you’re looking to buy at the auction.”

A faint ember of hope kindled in Roran’s breast. “When will the auction be held?”

“Why, it’s posted on every message board throughout the city. Day after tomorrow, to be sure.”

That explained to Roran why they had not learned of the auction before; they had done their best to avoid the message boards, on the off chance that someone would recognize Roran from the portrait on his reward poster.

“Thank you much,” he said to the man. “You may have saved us a great deal of trouble.”

“My pleasure, so it is.”

Once Roran and his companions filed out of the shop, they huddled together on the edge of the street. He said, “Do you think we should look into this?”

“It’s all we *have* to look into,” growled Loring.

“Birgit?”

“You needn’t ask me; it’s obvious. We cannot wait until the day after tomorrow, though.”

“No. I say we meet with this Jeod and see if we can strike a bargain with him before the auction opens. Are we agreed?”

They were, and so they set out for Jeod’s house, armed with directions from a passerby. The house—or rather, mansion—was set on the west side of Teirm, close to the citadel, among scores of other opulent buildings embellished with fine scrollwork, wrought-iron gates, statues, and gushing fountains. Roran could scarcely comprehend such riches; it amazed him how different the lives of these people were from his own.

Roran knocked on the front door to Jeod’s mansion, which stood next to an abandoned shop. After a moment, the door was pulled open by a plump butler garnished with overly shiny teeth. He eyed the four strangers upon his doorstep with disapproval, then flashed his glazed smile and asked, “How may I help you, sirs and madam?”

“We would talk with Jeod, if he is free.”

“Have you an appointment?”

Roran thought the butler knew perfectly well that they did not. “Our stay in Teirm is too brief for us to arrange a proper meeting.”

“Ah, well, then I regret to say that your time would have been better spent elsewhere. My master has many matters to tend. He cannot devote himself to every group of ragged tramps that bangs on his door, asking for handouts,” said the butler. He exposed even more of his glassy teeth and began to withdraw inside.

“Wait!” cried Roran. “It’s not handouts we want; we have business with Jeod.”

The butler lifted one eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Aye, it is. Please ask him if he will hear us. We’ve traveled more leagues than you’d care to know, and it’s of the utmost importance

that we see Jeod today."

"May I inquire as to the nature of your business?"

"It's a private matter."

"Very well, sir," said the butler. "I will convey your request, but I warn you that Jeod is occupied at the moment, and I doubt he will wish to bother himself. By what name shall I announce you, sir?"

"You may call me Stronghammer." The butler's mouth twitched as if amused by the name, then slipped behind the door and closed it.

"If his head were any larger, 'e couldn't fit in the privy," muttered Loring out the side of his mouth. Nolfavrell uttered a bark of laughter at the insult.

Birgit said, "Let's hope the servant doesn't imitate the master."

A minute later, the door reopened and the butler announced, with a rather brittle expression, "Jeod has agreed to meet you in the study." He moved to the side and gestured with one arm for them to proceed. "This way." After they trooped into the sumptuous entryway, the butler swept past them and down a polished wood hallway to one door among many, which he opened and ushered them through.

JEOD LONGSHANKS

If Roran had known how to read, he might have been more impressed by the treasure trove of books that lined the study walls. As it was, he reserved his attention for the tall man with graying hair who stood behind an oval writing desk. The man—who Roran assumed was Jeod—looked about as tired as Roran felt. His face was lined, careworn, and sad, and when he turned toward them, a nasty scar gleamed white from his scalp to his left temple. To Roran, it bespoke steel in the man. Long and buried, perhaps, but steel nevertheless.

"Do sit," said Jeod. "I won't stand on ceremony in my own house." He watched them with curious eyes as they settled in the soft leather armchairs. "May I offer you pastries and a glass of apricot brandy? I cannot talk for long, but I see you've been on the road for many a week, and I well remember how dusty my throat was after such journeys."

Loring grinned. "Aye. A touch of brandy would be welcome indeed. You're most generous, sir."

"Only a glass of milk for my boy," said Birgit.

"Of course, madam." Jeod rang for the butler, delivered his instructions, then leaned back in his chair. "I am at a disadvantage. I believe you have my name, but I don't have yours."

"Stronghammer, at your service," said Roran.

"Mardra, at your service," said Birgit.

"Kell, at your service," said Nolfavrell.

"And I'd be Wally, at your service," finished Loring.

"And I at yours," responded Jeod. "Now, Rolf mentioned that you wished to do business with me. It's only fair that you know I'm in no position to buy or sell goods, nor have I gold for investing, nor proud ships to carry wool and food, gems and spices across the restless sea. What, then, can I do for you?"

Roran rested his elbows on his knees, then knitted his fingers together and stared between them as he marshaled his thoughts. *A slip of the tongue could kill us here*, he reminded himself. "To put it simply, sir, we represent a certain group of people who—for various reasons—must purchase a large amount of supplies with very little money. We know that your belongings will be auctioned off day after tomorrow to repay your debts, and we would like to offer a bid now on those items we need. We would have waited until the auction, but circumstances

press us and we cannot tarry another two days. If we are to strike a bargain, it must be tonight or tomorrow, no later."

"What manner of supplies do you need?" asked Jeod.

"Food and whatever else is required to outfit a ship or other vessel for a long voyage at sea."

A spark of interest gleamed in Jeod's weary face. "Do you have a certain ship in mind? For I know every craft that's plied these waters in the last twenty years."

"We've yet to decide."

Jeod accepted that without question. "I understand now why you thought to come to me, but I fear you labor under a misapprehension." He spread his gray hands, indicating the room. "Everything you see here no longer belongs to me, but to my creditors. I have no authority to sell my possessions, and if I did so without permission, I would likely be imprisoned for cheating my creditors out of the money I owe them."

He paused as Rolf backed into the study, carrying a large silver tray dotted with pastries, cut-crystal goblets, a glass of milk, and a decanter of brandy. The butler placed the tray on a padded footstool and then proceeded to serve the refreshments. Roran took his goblet and sipped the mellow brandy, wondering how soon courtesy would allow the four of them to excuse themselves and resume their quest.

When Rolf left the room, Jeod drained his goblet with a single draught, then said, "I may be of no use to you, but I do know a number of people in my profession who might … *might* … be able to help. If you can give me a bit more detail about what you want to buy, then I'd have a better idea of who to recommend."

Roran saw no harm in that, so he began to recite a list of items the villagers *had* to have, things they might need, and things they wanted but would never be able to afford unless fortune smiled greatly upon them. Now and then Birgit or Loring mentioned something Roran had forgotten—like lamp oil—and Jeod would glance at them for a moment before returning his hooded gaze to Roran, where it remained with growing intensity. Jeod's interest concerned Roran; it was as if the merchant knew, or suspected, what he was hiding.

"It seems to me," said Jeod at the completion of Roran's inventory, "that this would be enough provisions to transport several hundred people to Feinster or Aroughs … or beyond. Admittedly, I've been rather occupied for the past few weeks, but I've heard of no such host in this area, nor can I imagine where one might have come from."

His face blank, Roran met Jeod's stare and said nothing. On the inside, he seethed with self-contempt for allowing Jeod to amass enough information to reach that conclusion.

Jeod shrugged. "Well, be as it may, that's your own concern. I'd

suggest that you see Galton on Market Street about your food and old Hamill by the docks for all else. They're both honest men and will treat you true and fair." Reaching over, he plucked a pastry from the tray, took a bite, and then, when he finished chewing, asked Nolfavrell, "So, young Kell, have you enjoyed your stay in Teirm?"

"Yes, sir," said Nolfavrell, and grinned. "I've never seen anything quite so large, sir."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir. I—"

Feeling that they were in dangerous territory, Roran interrupted: "I'm curious, sir, as to the nature of the shop next to your house. It seems odd to have such a humble store among all these grand buildings."

For the first time, a smile, if only a small one, brightened Jeod's expression, erasing years from his appearance. "Well, it was owned by a woman who was a bit odd herself: Angela the herbalist, one of the best healers I've ever met. She tended that store for twenty-some years and then, only a few months ago, up and sold it and left for parts unknown." He sighed. "It's a pity, for she made an interesting neighbor."

"That's who Gertrude wanted to meet, isn't it?" asked Nolfavrell, and looked up at his mother.

Roran suppressed a snarl and flashed a warning glance strong enough to make Nolfavrell quail in his chair. The name would mean nothing to Jeod, but unless Nolfavrell guarded his tongue better, he was liable to blurt out something far more damaging. *Time to go*, thought Roran. He put down his goblet.

It was then that he saw the name *did* mean something to Jeod. The merchant's eyes widened with surprise, and he gripped the arms of his chair until the tips of his fingers turned bone white. "It can't be!" Jeod focused on Roran, studying his face as if trying to see past the beard, and then breathed, "Roran … Roran Garrowsson."

An Unexpected Ally

Roran had already pulled his hammer from his belt and was halfway out of the chair when he heard his father's name. It was the only thing that kept him from leaping across the room and knocking Jeod unconscious. *How does he know who Garrow is?* Beside him, Loring and Birgit jumped to their feet, drawing knives from within their sleeves, and even Nolfavrell readied himself to fight with a dagger in hand.

"It *is* Roran, isn't it?" Jeod asked quietly. He showed no alarm at their weapons.

"How did you guess?"

"Because Brom brought Eragon here, and you look like your cousin. When I saw your poster with Eragon's, I realized that the Empire must have tried to capture you and that you had escaped. Although," Jeod's gaze drifted to the other three, "in all my imaginings, I never suspected that you took the rest of Carvahall with you."

Stunned, Roran dropped back into his chair and placed the hammer across his knees, ready for use. "Eragon was here?"

"Aye. And Saphira too."

"Saphira?"

Again, surprise crossed Jeod's face. "You don't know, then?"

"Know what?"

Jeod considered him for a long minute. "I think the time has come to drop our pretenses, Roran Garrowsson, and talk openly and without deception. I can answer many of the questions you must have—such as why the Empire is pursuing you—but in return, I need to know the reason you came to Teirm … the *real* reason."

"An' why should we trust you, Longshanks?" demanded Loring. "You could be working for Galbatorix, you could."

"I was Brom's friend for over twenty years," said Jeod. "I knew him even before he became a storyteller in Carvahall, and I did my best to help him and Eragon when they were under my roof. But since neither of them are here to vouch for me, I place my life in your hands, to do with as you wish. I could shout for help, but I won't. Nor will I fight you. All I ask is that you tell me your story and hear my own. Then you can decide for yourself what course of action is proper. You're in no immediate danger, so what harm is there in talking?"

Birgit caught Roran's eye with a flick of her chin. "He could just be trying to save his hide."

“Maybe,” replied Roran, “but we have to find out whatever it is he knows.” Hooking an arm underneath his chair, he dragged it across the room, placed the back of the chair against the door, and then sat in it, so that no one could burst in and catch them unawares. He jabbed his hammer at Jeod. “All right. You want to talk? Then let us talk, you and I.”

“It would be best if you go first.”

“If I do, and we’re not satisfied by your answers afterward, we’ll have to kill you,” warned Roran.

Jeod folded his arms. “So be it.”

Despite himself, Roran was impressed by the merchant’s fortitude; Jeod appeared unconcerned by his fate, if a bit grim about the mouth. “So be it,” Roran echoed.

Roran had relived the events since the Ra’zac’s arrival in Carvahall often enough, but never before had he described them in detail to another person. As he did, it struck him how much had happened to him and the other villagers in such a short time and how easy it had been for the Empire to destroy their lives in Palancar Valley. Resuscitating old terrors was painful for Roran, but he at least had the pleasure of seeing Jeod exhibit unfeigned astonishment as he heard about how the villagers had rousted the soldiers and Ra’zac from their camp, the siege of Carvahall thereafter, Sloan’s treachery, Katrina’s kidnapping, how Roran had convinced the villagers to flee, and the hardships of their journey to Teirm.

“By the Lost Kings!” exclaimed Jeod. “That’s the most extraordinary tale. Extraordinary! To think you’ve managed to thwart Galbatorix and that right now the entire village of Carvahall is hiding outside one of the Empire’s largest cities and the king doesn’t even know it.…” He shook his head with admiration.

“Aye, that’s our position,” growled Loring, “and it’s precarious at best, so you’d better explain well and good why we should *risk* letting you live.”

“It places me in as much—”

Jeod stopped as someone rattled the latch behind Roran’s chair, trying to open the door, followed by pounding on the oak planks. In the hallway, a woman cried, “Jeod! Let me in, Jeod! You can’t hide in that cave of yours.”

“May I?” murmured Jeod.

Roran clicked his fingers at Nolfavrell, and the boy tossed his dagger to Roran, who slipped around the writing desk and pressed the flat of the blade against Jeod’s throat. “Make her leave.”

Raising his voice, Jeod said, “I can’t talk now; I’m in the middle of a meeting.”

“Liar! You don’t have any business. You’re bankrupt! Come out and

face me, you coward! Are you a man or not that you won't even look your wife in the eye?" She paused for a second, as if expecting a response, then her screeches increased in volume: "Coward! You're a gutless rat, a filthy, yellow-bellied sheep-biter without the common sense to run a meat stall, much less a shipping company. My father would have never lost so much money!"

Roran winced as the insults continued. *I can't restrain Jeod if she goes on much longer*.

"Be still, woman!" commanded Jeod, and silence ensued. "Our fortunes might be about to change for the better if you but have the sense to restrain your tongue and not rail on like a fishmonger's wife."

Her answer was cold: "I shall wait upon your pleasure in the dining room, dear husband, and unless you choose to attend me by the evening meal and explain yourself, then I shall leave this accursed house, never to return." The sound of her footsteps retreated into the distance.

When he was sure that she was gone, Roran lifted the dagger from Jeod's neck and returned the weapon to Nolfavrell before reseating himself in the chair pushed against the door.

Jeod rubbed his neck and then, with a wry expression, said, "If we don't reach an understanding, you had better kill me; it'd be easier than explaining to Helen that I shouted at her for naught."

"You have my sympathy, Longshanks," said Loring.

"It's not her fault … not really. She just doesn't understand why so much misfortune has befallen us." Jeod sighed. "Perhaps it's my fault for not daring to tell her."

"Tell her what?" piped Nolfavrell.

"That I'm an agent for the Varden." Jeod paused at their dumbfounded expressions. "Perhaps I should start from the beginning. Roran, have you heard rumors in the past few months of the existence of a new Rider who opposes Galbatorix?"

"Mutterings here and there, yes, but nothing I'd give credence to."

Jeod hesitated. "I don't know how else to say this, Roran … but there *is* a new Rider in Alagaësia, and it's your cousin, Eragon. The stone he found in the Spine was actually a dragon egg I helped the Varden steal from Galbatorix years ago. The dragon hatched for Eragon and he named her Saphira. That is why the Ra'zac first came to Palancar Valley. They returned because Eragon has become a formidable enemy of the Empire and Galbatorix hoped that by capturing you, they could bring Eragon to bay."

Roran threw back his head and howled with laughter until tears gathered at the corners of his eyes and his stomach hurt from the convulsions. Loring, Birgit, and Nolfavrell looked at him with something akin to fear, but Roran cared not for their opinions. He

laughed at the absurdity of Jeod's assertion. He laughed at the terrible possibility that Jeod had told the truth.

Taking rasping breaths, Roran gradually returned to normal, despite an occasional outburst of humorless chuckles. He wiped his face on his sleeve and then regarded Jeod, a hard smile upon his lips. "It fits the facts; I'll give you that. But so do a half dozen other explanations I've thought of."

Birgit said, "If Eragon's stone was a dragon egg, then where did it come from?"

"Ah," replied Jeod, "now there's an affair I'm well acquainted with. …"

Comfortable in his chair, Roran listened with disbelief as Jeod spun a fantastic story of how Brom—grumpy old Brom!—had once been a Rider and had supposedly helped establish the Varden, how Jeod had discovered a secret passageway into Urû'baen, how the Varden arranged to steal the last three dragon eggs from Galbatorix, and how Brom had fought and killed Morzan of the Forsworn over the only egg the Varden's thief had succeeded in pilfering. As if that were not preposterous enough, Jeod went on to describe an agreement between the Varden, dwarves, and elves that the egg should be ferried between Du Weldenvarden and the Beor Mountains, which was why the egg and its couriers were near the edge of the great forest when they were ambushed by a Shade.

A Shade—ha! thought Roran.

Skeptical as he was, Roran attended with redoubled interest when Jeod began to talk of Eragon finding the egg and raising the dragon Saphira in the forest by Garrow's farm. Roran had been occupied at the time—preparing to leave for Dempton's mill in Therinsford—but he remembered how distracted Eragon had been, how he spent every moment he could outdoors, doing who knows what.…

As Jeod explained how and why Garrow died, rage filled Roran that Eragon had dared keep the dragon secret when it so obviously put everyone in danger. *It's his fault my father died!*

"What was he thinking?" burst out Roran.

He hated how Jeod looked at him with calm understanding. "I doubt Eragon knew himself. Riders and their dragons are bound together so closely, it's often hard to differentiate one from the other. Eragon could have no more harmed Saphira than he could have sawed off his own leg."

"He could have," muttered Roran. "Because of him, I've had to do things just as painful, and I know—he could have."

"You've a right to feel as you do," said Jeod, "but don't forget that the reason Eragon left Palancar Valley was to protect you and all who remained. I believe it was an extremely hard choice for him to make.

From his point of view, he sacrificed himself to ensure your safety and to avenge your father. And while leaving may not have had the desired effect, things would have certainly turned out far worse if Eragon had stayed."

Roran said nothing more until Jeod mentioned that the reason Brom and Eragon had visited Teirm was to see if they could use the city's shipping manifests to locate the Ra'zac's lair. "And did they?" cried Roran, bolting upright.

"We did indeed."

"Well, where are they, then? For goodness' sake, man, say it; you know how important this is to me!"

"It seemed apparent from the records—and I later had a message from the Varden that Eragon's own account confirmed this—that the Ra'zac's den is in the formation known as Helgrind, by Dras-Leona."

Roran gripped his hammer with excitement. *It's a long way to Dras-Leona, but Teirm has access to the only open pass between here and the southern end of the Spine. If I can get everyone safely heading down the coast, then I could go to this Helgrind, rescue Katrina if she's there, and follow the Jiet River down to Surda.*

Something of Roran's thoughts much have revealed themselves on his face, because Jeod said, "It can't be done, Roran."

"What?"

"No one man can take Helgrind. It's a solid, bare, black mountain of stone that's impossible to climb. Consider the Ra'zac's foul steeds; it seems likely they would have an eyrie near the top of Helgrind rather than bed near the ground, where they are most vulnerable. How, then, would you reach them? And if you could, do you really believe that you could defeat both Ra'zac and their two steeds, if not more? I have no doubt you are a fearsome warrior—after all, you and Eragon share blood—but these are foes beyond any normal human."

Roran shook his head. "I can't abandon Katrina. It may be futile, but I must try to free her, even if it costs me my life."

"It won't do Katrina any good if you get yourself killed," admonished Jeod. "If I may offer a bit of advice: try to reach Surda as you've planned. Once there, I'm sure you can enlist Eragon's help. Even the Ra'zac cannot match a Rider and dragon in open combat."

In his mind's eye, Roran saw the huge gray-skinned beasts the Ra'zac rode upon. He was loath to acknowledge it, but he knew that such creatures were beyond his ability to kill, no matter the strength of his motivation. The instant he accepted that truth, Roran finally believed Jeod's tale—for if he did not, Katrina was forever lost to him.

Eragon, he thought. *Eragon! By the blood I've spilled and the gore on my hands, I swear upon my father's grave I'll have you atone for what you've done by storming Helgrind with me. If you created this mess, then*

I'll have you clean it up.

Roran motioned to Jeod. "Continue your account. Let us hear the rest of this sorry play before the day grows much older."

Then Jeod spoke of Brom's death; of Murtagh, son of Morzan; of capture and escape in Gil'ead; of a desperate flight to save an elf; of Urgals and dwarves and a great battle in a place called Farthen Dûr, where Eragon defeated a Shade. And Jeod told them how the Varden left the Beor Mountains for Surda and how Eragon was even now deep within Du Weldenvarden, learning the elves' mysterious secrets of magic and warfare, but would soon return.

When the merchant fell silent, Roran gathered at the far end of the study with Loring, Birgit, and Nolfavrell and asked their thoughts. Lowering his voice, Loring said, "I can't tell whether he's lying or not, but any man who can weave a yarn like that at knifepoint deserves to live. A new Rider! And Eragon to boot!" He shook his head.

"Birgit?" asked Roran.

"I don't know. It's so outlandish…." She hesitated. "But it must be true. Another Rider is the only thing that would spur the Empire to pursue us so fiercely."

"Aye," agreed Loring. His eyes were bright with excitement. "We've been entangled in far more *momentous* events than we realized. A new Rider. Just think about it! The old order is about to be washed away, I tell you.… You were right all along, Roran."

"Nolfavrell?"

The boy looked solemn at being asked. He bit his lip, then said, "Jeod seems honest enough. I *think* we can trust him."

"Right, then," said Roran. He strode back to Jeod, planted his knuckles on the edge of the desk, and said, "Two last questions, Longshanks. What do Brom and Eragon look like? And how did you recognize Gertrude's name?"

"I knew of Gertrude because Brom mentioned that he left a letter for you in her care. As for what they looked like: Brom stood a bit shorter than me. He had a thick beard, a hooked nose, and he carried a carved staff with him. And I dare say he was rather irritable at times." Roran nodded; that was Brom. "Eragon was … young. Brown hair, brown eyes, with a scar on his wrist, and he never stopped asking questions." Roran nodded again; that was his cousin.

Roran stuck his hammer back under his belt. Birgit, Loring, and Nolfavrell sheathed their blades. Then Roran pulled his chair away from the door, and the four of them resumed their seats like civilized beings. "What now, Jeod?" asked Roran. "Can you help us? I know you're in a difficult situation, but we … we are desperate and have no one else to turn to. As an agent of the Varden, can you guarantee us the Varden's protection? We are willing to serve them if they'll shield

us from Galbatorix's wrath."

"The Varden," said Jeod, "would be more than happy to have you. More than happy. I suspect you already guessed that. As for help …" He ran a hand down his long face and stared past Loring at the rows of books on the shelves. "I've been aware for almost a year that my true identity—as well as that of many other merchants here and elsewhere who have assisted the Varden—was betrayed to the Empire. Because of that, I haven't dared flee to Surda. If I tried, the Empire would arrest me, and then who knows what horrors I'd be in for? I've had to watch the gradual destruction of my business without being able to take any action to oppose or escape it. What's worse, now that I cannot ship anything to the Varden and they dare not send envoys to me, I feared that Lord Risthart would have me clapped in irons and dragged off to the dungeons, since I'm of no further interest to the Empire. I've expected it every day since I declared bankruptcy."

"Perhaps," suggested Birgit, "they want you to flee so they can capture whoever else you bring with you."

Jeod smiled. "Perhaps. But now that you are here, I have a means to leave that they never anticipated."

"Then you have a plan?" asked Loring.

Glee crossed Jeod's face. "Oh yes, I have a plan. Did the four of you see the ship *Dragon Wing* moored at port?"

Roran thought back to the vessel. "Aye."

"The *Dragon Wing* is owned by the Blackmoor Shipping Company, a front for the Empire. They handle supplies for the army, which has mobilized to an alarming degree recently, conscripting soldiers among the peasants and commandeering horses, asses, and oxen." Jeod raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure what it indicates, but it's possible Galbatorix means to march on Surda. In any case, the *Dragon Wing* is to sail for Feinster within the week. She's the finest ship ever built, from a new design by master shipwright Kinnell."

"And you want to pirate her," concluded Roran.

"I do. Not only to spite the Empire or because the *Dragon Wing* is reputed to be the fastest square-rigged ship of her tonnage, but because she's already fully provisioned for a long voyage. And since her cargo is food, we'd have enough for the whole village."

Loring uttered a strained cackle. "I 'ope you can sail her yourself, Longshanks, 'cause not one of us knows how to handle anything larger than a barge."

"A few men from the crews of my ships are still in Teirm. They're in the same position I am, unable to fight or flee. I'm confident they'll jump at a chance to get to Surda. They can teach you what to do on the *Dragon Wing*. It won't be easy, but I don't see much choice in the matter."

Roran grinned. The plan was to his liking: swift, decisive, and unexpected.

"You mentioned," said Birgit, "that in the past year none of your ships—nor those from other merchants who serve the Varden—have reached their destination. Why, then, should this mission succeed when so many have failed?"

Jeod was quick to answer: "Because surprise is on our side. The law requires merchant ships to submit their itinerary for approval with the port authority at least two weeks before departure. It takes a great deal of time to prepare a ship for launch, so if we leave without warning, it could be a week or more before Galbatorix can launch intercept vessels. If luck is with us, we won't see so much as the topmast of our pursuers. So," continued Jeod, "if you are willing to attempt this enterprise, this is what we must do…."

ESCAPE

After they considered Jeod's proposal from every possible angle and agreed to abide by it—with a few modifications—Roran sent Nolfavrell to fetch Gertrude and Mandel from the Green Chestnut, for Jeod had offered their entire party his hospitality.

"Now, if you will excuse me," said Jeod, rising, "I must go reveal to my wife that which I should never have hidden from her and ask if she'll accompany me to Surda. You may take your pick of rooms on the second floor. Rolf will summon you when supper is ready." With long, slow steps, he departed the study.

"Is it wise to let him tell that ogress?" asked Loring.

Roran shrugged. "Wise or not, we can't stop him. And I don't think he'll be at peace until he does."

Instead of going to a room, Roran wandered through the mansion, unconsciously evading the servants as he pondered the things Jeod had said. He stopped at a bay window open to the stables at the rear of the house and filled his lungs with the brisk and smoky air, heavy with the familiar smell of manure.

"Do you hate him?"

He started and turned to see Birgit silhouetted in the doorway. She pulled her shawl tight around her shoulders as she approached.

"Who?" he asked, knowing full well.

"Eragon. Do you hate him?"

Roran looked at the darkening sky. "I don't know. I hate him for causing the death of my father, but he's still family and for that I love him.… I suppose that if I didn't need Eragon to save Katrina, I would have nothing to do with him for a long while yet."

"As I need and hate you, Stronghammer."

He snorted with grim amusement. "Aye, we're joined at the hip, aren't we? You have to help me find Eragon in order to avenge Quimby on the Ra'zac."

"And to have my vengeance on you afterward."

"That too." Roran stared into her unwavering eyes for a moment, acknowledging the bond between them. He found it strangely comforting to know that they shared the same drive, the same angry fire that quickened their steps when others faltered. In her, he recognized a kindred spirit.

Returning through the house, Roran stopped by the dining room as

he heard the cadence of Jeod's voice. Curious, he fit his eye to a crack by the middle door hinge. Jeod stood opposite a slight, blond woman, who Roran assumed was Helen.

"If what you say is true, how can you expect me to trust you?"

"I cannot," answered Jeod.

"Yet you ask me to become a fugitive for you?"

"You once offered to leave your family and wander the land with me. You begged me to spirit you away from Teirm."

"Once. I thought you were terribly dashing then, what with your sword and your scar."

"I still have those," he said softly. "I made many mistakes with you, Helen; I understand that now. But I still love you and want you to be safe. I have no future here. If I stay, I'll only bring grief to your family. You can return to your father or you can come with me. Do what will make you the happiest. However, I beg you to give me a second chance, to have the courage to leave this place and shed the bitter memories of our life here. We can start anew in Surda."

She was quiet for a long time. "That young man who was here, is he really a Rider?"

"He is. The winds of change are blowing, Helen. The Varden are about to attack, the dwarves are gathering, and even the elves stir in their ancient haunts. War approaches, and if we're fortunate, so does Galbatorix's downfall."

"Are you important among the Varden?"

"They owe me some consideration for my part in acquiring Saphira's egg."

"Then you would have a position with them in Surda?"

"I imagine so." He put his hands on her shoulders, and she did not draw away.

She whispered, "Jeod, Jeod, don't press me. I cannot decide yet."

"Will you think about it?"

She shivered. "Oh yes. I'll think about it."

Roran's heart pained him as he left.

Katrina.

That night at dinner, Roran noticed Helen's eyes were often upon him, studying and measuring—comparing him, he was sure, to Eragon.

After the meal, Roran beckoned to Mandel and led him out into the courtyard behind the house.

"What is it, sir?" asked Mandel.

"I wished to talk with you in private."

"About what?"

Roran fingered the pitted blade of his hammer and reflected on how much he felt like Garrow when his father gave a lecture on

responsibility; Roran could even feel the same phrases rising in his throat. *And so one generation passes to the next*, he thought. “You’ve become quite friendly with the sailors as of late.”

“They’re not our enemies,” objected Mandel.

“Everyone is an enemy at this point. Clovis and his men could turn on us in an instant. It wouldn’t be a problem, though, if being with them hadn’t caused you to neglect your duties.” Mandel stiffened and color bloomed in his cheeks, but he did not lower himself in Roran’s esteem by denying the charge. Pleased, Roran asked, “What is the most important thing we can do right now, Mandel?”

“Protect our families.”

“Aye. And what else?”

Mandel hesitated, uncertain, then confessed, “I don’t know.”

“Help one another. It’s the only way any of us are going to survive. I was especially disappointed to learn that you’ve gambled food with the sailors, since that endangers the entire village. Your time would be far better spent hunting than playing games of dice or learning to throw knives. With your father gone, it’s fallen upon *you* to care for your mother and siblings. They rely on you. Am I clear?”

“Very clear, sir,” replied Mandel with a choked voice.

“Will this ever happen again?”

“Never again, sir.”

“Good. Now I didn’t bring you here just to chastise you. You show promise, which is why I’m giving you a task that I would trust to no one else but myself.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Tomorrow morning I need you to return to camp and deliver a message to Horst. Jeod believes the Empire has spies watching this house, so it’s vital that you make sure you aren’t followed. Wait until you’re out of the city, then lose whoever is trailing you in the countryside. Kill him if you have to. When you find Horst, tell him to …” As Roran outlined his instructions, he watched Mandel’s expression change from surprise, to shock, and then to awe.

“What if Clovis objects?” asked Mandel.

“That night, break the tillers on the barges so they can’t be steered. It’s a dirty trick, but it could be disastrous if Clovis or any of his men arrive at Teirm before you.”

“I won’t let that happen,” vowed Mandel.

Roran smiled. “Good.” Satisfied that he had resolved the matter of Mandel’s behavior and that the young man would do everything possible to get the message to Horst, Roran went back inside and bade their host good night before heading off to sleep.

With the exception of Mandel, Roran and his companions confined

themselves to the mansion throughout the following day, taking advantage of the delay to rest, hone their weapons, and review their stratagems.

From dawn till dusk, they saw some of Helen as she bustled from one room to the next, more of Rolf with his teeth like varnished pearls, and none of Jeod, for the gray-pated merchant had left to walk the city and—seemingly by accident—meet with the few men of the sea whom he trusted for their expedition.

Upon his return, he told Roran, “We can count on five more hands. I only hope it’s enough.” Jeod remained in his study for the rest of the evening, drawing up various legal documents and otherwise tending to his affairs.

Three hours before dawn, Roran, Loring, Birgit, Gertrude, and Nolfavrell roused themselves and, fighting back prodigious yawns, congregated in the mansion’s entryway, where they muffled themselves in long cloaks to obscure their faces. A rapier hung at Jeod’s side when he joined them, and Roran thought the narrow sword somehow completed the rangy man, as if it reminded Jeod who he really was.

Jeod lit an oil lantern and held it up before them. “Are we ready?” he asked. They nodded. Then Jeod unlatched the door and they filed outside to the empty cobblestone street. Behind them, Jeod lingered in the entryway, casting a longing gaze toward the stairs on the right, but Helen did not appear. With a shudder, Jeod left his home and closed the door.

Roran put a hand on his arm. “What’s done is done.”

“I know.”

They trotted through the dark city, slowing to a quick walk whenever they encountered watchmen or a fellow creature of the night, most of whom darted away at the sight of them. Once they heard footsteps on top of a nearby building. “The design of the city,” explained Jeod, “makes it easy for thieves to climb from one roof to another.”

They slowed to a walk again when they arrived at Teirm’s eastern gate. Because the gate opened to the harbor, it was closed only four hours each night in order to minimize the disruption to commerce. Indeed, despite the time, several men were already moving through the gate.

Even though Jeod had warned them it might happen, Roran still felt a surge of fear when the guards lowered their pikes and asked what their business was. He wet his mouth and tried not to fidget while the elder soldier examined a scroll that Jeod handed to him. After a long minute, the guard nodded and returned the parchment. “You can pass.”

Once they were on the wharf and out of earshot of the city wall, Jeod said, “It’s a good thing he couldn’t read.”

The six of them waited on the damp planking until, one by one, Jeod’s men emerged from the gray mist that lay upon the shore. They were grim and silent, with braided hair that hung to the middle of their backs, tar-smeared hands, and an assortment of scars even Roran respected. He liked what he saw, and he could tell they approved of him as well. They did not, however, take to Birgit.

One of the sailors, a large brute of a man, jerked a thumb at her and accused Jeod, “You didn’t say there’d be a woman along for the fightin’. How am I supposed to concentrate with some backwoods tramp getting in m’ way?”

“Don’t talk about her like that,” said Nolfavrell between clenched teeth.

“An’ her runt too?”

In a calm voice, Jeod said, “Birgit has fought the Ra’zac. And her son has already killed one of Galbatorix’s best soldiers. Can you claim as much, Uthar?”

“It’s not proper,” said another man. “I wouldn’t feel safe with a woman at my side; they do naught but bring bad luck. A lady shouldn’t—”

Whatever he was going to say was lost, for at that instant, Birgit did a very unladylike thing. Stepping forward, she kicked Uthar between his legs and then grabbed the second man and pressed her knife against his throat. She held him for a moment, so everyone could see what she had done, then released her captive. Uthar rolled on the boards by her feet, holding himself and muttering a stream of curses.

“Does anyone else have an objection?” demanded Birgit. Beside her, Nolfavrell stared with openmouthed amazement at his mother.

Roran pulled his hood lower to conceal his grin. *Good thing they haven’t noticed Gertrude*, he thought.

When no one else challenged Birgit, Jeod asked, “Did you bring what I wanted?” Each sailor reached inside his vest and divulged a weighted club and several lengths of rope.

Thus armed, they worked their way down the harbor toward the *Dragon Wing*, doing their best to escape detection. Jeod kept his lantern shuttered the whole while. Near the dock, they hid behind a warehouse and watched the two lights carried by sentries bob around the deck of the ship. The gangway had been pulled away for the night.

“Remember,” whispered Jeod, “the most important thing is to keep the alarm from being sounded until we’re ready to leave.”

“Two men above, two men below, right?” asked Roran.

Uthar replied, “That be the custom.”

Roran and Uthar stripped to their breeches, tied the rope and clubs

around their waists—Roran left his hammer behind—and then ran farther down the wharf, out of the sentries' sight, where they lowered themselves into the frigid water.

"Garr, I hate when I have to do this," said Uthar.

"You've done it before?"

"Four times now. Don't stop moving or you'll freeze."

Clinging to the slimy piles underneath the wharf, they swam back up the way they had come until they reached the stone pier that led to the *Dragon Wing*, and then turned right. Uthar put his lips to Roran's ear. "I'll take the starboard anchor." Roran nodded his agreement.

They both dove under the black water, and there they separated. Uthar swam like a frog under the bow of the ship, while Roran went straight to the port anchor and clung to its thick chain. He untied the club from his waist and fit it between his teeth—as much to stop them from chattering as to free his hands—and prepared to wait. The rough metal sapped the warmth from his arms as fast as ice.

Not three minutes later, Roran heard the scuff of Birgit's boots above him as she walked to the end of the pier, opposite the middle of the *Dragon Wing*, and then the faint sound of her voice as she engaged the sentries in conversation. Hopefully, she would keep their attention away from the bow.

Now!

Roran pulled himself hand over hand along the chain. His right shoulder burned where the Ra'zac had bit him, but he pressed on. From the porthole where the anchor chain entered the ship, he clambered up the ridges that supported the painted figurehead, over the railing, and onto the deck. Uthar was already there, dripping and panting.

Clubs in hand, they padded toward the aft of the ship, using whatever cover they could find. They stopped not ten feet behind the sentries. The two men leaned on the railing, bandying words with Birgit.

In a flash, Roran and Uthar burst into the open and struck the sentries on the head before they could draw their sabers. Below, Birgit waved for Jeod and the rest of their group, and between them they raised the gangway and slid one end across to the ship, where Uthar lashed it to the railing.

As Nolfavrell ran aboard, Roran tossed his rope to the boy and said, "Tie and gag these two."

Then everyone but Gertrude descended belowdecks to hunt for the remaining sentries. They found four additional men—the purser, the bosun, the ship's cook, and the ship's cook's assistant—all of whom were trundled out of bed, knocked on the head if they resisted, and then securely trussed. In this, Birgit again proved her worth, capturing

two men herself.

Jeod had the unhappy prisoners placed in a line on the deck so they could be watched at all times, then declared, “We have much to do, and little time. Roran, Uthar is captain on the *Dragon Wing*. You and the others will take your orders from him.”

For the next two hours, the ship was a frenzy of activity. The sailors tended to the rigging and sails, while Roran and those from Carvahall worked to empty the hold of extraneous supplies, such as bales of raw wool. These they lowered overboard to prevent anyone on the wharf from hearing a splash. If the entire village was to fit on the *Dragon Wing*, they needed to clear as much space as possible.

Roran was in the midst of fitting a cable around a barrel when he heard the hoarse cry, “Someone’s coming!” Everyone on deck, except Jeod and Uthar, dropped to their bellies and reached for their weapons. The two men who remained standing paced the ship as if they were sentries. Roran’s heart pounded while he lay motionless, wondering what was about to happen. He held his breath as Jeod addressed the intruder … then footsteps echoed on the gangway.

It was Helen.

She wore a plain dress, her hair was bound under a kerchief, and she carried a burlap sack over one shoulder. She spoke not a word, but stowed her gear in the main cabin and returned to stand by Jeod. Roran thought he had never seen a happier man.

The sky above the distant mountains of the Spine had just begun to brighten when one of the sailors in the rigging pointed north and whistled to indicate he had spotted the villagers.

Roran moved even faster. What time they had was now gone. He rushed up on deck and peered at the dark line of people advancing down the coast. This part of their plan depended on the fact that, unlike other coastal cities, Teirm’s outer wall had not been left open to the sea, but rather completely enclosed the bulk of the city in order to ward off frequent pirate attacks. This meant that the buildings skirting the harbor were left exposed—and that the villagers could walk right up to the *Dragon Wing*.

“Hurry now, hurry!” said Jeod.

At Uthar’s command, the sailors brought out armfuls of javelins for the great bows on deck, as well as casks of foul-smelling tar, which they knocked open and used to paint the upper half of the javelins. They then drew and loaded the ballistae on the starboard side; it took two men per bow to pull out the sinew cord until it caught on its hook.

The villagers were two-thirds of the way to the ship before the soldiers patrolling the battlements of Teirm spotted them and trumpeted the alarm. Even before that first note faded, Uthar

bellowed, “Light and fire ’em!”

Dashing open Jeod’s lantern, Nolfavrell ran from one ballista to the next, holding the flame to the javelins until the tar ignited. The instant a missile caught, the man behind the bow pulled the release line and the javelin vanished with a heavy *thunk*. In all, twelve blazing bolts shot from the *Dragon Wing* and pierced the ships and buildings along the bay like roaring, red-hot meteors from the heavens above.

“Draw and reload!” shouted Uthar.

The creak of bending wood filled the air as every man hauled back on the twisted cords. Javelins were slotted in place. Once again, Nolfavrell made his run. Roran could feel the vibration in his feet as the ballista in front of him sent its deadly projectile winging on its way.

The fire quickly spread along the waterfront, forming an impenetrable barrier that prevented soldiers from reaching the *Dragon Wing* though Teirm’s east gate. Roran had counted on the pillar of smoke to hide the ship from the archers on the battlements, but it was a near thing; a flight of arrows tugged at the rigging, and one dart embedded itself in the deck by Gertrude before the soldiers lost sight of the ship.

From the bow, Uthar shouted, “Pick your targets at will!”

The villagers were running pell-mell down the beach now. They reached the north end of the wharf, and a handful of them stumbled and fell as the soldiers in Teirm redirected their aim. Children screamed in terror. Then the villagers regained momentum. They pounded down the planks, past a warehouse engulfed in flame and along the pier. The panting mob charged onto the ship in a confused mass of jostling bodies.

Birgit and Gertrude guided the stream of people to the fore and aft hatches. In a few minutes, the various levels of the ship were packed to their limit, from the cargo hold to the captain’s cabin. Those who could not fit below remained huddled on deck, holding Fisk’s shields over their heads.

As Roran had asked in his message, all able-bodied men from Carvahall clustered around the mainmast, waiting for instructions. Roran saw Mandel among them and tossed him a proud salute.

Then Uthar pointed at a sailor and barked, “You there, Bonden! Get those swabs to the capstans and weigh anchors, then down to the oars. Double time!” To the rest of the men at the ballistae, he ordered, “Half of you leave off and take the port ballistae. Drive away any boarding parties.”

Roran was one of those who switched sides. As he prepared the ballistae, a few laggards staggered out of the acrid smoke and onto the ship. Beside him, Jeod and Helen hoisted the six prisoners one by one

onto the gangway and rolled them onto the pier.

Before Roran quite knew it, anchors had been raised, the gangway was cut loose, and a drum pounded beneath his feet, setting the tempo for the oarsmen. Ever so slowly, the *Dragon Wing* turned to starboard —toward the open sea—and then, with gathering speed, pulled away from the dock.

Roran accompanied Jeod to the quarterdeck, where they watched the crimson inferno devour everything flammable between Teirm and the ocean. Through the filter of smoke, the sun appeared a flat, bloated, bloody orange disk as it rose over the city.

How many have I killed now? wondered Roran.

Echoing his thoughts, Jeod observed, "This will harm a great many innocent people."

Guilt made Roran respond with more force than he intended: "Would you rather be in Lord Risthart's prisons? I doubt many will be injured in the blaze, and those that aren't won't face death, like we will if the Empire catches us."

"You needn't lecture me, Roran. I know the arguments well enough. We did what we had to. Just don't ask me to take pleasure in the suffering we've caused to ensure our own safety."

By noon the oars had been stowed and the *Dragon Wing* sailed under her own power, propelled by favorable winds from the north. The gusts of air caused the rigging overhead to emit a low hum.

The ship was miserably overcrowded, but Roran was confident that with some careful planning they could make it to Surda with a minimum of discomfort. The worst inconvenience was that of limited rations; if they were to avoid starvation, food would have to be dispensed in miserly portions. And in such cramped quarters, disease was an all too likely possibility.

After Uthar gave a brief speech about the importance of discipline on a ship, the villagers applied themselves to the tasks that required their immediate attention, such as tending to their wounded, unpacking their meager belongings, and deciding upon the most efficient sleeping arrangement for each deck. They also had to choose people to fill the various positions on the *Dragon Wing:* who would cook, who would train as sailors under Uthar's men, and so forth.

Roran was helping Elain hang a hammock when he became embroiled in a heated dispute between Odele, her family, and Frewin, who had apparently deserted Torson's crew to stay with Odele. The two of them wanted to marry, which Odele's parents vehemently opposed on the grounds that the young sailor lacked a family of his own, a respectable profession, and the means to provide even a modicum of comfort for their daughter. Roran thought it best if the

enamored couple remained together—it seemed impractical to try and separate them while they remained confined to the same ship—but Odele's parents refused to give his arguments credence.

Frustrated, Roran said, "What would you do, then? You can't lock her away, and I believe Frewin has proved his devotion more than—"

"Ra'zac!"

The cry came from the crow's nest.

Without a second thought, Roran yanked his hammer from his belt, whirled about, and scrambled up the ladder through the fore hatchway, barking his shin on the way. He sprinted toward the knot of people on the quarterdeck, coming to a halt beside Horst.

The smith pointed.

One of the Ra'zac's dread steeds drifted like a tattered shadow above the edge of the coastline, a Ra'zac on its back. Seeing the two monsters exposed in daylight in no way diminished the creeping horror they inspired in Roran. He shuddered as the winged creature uttered its terrifying shriek, and then the Ra'zac's insectile voice drifted across the water, faint but distinct: *"You shall not essscape!"*

Roran looked at the ballistae, but they could not turn far enough to aim at the Ra'zac or its mount. "Does anyone have a bow?"

"I do," said Baldor. He dropped to one knee and began to string his weapon. "Don't let them see me." Everyone on the quarterdeck gathered in a tight circle around Baldor, shielding him with their bodies from the Ra'zac's malevolent gaze.

"Why don't they attack?" growled Horst.

Puzzled, Roran searched for an explanation but found none. It was Jeod who suggested, "Perhaps it's too bright for them. The Ra'zac hunt at night, and so far as I know they do not willingly venture forth from their lairs while the sun is yet in the sky."

"It's not just that," said Gertrude slowly. "I think they're afraid of the ocean."

"Afraid of the ocean?" scoffed Horst.

"Watch them; they don't fly more than a yard over the water at any given time."

"She's right," said Roran. *At last, a weakness I can use against them!*

A few seconds later, Baldor said, "Ready!"

At his word, the ranks of people who stood before him jumped aside, clearing the path for his arrow. Baldor sprang to his feet and, in a single motion, pulled the feather to his cheek and loosed the reed shaft.

It was a heroic shot. The Ra'zac was at the extreme edge of a longbow's range—far beyond any mark Roran had seen an archer hit—and yet Baldor's aim was true. His arrow struck the flying creature on the right flank, and the beast gave a scream of pain so great that

the glass on the deck was shattered and the stones on the shore were riven in shards. Roran clapped his hands over his ears to protect them from the hideous blast. Still screaming, the monster veered inland and dropped behind a line of misty hills.

"Did you kill it?" asked Jeod, his face pale.

"I fear not," replied Baldor. "It was naught but a flesh wound."

Loring, who had just arrived, observed with satisfaction, "Aye. But at least you hurt him, and I'd wager they'll think twice about bothering us again."

Gloom settled over Roran. "Save your triumph for later, Loring. This was no victory."

"Why not?" demanded Horst.

"Because now the Empire knows exactly where we are." The quarterdeck fell silent as they grasped the implications of what he had said.

CHILD'S PLAY

"And this," said Trianna, "is the latest pattern we've invented."

Nasuada took the black veil from the sorceress and ran it through her hands, marveling at its quality. No human could throw lace that fine. She gazed with satisfaction at the rows of boxes on her desk, which contained samples of the many designs Du Vrangr Gata now produced. "You've done well," she said. "Far better than I had hoped. Tell your spellcasters how pleased I am with their work. It means much to the Varden."

Trianna inclined her head at the praise. "I will convey your message to them, Lady Nasuada."

"Have they yet—"

A disturbance at the doors to her quarters interrupted Nasuada. She heard her guards swear and raise their voices, then a yelp of pain. The sound of metal clashing on metal rang in the hallway. Nasuada backed away from the door in alarm, drawing her dagger from its sheath.

"Run, Lady!" said Trianna. The sorceress placed herself in front of Nasuada and pushed back her sleeves, baring her white arms in preparation to work magic. "Take the servants' entrance."

Before Nasuada could move, the doors burst open and a small figure tackled her legs, knocking her to the floor. Even as Nasuada fell, a silvery object flashed through the space she had just occupied, burying itself in the far wall with a dull *thud*.

Then the four guards entered, and all was confusion as Nasuada felt them drag her assailant off her. When Nasuada managed to stand, she saw Elva hanging in their grip.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Nasuada.

The black-haired girl smiled, then doubled over and retched on the braided rug. Afterward, she fixed her violet eyes on Nasuada and—in her terrible, knowing voice—she said, "Have your magician examine the wall, O Daughter of Ajihad, and see if I have not fulfilled my promise to you."

Nasuada nodded to Trianna, who glided to the splintered hole in the wall and muttered a spell. She returned holding a metal dart. "This was buried in the wood."

"But where did it come from?" asked Nasuada, bewildered.

Trianna gestured toward the open window overlooking the city of Aberon. "Somewhere out there, I guess."

Nasuada returned her attention to the waiting child. “What do you know about this, Elva?”

The girl’s horrible smile widened. “It was an assassin.”

“Who sent him?”

“An assassin trained by Galbatorix himself in the dark uses of magic.” Her burning eyes grew half-lidded, as if she were in a trance. “The man hates you. He’s coming for you. He would have killed you if I hadn’t stopped him.” She lurched forward and retched again, spewing half-digested food across the floor. Nasuada gagged with revulsion. “And he’s about to suffer great pain.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I will tell you he stays in the hostel on Fane Street, in the last room, on the top floor. You had better hurry, or he’ll get away … away.” She groaned like a wounded beast and clutched her belly. “Hurry, before Eragon’s spell forces me to stop you from hurting him. You’ll be sorry, then!”

Trianna was already moving as Nasuada said, “Tell Jörmundur what’s happened, then take your strongest magicians and hunt down this man. Capture him if you can. Kill him if you can’t.” After the sorceress left, Nasuada looked at her men and saw that their legs were bleeding from numerous small cuts. She realized what it must have cost Elva to hurt them. “Go,” she told them. “Find a healer who can mend your injuries.”

The warriors shook their heads, and their captain said, “No, Ma’am. We will stay by your side until we know it’s safe again.”

“As you see fit, Captain.”

The men barricaded the windows—which worsened the already sweltering heat that plagued Borromeo Castle—then everyone retreated to her inner chambers for further protection.

Nasuada paced, her heart pounding with delayed shock as she contemplated how close she had come to being killed. *What would become of the Varden if I died?* she wondered. *Who would succeed me?* Dismay gripped her; she had made no arrangements for the Varden in the event of her own demise, an oversight that now seemed a monumental failing. *I won’t allow the Varden to be thrown into chaos because I failed to take precautions!*

She halted. “I am in your debt, Elva.”

“Now and forever.”

Nasuada faltered, disconcerted as she often was by the girl’s responses, then continued: “I apologize for not ordering my guards to let you pass, night or day. I should have anticipated an event like this.”

“You should have,” agreed Elva in a mocking tone.

Smoothing the front of her dress, Nasuada resumed pacing, as much

to escape the sight of Elva's stone-white, dragon-marked face as to disperse her own nervous energy. "How did you escape your rooms unaccompanied?"

"I told my caretaker, Greta, what she wanted to hear."

"That's all?"

Elva blinked. "It made her very happy."

"And what of Angela?"

"She left on an errand this morning."

"Well, be as that may, you have my gratitude for saving my life. Ask me any boon you want and I shall grant it if it's within my power."

Elva glanced around the ornate bedroom, then said, "Do you have any food? I'm hungry."

Two hours later, Trianna returned, leading a pair of warriors who carried a limp body between them. At Trianna's word, the men dropped the corpse on the floor. Then the sorceress said, "We found the assassin where Elva said we would. Drail was his name."

Motivated by a morbid curiosity, Nasuada examined the face of the man who had tried to kill her. The assassin was short, bearded, and plain-looking, no different from countless other men in the city. She felt a certain connection to him, as if his attempt on her life and the fact that she had arranged his death in return linked them in the most intimate manner possible. "How was he killed?" she asked. "I see no marks on his body."

"He committed suicide with magic when we overwhelmed his defenses and entered his mind, but before we could take control of his actions."

"Were you able to learn anything of use before he died?"

"We were. Drail was part of a network of agents based here in Surda who are loyal to Galbatorix. They are called the Black Hand. They spy on us, sabotage our war efforts, and—best we could determine in our brief glimpse into Drail's memories—are responsible for dozens of murders throughout the Varden. Apparently, they've been waiting for a good chance to kill you ever since we arrived from Farthen Dûr."

"Why hasn't this Black Hand assassinated King Orrin yet?"

Trianna shrugged. "I can't say. It may be that Galbatorix considers you to be more of a threat than Orrin. If that's the case, then once the Black Hand realizes you are protected from their attacks"—here her gaze darted toward Elva—"Orrin won't live another month unless he is guarded by magicians day and night. Or perhaps Galbatorix has abstained from such direct action because he wanted the Black Hand to remain unnoticed. Surda has always existed at his tolerance. Now that it's become a threat …"

"Can you protect Orrin as well?" asked Nasuada, turning to Elva.

Her violet eyes seemed to glow. "Maybe if he asks nicely."

Nasuada's thoughts raced as she considered how to thwart this new menace. "Can all of Galbatorix's agents use magic?"

"Drail's mind was confused, so it's hard to tell," said Trianna, "but I'd guess a fair number of them can."

Magic, cursed Nasuada to herself. The greatest danger the Varden

faced from magicians—or any person trained in the use of their mind—was not assassination, but rather espionage. Magicians could spy on people's thoughts and glean information that could be used to destroy the Varden. That was precisely why Nasuada and the entire command structure of the Varden had been taught to know when someone was touching their minds and how to shield themselves from such attentions. Nasuada suspected that Orrin and Hrothgar relied upon similar precautions within their own governments.

However, since it was impractical for everyone privy to potentially damaging information to master that skill, one of Du Vrangr Gata's many responsibilities was to hunt for anyone who was siphoning off facts as they appeared in people's minds. The cost of such vigilance was that Du Vrangr Gata ended up spying on the Varden as much as on their enemies, a fact that Nasuada made sure to conceal from the bulk of her followers, for it would only sow hatred, distrust, and dissent. She disliked the practice but saw no alternative.

What she had learned about the Black Hand hardened Nasuada's conviction that, somehow, magicians had to be governed.

"Why," she asked, "didn't you discover this sooner? I can understand that you might miss a lone assassin, but an entire network of spellcasters dedicated to our destruction? Explain yourself, Trianna."

The sorceress's eyes flashed with anger at the accusation. "Because here, unlike in Farthen Dûr, we cannot examine everyone's minds for duplicity. There are just too many people for us magicians to keep track of. *That* is why we didn't know about the Black Hand until now, Lady Nasuada."

Nasuada paused, then inclined her head. "Understood. Did you discover the identities of any other members of the Black Hand?"

"A few."

"Good. Use them to ferret out the rest of the agents. I want you to destroy this organization for me, Trianna. Eradicate them as you would an infestation of vermin. I'll give you however many men you need."

The sorceress bowed. "As you wish, Lady Nasuada."

At a knock on the door, the guards drew their swords and positioned themselves on either side of the entranceway, then their captain yanked open the door without warning. A young page stood outside, a fist raised to knock again. He stared with astonishment at the body on the floor, then snapped to attention as the captain asked, "What is it, boy?"

"I have a message for Lady Nasuada from King Orrin."

"Then speak and be quick about it," said Nasuada.

The page took a moment to compose himself. "King Orrin requests

that you attend him directly in his council chambers, for he has received reports from the Empire that demand your immediate attention."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I must attend to this. Trianna, you have your orders. Captain, will you leave one of your men to dispose of Drail?"

"Aye, Ma'am."

"Also, please have him locate Farica, my handmaid. She will see to it that my study is cleaned."

"And what of me?" asked Elva, tilting her head.

"You," said Nasuada, "shall accompany me. That is, if you feel strong enough to do so."

The girl threw back her head, and from her small, round mouth emanated a cold laugh. "I'm strong enough, Nasuada. Are you?"

Ignoring the question, Nasuada swept forth into the hallway with her guards clustered around her. The stones of the castle exuded an earthy smell in the heat. Behind her, she heard the patter of Elva's footsteps and was perversely pleased that the ghastly child had to hurry to keep pace with the adults' longer stride.

The guards remained behind in the vestibule to the council chambers while Nasuada and Elva proceeded inside. The chambers were bare to the point of severity, reflecting the militant nature of Surda's existence. The country's kings had devoted their resources to protecting their people and overthrowing Galbatorix, not to decorating Borromeo Castle with idle riches as the dwarves had done with Tronjheim.

In the main room lay a rough-hewn table twelve feet long, upon which a map of Alagaësia was staked open with daggers at the four corners. As was custom, Orrin sat at the head of the table, while his various advisers—many of whom, Nasuada knew, vehemently opposed her—occupied the chairs farther down. The Council of Elders was also present. Nasuada noticed the concern on Jörmundur's face as he looked at her and deduced that Trianna had indeed told him about Drail.

"Sire, you asked for me?"

Orrin rose. "That I did. We have now—" He stopped in midword as he noticed Elva. "Ah, yes, Shining Brow. I have not had the opportunity to grant you audience before, though accounts of your feats have reached my ear and, I must confess, I have been most curious to meet you. Have you found the quarters I arranged for you satisfactory?"

"They are quite nice, Sire. Thank you." At the sound of her eerie voice, the voice of an adult, everyone at the table flinched.

Irwin, the prime minister, bolted upright and pointed a quivering finger at Elva. “Why have you brought this … this *abomination* here?”

“You forget your manners, sir,” replied Nasuada, though she understood his sentiment.

Orrin frowned. “Yes, do restrain yourself, Irwin. However, his point is valid, Nasuada; we cannot have this child present at our deliberations.”

“The Empire,” she said, “has just tried to assassinate me.” The room echoed with cries of surprise. “If it were not for Elva’s swift action, I would be dead. As a result, I have taken her into my confidence; where I go, she goes.” *Let them wonder what it is exactly Elva can do*.

“This is indeed distressing news!” exclaimed the king. “Have you caught the blackguard responsible?”

Seeing the eager expressions of his advisers, Nasuada hesitated. “It would be best to wait until I can give you an account in private, Sire.”

Orrin appeared put out by her response, but he did not pursue the issue. “Very well. But sit, sit! We have just received the most troubling report.” After Nasuada took her place opposite him—Elva lurking behind her—he continued: “It seems that our spies in Gil’ead have been deceived as to the status of Galbatorix’s army.”

“How so?”

“They believe the army to be *in* Gil’ead, whereas we have here a missive from one of our men in Urû’baen, who says that he witnessed a great host march south past the capital a week and a half ago. It was night, so he could not be sure of their numbers, but he was certain that the host was far larger than the sixteen thousand that form the core of Galbatorix’s troops. There may have been as many as a hundred thousand soldiers, or more.”

A hundred thousand! A cold pit of fear settled in Nasuada’s stomach. “Can we trust your source?”

“His intelligence has always been reliable.”

“I don’t understand,” said Nasuada. “How could Galbatorix move that many men without our knowing of it before? The supply trains alone would be miles long. It’s been obvious the army was mobilizing, but the Empire was nowhere near ready to deploy.”

Falberd spoke then, slapping a heavy hand on the table for emphasis: “We were outfoxed. Our spies must have been deceived with magic to think the army was still in their barracks in Gil’ead.”

Nasuada felt the blood drain from her face. “The only person strong enough to sustain an illusion of that size and duration—”

“Is Galbatorix himself,” completed Orrin. “That was our conclusion. It means that Galbatorix has finally abandoned his lair in favor of open combat. Even as we speak, the black foe approaches.”

Irwin leaned forward. “The question now is how we should respond.

We must confront this threat, of course, but in what manner? Where, when, and how? Our own forces aren't prepared for a campaign of this magnitude, while yours, Lady Nasuada—the Varden—are already accustomed to the fierce clamor of war."

"What do you mean to imply?" *That we should die for you?*

"I but made an observation. Take it how you will."

Then Orrin said, "Alone, we will be crushed against an army so large. We must have allies, and above all else we must have Eragon, especially if we are to confront Galbatorix. Nasuada, will you send for him?"

"I would if I could, but until Arya returns, I have no way to contact the elves or to summon Eragon."

"In that case," said Orrin in a heavy voice, "we must hope that she arrives before it is too late. I do not suppose we can expect the elves' assistance in this affair. While a dragon may traverse the leagues between Aberon and Ellesméra with the speed of a falcon, it would be impossible for the elves to marshal themselves and cross that same distance before the Empire reaches us. That leaves only the dwarves. I know that you have been friends with Hrothgar for many years; will you send him a plea for help on our behalf? The dwarves have always promised they would fight when the time came."

Nasuada nodded. "Du Vrangr Gata has an arrangement with certain dwarf magicians that allows us to transfer messages instantaneously. I will convey your—*our*—request. And I will ask Hrothgar to send an emissary to Ceris to inform the elves of the situation so that they are forewarned, if nothing else."

"Good. We are quite a ways from Farthen Dûr, but if we can delay the Empire for even a week, the dwarves might be able to get here in time."

The discussion that followed was an exceedingly grim one. Various tactics existed for defeating a larger—although not necessarily superior—force, but no one at the table could imagine how they might defeat Galbatorix, especially when Eragon was still so powerless compared to the ancient king. The only ploy that might succeed would be to surround Eragon with as many magicians, dwarf and human, as possible, and then attempt to force Galbatorix to confront them alone. *The problem with that plan*, thought Nasuada, *is that Galbatorix overcame far more formidable enemies during his destruction of the Riders, and his strength has only grown since*. She was certain that this had occurred to everyone else as well. *If we but had the elves' spellweavers to swell our ranks, then victory might be within our reach. Without them … If we cannot overthrow Galbatorix, the only avenue left may be to flee Alagaësia across the sundering sea and find a new land in which to build a life for ourselves. There we could wait until Galbatorix is no more. Even he*

cannot endure forever. The only certainty is that, eventually, all things shall pass.

They moved on then from tactics to logistics, and here the debate became far more acrimonious as the Council of Elders argued with Orrin's advisers over the distribution of responsibilities between the Varden and Surda: who should pay for this or that, provide rations for laborers who worked for both groups, manage the provisions for their respective warriors, and how numerous other related subjects should be dealt with.

In the midst of the verbal fray, Orrin pulled a scroll from his belt and said to Nasuada, "On the matter of finances, would you be so kind as to explain a rather curious item that was brought to my attention?"

"I'll do my best, Sire."

"I hold in my hand a complaint from the weavers' guild, which asserts that weavers throughout Surda have lost a good share of their profits because the textile market has been inundated with extraordinarily cheap lace—lace they swear originates with the Varden." A pained look crossed his face. "It seems foolish to even ask, but does their claim have basis in fact, and if so, why would the Varden do such a thing?"

Nasuada made no attempt to hide her smile. "If you remember, Sire, when you refused to lend the Varden more gold, you advised me to find another way for us to support ourselves."

"So I did. What of it?" asked Orrin, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, it struck me that while lace takes a long time to make by hand, which is why it's so expensive, lace is quite easy to produce using magic due to the small amount of energy involved. You of all people, as a natural philosopher, should appreciate that. By selling our lace here and in the Empire, we have been able to fully fund our efforts. The Varden no longer want for food or shelter."

Few things in her life pleased Nasuada so much as Orrin's incredulous expression at that instant. The scroll frozen halfway between his chin and the table, his slightly parted mouth, and the quizzical frown upon his brow conspired to give him the stunned appearance of a man who had just seen something he did not understand. She savored the sight.

"Lace?" he sputtered.

"Yes, Sire."

"You can't fight Galbatorix with lace!"

"Why not, Sire?"

He struggled for a moment, then growled, "Because … because it's not respectable, that's why. What bard would compose an epic about our deeds and write about *lace*?"

"We do not fight in order to have epics written in our praise."

“Then blast epics! How am I supposed to answer the weavers’ guild? By selling your lace so cheaply, you hurt people’s livelihoods and undermine our economy. It won’t do. It won’t do at all.”

Letting her smile become sweet and warm, Nasuada said in her friendliest tone, “Oh dear. If it’s too much of a burden for your treasury, the Varden would be more than willing to offer you a loan in return for the kindness you’ve shown us … at a suitable rate of interest, of course.”

The Council of Elders managed to maintain their decorum, but behind Nasuada, Elva uttered a quick laugh of amusement.

Red Blade, White Blade

The moment the sun appeared over the tree-lined horizon, Eragon deepened his breathing, willed his heart to quicken, and opened his eyes as he returned to full awareness. He had not been asleep, for he had not slept since his transformation. When he felt weary and lay himself down to rest, he entered a state that was unto a waking dream. There he beheld many wondrous visions and walked among the gray shades of his memories, yet all the while remained aware of his surroundings.

He watched the sunrise and thoughts of Arya filled his mind, as they had every hour since the Agaetí Blödhren two days before. The morning after the celebration, he had gone looking for her in Tialdarí Hall—intending to try and make amends for his behavior—only to discover that she had already left for Surda. *When will I see her again?* he wondered. In the clear light of day, he had realized just how much the elves' and dragons' magic had dulled his wits during the Agaetí Blödhren. *I may have acted a fool, but it wasn't entirely my fault. I was no more responsible for my conduct than if I were drunk*.

Still, he had meant every word he said to Arya—even if normally he would not have revealed so much of himself. Her rejection cut Eragon to the quick. Freed of the enchantments that had clouded his mind, he was forced to admit that she was probably right, that the difference between their ages was too great to overcome. It was a difficult thing for him to accept, and once he had, the knowledge only increased his anguish.

Eragon had heard the expression "heartbroken" before. Until then, he always considered it a fanciful description, not an actual physical symptom. But now he felt a deep ache in his chest—like that of a sore muscle—and each beat of his heart pained him.

His only comfort was Saphira. In those two days, she had never criticized what he had done, nor did she leave his side for more than a few minutes at a time, lending him the support of her companionship. She talked to him a great deal as well, doing her best to draw him out of his shell of silence.

To keep himself from brooding over Arya, Eragon took Orik's puzzle ring from his nightstand and rolled it between his fingers, marveling at how keen his senses had become. He could feel every flaw in the twisted metal. As he studied the ring, he perceived a pattern in the

arrangement of the gold bands, a pattern that had escaped him before. Trusting his instinct, he manipulated the bands in the sequence suggested by his observation. To his delight, the eight pieces fit together perfectly, forming a solid whole. He slid the ring onto the fourth finger of his right hand, admiring how the woven bands caught the light.

You could not do that before, observed Saphira from the bowl in the floor where she slept.

I can see many things that were once hidden to me.

Eragon went to the wash closet and performed his morning ablutions, including removing the stubble from his cheeks with a spell. Despite the fact that he now closely resembled an elf, he had retained the ability to grow a beard.

Orik was waiting for them when Eragon and Saphira arrived at the sparring field. His eyes brightened as Eragon lifted his hand and displayed the completed puzzle ring. “You solved it, then!”

“It took me longer than I expected,” said Eragon, “but yes. Are you here to practice as well?”

“Eh. I already got in a bit o’ ax work with an elf who took a rather fiendish delight in cracking me over the head. No … I came to watch you fight.”

“You’ve seen me fight before,” pointed out Eragon.

“Not for a while, I haven’t.”

“You mean you’re curious to see how I’ve changed.” Orik shrugged in response.

Vanir approached from across the field. He cried, “Are you ready, Shadeslayer?” The elf’s condescending demeanor had lessened since their last duel before the Agaetí Blödhren, but not by much.

“I’m ready.”

Eragon and Vanir squared off against each other in an open area of the field. Emptying his mind, Eragon grasped and drew Zar’roc as fast as he could. To his surprise, the sword felt as if it weighed no more than a willow wand. Without the expected resistance, Eragon’s arm snapped straight, tearing the sword from his hand and sending it whirling twenty yards to his right, where it buried itself in the trunk of a pine tree.

“Can you not even hold on to your blade, Rider?” demanded Vanir.

“I apologize, Vanir-vodhr,” gasped Eragon. He clutched his elbow, rubbing the bruised joint to lessen the pain. “I misjudged my strength.”

“See that it does not happen again.” Going to the tree, Vanir gripped Zar’roc’s hilt and tried to pull the sword free. The weapon remained motionless. Vanir’s eyebrows met as he frowned at the unyielding crimson blade, as if he suspected some form of trickery.

Bracing himself, the elf heaved backward and, with the crack of wood, yanked Zar'roc out of the pine.

Eragon accepted the sword from Vanir and hefted Zar'roc, troubled by how light it was. *Something's wrong,* he thought.

"Take your place!"

This time it was Vanir who initiated the fight. In a single bound, he crossed the distance between them and thrust his blade toward Eragon's right shoulder. To Eragon, it seemed as if the elf moved slower than usual, as if Vanir's reflexes had been reduced to the level of a human's. It was easy for Eragon to deflect Vanir's sword, blue sparks flying from the metal as their blades grated against one another.

Vanir landed with an astonished expression. He struck again, and Eragon evaded the sword by leaning back, like a tree swaying in the wind. In quick succession, Vanir rained a score of heavy blows upon Eragon, each of which Eragon dodged or blocked, using Zar'roc's sheath as often as the sword to foil Vanir's onslaught.

Eragon soon realized that the spectral dragon from the Agaetí Blödhren had done more than alter his appearance; it had also granted him the elves' physical abilities. In strength and speed, Eragon now matched even the most athletic elf.

Fired by that knowledge and a desire to test his limits, Eragon jumped as high as he could. Zar'roc flashed crimson in the sunlight as he flew skyward, soaring more than ten feet above the ground before he flipped like an acrobat and came down behind Vanir, facing the direction from which he had started.

A fierce laugh erupted from Eragon. No more was he helpless before elves, Shades, and other creatures of magic. No more would he suffer the elves' contempt. No more would he have to rely on Saphira or Arya to rescue him from enemies like Durza.

He charged Vanir, and the field rang with a furious din as they strove against each other, raging back and forth upon the trampled grass. The force of their blows created gusts of wind that whipped their hair into tangled disarray. Overhead, the trees shook and dropped their needles. The duel lasted long into the morning, for even with Eragon's newfound skill, Vanir was still a formidable opponent. But in the end, Eragon would not be denied. Playing Zar'roc in a circle, he darted past Vanir's guard and struck him upon the upper arm, breaking the bone.

Vanir dropped his blade, his face turning white with shock. "How swift is your sword," he said, and Eragon recognized the famous line from *The Lay of Umhodan*.

"By the gods!" exclaimed Orik. "That was the best swordsmanship I've ever seen, and I was there when you fought Arya in Farthen Dûr."

Then Vanir did what Eragon had never expected: the elf twisted his uninjured hand in the gesture of fealty, placed it upon his sternum, and bowed. “I beg your pardon for my earlier behavior, Eragon-elda. I thought that you had consigned my race to the void, and out of my fear I acted most shamefully. However, it seems that your race no longer endangers our cause.” In a grudging voice, he added: “You are now worthy of the title Rider.”

Eragon bowed in return. “You honor me. I’m sorry that I injured you so badly. Will you allow me to heal your arm?”

“No, I shall let nature tend to it at her own pace, as a memento that I once crossed blades with Eragon Shadeslayer. You needn’t fear that it will disrupt our sparring tomorrow; I am equally good with my left hand.”

They both bowed again, and then Vanir departed.

Orik slapped a hand on his thigh and said, “Now we have a chance at victory, a real chance! I can feel it in my bones. Bones like stone, they say. Ah, this’ll please Hrothgar and Nasuada to no end.”

Eragon kept his peace and concentrated on removing the block from Zar’roc’s edges, but he said to Saphira, *If brawn were all that was required to depose Galbatorix, the elves would have done it long ago*. Still, he could not help being pleased by his heightened prowess, as well as by his long-awaited reprieve from the torment of his back. Without the constant bursts of pain, it was as if a haze had been lifted from his mind, allowing him to think clearly once again.

A few minutes remained before they were supposed to meet with Oromis and Glaedr, so Eragon took his bow and quiver from where they hung on Saphira’s back and walked to the range where elves practiced archery. Since the elves’ bows were much more powerful than his, their padded targets were both too small and too far away for him. He had to shoot from halfway down the range.

Taking his place, Eragon nocked an arrow and slowly pulled back the string, delighted by how easy it had become. He aimed, released the arrow, and held his position, waiting to see if he would hit his mark. Like a maddened hornet, the dart buzzed toward the target and buried itself in the center. He grinned. Again and again, he fired at the target, his speed increasing with his confidence until he loosed thirty arrows in a minute.

At the thirty-first arrow, he pulled on the string slightly harder than he had ever done—or was capable of doing—before. With an explosive report, the yew bow broke in half underneath his left hand, scratching his fingers and discharging a burst of splinters from the back of the bow. His hand went numb from the jolt.

Eragon stared at the remains of his weapon, dismayed by the loss. Garrow had made it as a birthday present for him over three years

ago. Since then, hardly a week went by when Eragon had not used his bow. It had helped him to provide food for his family on numerous occasions when they would have otherwise gone hungry. With it, he had killed his first deer. With it, he had killed his first Urgal. And through it, he had first used magic. Losing his bow was like losing an old friend who could be relied upon in even the worst situation.

Saphira sniffed the two pieces of wood dangling from his grip and said, *It seems you need a new stick thrower*. He grunted—in no mood to talk—and stomped out to retrieve his arrows.

From the open field, he and Saphira flew to the white Crags of Tel'naeír and presented themselves to Oromis, who was seated on a stool in front of his hut, gazing out over the cliff with his farseeing eyes. He said, "Have you entirely recovered, Eragon, from the potent magic of the Blood-oath Celebration?"

"I have, Master."

A long silence followed as Oromis drank from a cup of blackberry tea and resumed contemplating the ancient forest. Eragon waited without complaint; he was used to such pauses when dealing with the old Rider. At length, Oromis said, "Glaedr explained to me, as best he could, what was done to you during the celebration. Such a thing has never before occurred in the history of the Riders.… Once again, the dragons have proved themselves capable of far more than we imagined." He sipped his tea. "Glaedr was uncertain exactly what changes you would experience, so I would like you to describe the full extent of your transformation, including your appearance."

Eragon quickly summarized how he had been altered, detailing the increased sensitivity of his sight, smell, hearing, and touch, and ending with an account of his clash with Vanir.

"And how," asked Oromis, "do you feel about this? Do you resent that your body was manipulated without your permission?"

"No, no! Not at all. I might have resented it before the battle of Farthen Dûr, but now I'm just grateful that my back doesn't hurt anymore. I would have willingly submitted myself to far greater changes in order to escape Durza's curse. No, my only response is gratitude."

Oromis nodded. "I am glad that you are wise enough to take that position, for your gift is worth more than all the gold in the world. With it, I believe that our feet are at last set upon the correct path." Again, he sipped his tea. "Let us proceed. Saphira, Glaedr expects you at the Stone of Broken Eggs. Eragon, you will begin today with the third level of Rimgar, if you can. I would know everything you are capable of."

Eragon started toward the square of tamped earth where they usually performed the Dance of Snake and Crane, then hesitated when

the silver-haired elf remained behind. “Master, won’t you join me?”

A sad smile graced Oromis’s face. “Not today, Eragon. The spells required by the Blood-oath Celebration exacted a heavy toll from me. That and my … condition. It took the last of my strength to come sit outside.”

“I am sorry, Master.” *Does he resent that the dragons didn’t choose to heal him as well?* wondered Eragon. He immediately discounted the thought; Oromis would never be so petty.

“Do not be. It is no fault of yours that I am crippled.”

As Eragon struggled to complete the third level of the Rimgar, it became obvious that he still lacked the elves’ balance and flexibility, two attributes that even the elves had to work to acquire. In a way, he welcomed those limitations, for if he were perfect, what would be left for him to accomplish?

The following weeks were difficult for Eragon. On one hand, he made enormous progress with his training, mastering subject after subject that had once confounded him. He still found Oromis’s lessons challenging, but he no longer felt as if he were drowning in a sea of his own inadequacy. It was easier for Eragon to read and write, and his increased strength meant that he could now cast elven spells that required so much energy, they would kill any normal human. His strength also made him aware of how weak Oromis was compared to other elves.

And yet, despite those accomplishments, Eragon experienced a growing sense of discontent. No matter how hard he tried to forget Arya, every day that passed increased his yearning, an agony made worse by knowing that she did not want to see or talk with him. But more than that, it seemed to him as if an ominous storm was gathering beyond the edge of the horizon, a storm that threatened to break at any moment and sweep across the land, devastating everything in its path.

Saphira shared his unease. She said, *The world is stretched thin, Eragon. Soon it will snap and madness will burst forth. What you feel is what we dragons feel and what the elves feel—the inexorable march of grim fate as the end of our age approaches. Weep for those who will die in the chaos that shall consume Alagaësia. And hope that we may win a brighter future by the strength of your sword and shield and my fangs and talons*.

Visions Near and Far

The day came when Eragon went to the glade beyond Oromis's hut, seated himself on the polished white stump in the center of the mossy hollow, and—when he opened his mind to observe the creatures around him—sensed not just the birds, beasts, and insects but also the plants of the forest.

The plants possessed a different type of consciousness than animals: slow, deliberate, and decentralized, but in their own way just as cognizant of their surroundings as Eragon himself was. The faint pulse of the plants' awareness bathed the galaxy of stars that wheeled behind his eyes—each bright spark representing a life—in a soft, omnipresent glow. Even the most barren soil teemed with organisms; the land itself was alive and sentient.

Intelligent life, he concluded, existed everywhere.

As Eragon immersed himself in the thoughts and feelings of the beings around him, he was able to attain a state of inner peace so profound that, during that time, he ceased to exist as an individual. He allowed himself to become a nonentity, a void, a receptacle for the voices of the world. Nothing escaped his attention, for his attention was focused on nothing.

He *was* the forest and its inhabitants.

Is that what a god feels like? wondered Eragon when he returned to himself.

He left the glade, sought out Oromis in his hut, and knelt before the elf, saying, "Master, I have done as you told me to. I listened until I heard no more."

Oromis paused in his writing and, with a thoughtful expression, looked at Eragon. "Tell me." For an hour and a half, Eragon waxed eloquent about every aspect of the plants and animals that populated the glade, until Oromis raised his hand and said, "I am convinced; you heard all there was to hear. But did you understand it all?"

"No, Master."

"That is as it should be. Comprehension will come with age.… Well done, Eragon-finiarel. Well done indeed. If you were my student in Ilirea, before Galbatorix rose to power, you would have just graduated from your apprenticeship and would be considered a full member of our order and accorded the same rights and privileges as even the oldest Riders." Oromis pushed himself up out of his chair and then

remained standing in place, swaying. “Lend me your shoulder, Eragon, and help me outside. My limbs betray my will.”

Hurrying to his master’s side, Eragon supported the elf’s slight weight as Oromis hobbled to the brook that rushed headlong toward the edge of the Crags of Tel’naeír. “Now that you have reached this stage in your education, I can teach you one of the greatest secrets of magic, a secret that even Galbatorix may not know. It is your best hope of matching his power.” The elf’s gaze sharpened. “What is the cost of magic, Eragon?”

“Energy. A spell costs the same amount of energy as it would to complete the task through mundane means.”

Oromis nodded. “And where does the energy come from?”

“The spellcaster’s body.”

“Does it have to?”

Eragon’s mind raced as he considered the awesome implications of Oromis’s question. “You mean it can come from other sources?”

“That is exactly what happens whenever Saphira assists you with a spell.”

“Yes, but she and I share a unique connection,” protested Eragon. “Our bond is the reason I can draw upon her strength. To do that with someone else, I would have to enter …” He trailed off as he realized what Oromis was driving at.

“You would have to enter the consciousness of the being—or beings—who was going to provide the energy,” said Oromis, completing Eragon’s thought. “Today you proved that you can do just that with even the smallest form of life. Now …” He stopped and pressed a hand against his chest as he coughed, then continued, “I want you to extract a sphere of water from the stream, using only the energy you can glean from the forest around you.”

“Yes, Master.”

As Eragon reached out to the nearby plants and animals, he felt Oromis’s mind brush against his own, the elf watching and judging his progress. Frowning with concentration, Eragon endeavored to eke the needed force from the environment and hold it within himself until he was ready to release the magic.…

“Eragon! Do not take it from me! I am weak enough as is.”

Startled, Eragon realized that he had included Oromis in his search. “I’m sorry, Master,” he said, chastised. He resumed the process, careful to avoid draining the elf’s vitality, and when he was ready, commanded, “Up!”

Silent as the night, a sphere of water a foot wide rose from the brook until it floated at eye level across from Eragon. And while Eragon experienced the usual strain that results from intense effort, the spell itself caused him no fatigue.

The sphere was only in the air for a moment when a wave of death rolled through the smaller creatures Eragon was in contact with. A line of ants keeled over motionless. A baby mouse gasped and entered the void as it lost the strength to keep its heart beating. Countless plants withered and crumbled and became inert as dust.

Eragon flinched, horrified by what he had caused. Given his new respect for the sanctity of life, he found the crime appalling. What made it worse was that he was intimately linked with each being as it ceased to exist; it was as if he himself were dying over and over. He severed the flow of magic—letting the sphere of water splash across the ground—and then whirled on Oromis and growled, "You knew that would happen!"

An expression of profound sorrow engulfed the ancient Rider. "It was necessary," he replied.

"Necessary that so many had to die?"

"Necessary that you understand the terrible price of using this type of magic. Mere words cannot convey the feeling of having those whose minds you share die. You had to experience it for yourself."

"I won't do that again," vowed Eragon.

"Nor will you have to. If you are disciplined, you can choose to draw the power only from plants and animals that can withstand the loss. It's impractical in battle, but you may do so in your lessons." Oromis gestured at him, and, still simmering, Eragon allowed the elf to lean on him as they returned to the hut. "You see why this technique was not taught to younger riders. If it were to become known to a spellweaver of evil disposition, he or she could wreak vast amounts of destruction, especially since it would be difficult to stop anyone with access to so much power." Once they were back inside, the elf sighed, lowered himself into his chair, and pressed the tips of his fingers together.

Eragon sat as well. "Since it's possible to absorb energy from"—he waved his hand—"from *life*, is it also possible to absorb it directly from light or fire or from any of the other forms of energy?"

"Ah, Eragon, if it were, we could destroy Galbatorix in an instant. We can exchange energy with other living beings, we can use that energy to move our bodies or to fuel a spell, and we can even store that energy in certain objects for later use, but we cannot assimilate the fundamental forces of nature. Reason says that it can be done, but no one has managed to devise a spell that allows it."

Nine days later, Eragon presented himself to Oromis and said, "Master, it struck me last night that neither you nor the hundreds of elven scrolls I've read have mentioned your religion. What do elves believe?"

A long sigh was Oromis's first answer. Then: "We believe that the world behaves according to certain inviolable rules and that, by persistent effort, we can discover those rules and use them to predict events when circumstances repeat."

Eragon blinked. That did not tell him what he wanted to know. "But who, or what, do you worship?"

"Nothing."

"You worship the concept of nothing?"

"No, Eragon. We do not worship at all."

The thought was so alien, it took Eragon several moments to grasp what Oromis meant. The villagers of Carvahall lacked a single overriding doctrine, but they did share a collection of superstitions and rituals, most of which concerned warding off bad luck. During the course of his training, it had dawned upon Eragon that many of the phenomena that the villagers attributed to supernatural sources were in fact natural processes, such as when he learned in his meditations that maggots hatched from fly eggs instead of spontaneously arising from the dirt, as he had thought before. Nor did it make sense for him to put out an offering of food to keep sprites from turning the milk sour when he knew that sour milk was actually caused by a proliferation of tiny organisms in the liquid. Still, Eragon remained convinced that otherworldly forces influenced the world in mysterious ways, a belief that his exposure to the dwarves' religion had bolstered. He said, "Where do you think the world came from, then, if it wasn't created by the gods?"

"Which gods, Eragon?"

"Your gods, the dwarf gods, our gods … someone must have created it."

Oromis raised an eyebrow. "I would not necessarily agree with you. But be as that may, I cannot prove that gods do *not* exist. Nor can I prove that the world and everything in it was not created by an entity or entities in the distant past. But I can tell you that in the millennia we elves have studied nature, we have never witnessed an instance where the rules that govern the world have been broken. That is, we have never seen a miracle. Many events have defied our ability to explain, but we are convinced that we failed because we are still woefully ignorant about the universe and not because a deity altered the workings of nature."

"A god wouldn't have to alter nature to accomplish his will," asserted Eragon. "He could do it within the system that already exists. … He could use magic to affect events."

Oromis smiled. "Very true. But ask yourself this, Eragon: If gods exist, have they been good custodians of Alagaësia? Death, sickness, poverty, tyranny, and countless other miseries stalk the land. If this is

the handiwork of divine beings, then they are to be rebelled against and overthrown, not given obeisance, obedience, and reverence."

"The dwarves believe—"

"Exactly! The dwarves *believe*. When it comes to certain matters, they rely upon faith rather than reason. They have even been known to ignore proven facts that contradict their dogma."

"Like what?" demanded Eragon.

"Dwarf priests use coral as proof that stone is alive and can grow, which also corroborates their story that Helzvog formed the race of dwarves out of granite. But we elves discovered that it is actually an exoskeleton secreted by minuscule animals that live inside it. Any magician can sense the animals if he opens his mind. We explained this to the dwarves, but they refused to listen, saying that the life we felt resides in every kind of stone, although their priests are the only ones who are supposed to be able to detect the life in landlocked stones."

For a long time, Eragon stared out the window, turning Oromis's words over in his mind. "You don't believe in an afterlife, then."

"From what Glaedr said, you already knew that."

"And you don't put stock in gods."

"We give credence only to that which we can prove exists. Since we cannot find evidence that gods, miracles, and other supernatural things are real, we do not trouble ourselves about them. If that were to change, if Helzvog were to reveal himself to us, then we would accept the new information and revise our position."

"It seems a cold world without something … more."

"On the contrary," said Oromis, "it is a better world. A place where we are responsible for our own actions, where we can be kind to one another because we want to and because it is the right thing to do instead of being frightened into behaving by the threat of divine punishment. I won't tell you what to believe, Eragon. It is far better to be taught to think critically and then be allowed to make your own decisions than to have someone else's notions thrust upon you. You asked after our religion, and I have answered you true. Make of it what you will."

Their discussion—coupled with his previous worries—left Eragon so disturbed that he had difficulty concentrating on his studies in the following days, even when Oromis began to show him how to sing to plants, which Eragon had been eager to learn.

Eragon recognized that his own experiences had already led him to adopt a more skeptical attitude; in principle, he agreed with much of what Oromis had said. The problem he struggled with, though, was that if the elves were right, it meant that nearly all the humans and

dwarves were deluded, something Eragon found difficult to accept. *That many people can't be mistaken*, he insisted to himself.

When he asked Saphira about it, she said, *It matters little to me, Eragon. Dragons have never believed in higher powers. Why should we when deer and other prey consider* us *to be a higher power?* He laughed at that. *Only do not ignore reality in order to comfort yourself, for once you do, you make it easy for others to deceive you*.

That night, Eragon's uncertainties burst forth in his waking dreams, which raged like a wounded bear through his mind, tearing disparate images from his memories and mixing them into such a clamor, he felt as if he were transported back into the confusion of the battle under Farthen Dûr. *He saw Garrow lying dead in Horst's house, then Brom dead in the lonely sandstone cave, and then the face of Angela the herbalist, who whispered, "Beware, Argetlam, betrayal is clear. And it will come from within your family. Beware, Shadeslayer!"*

Then the crimson sky was torn apart and Eragon again beheld the two armies from his premonition in the Beor Mountains. The banks of warriors collided upon an orange and yellow field, accompanied by the harsh screams of gore-crows and the whistle of black arrows. The earth itself seemed to burn: green flames belched from scorched holes that dotted the ground, charring the mangled corpses left in the armies' wake. He heard the roar of a gigantic beast from above that rapidly app—

Eragon jolted upright in bed and scrabbled at the dwarf necklace, which burned at his throat. Using his tunic to protect his hand, he pulled the silver hammer away from his skin and then sat and waited in the dark, his heart thudding from the surprise. He felt his strength ebb as Gannel's spell thwarted whoever was trying to scry him and Saphira. Once again, he wondered if Galbatorix himself was behind the spell, or if it was one of the king's pet magicians.

Eragon frowned and released the hammer as the metal grew cold again. *Something's wrong. I know that much, and I've known it for a while, as has Saphira*. Too uneasy to resume the trancelike state that had replaced sleep for him, he crept from their bedroom without waking Saphira and climbed the spiral staircase to the study. There he unshuttered a white lantern and read one of Analísia's epics until sunrise in an attempt to calm himself.

Just as Eragon put away the scroll, Blagden flew through the open portal in the eastern wall and, with a flutter of wings, landed on the corner of the carved writing desk. The white raven fixed his beady eyes on Eragon and croaked, *"Wyrda!"*

Eragon inclined his head. "And may the stars watch over you, Master Blagden."

The raven hopped closer. He cocked his head to the side and uttered a barking cough, as if he were clearing his throat, then recited in his

hoarse voice:

By beak and bone,
Mine blackened stone
Sees rooks and crooks
And bloody brooks!

"What does that mean?" asked Eragon.

Blagden shrugged and repeated the verse. When Eragon still pressed him for an explanation, the bird ruffled his feathers, appearing displeased, and cackled, "Son and father alike, both as blind as bats."

"Wait!" exclaimed Eragon, jolting upright. "Do you know my father? Who is he?"

Blagden cackled again. This time he seemed to be laughing.

While two may share two,
And one of two is certainly one,
One might be two.

"A name, Blagden. Give me a name!" When the raven remained silent, Eragon reached out with his mind, intending to wrench the information from the bird's memories.

Blagden was too wily, however. He deflected Eragon's probe with a flick of his thoughts. Shrieking *"Wyrda!"* he darted forward, plucked a bright glass stopper from an inkwell, and sped away with his trophy clutched in his beak. He dove out of sight before Eragon could cast a spell to bring him back.

Eragon's stomach knotted as he tried to decipher Blagden's two riddles. The last thing he had expected was to hear his father mentioned in Ellesméra. Finally, he muttered, "That's it." *I'll find Blagden later and wring the truth out of him. But right now … I would have to be a half-wit to ignore these portents*. He jumped to his feet and ran down the stairs, waking Saphira with his mind and telling her what had transpired during the night. Retrieving his shaving mirror from the wash closet, Eragon sat between Saphira's two front paws so that she could look over his head and see what he saw.

Arya won't appreciate it if we intrude on her privacy, warned Saphira.

I have to know if she's safe.

Saphira accepted that without argument. *How will you find her? You said that after her imprisonment, she erected wards that—like your necklace—prevent anyone from scrying her*.

If I can scry the people she's with, I might be able to figure out how Arya

is. Concentrating on an image of Nasuada, Eragon passed his hand over the mirror and murmured the traditional phrase, "Dream stare."

The mirror shimmered and turned white, except for nine people clustered around an invisible table. Of them, Eragon was familiar with Nasuada and the Council of Elders. But he could not identify a strange girl hooded in black who lurked behind Nasuada. This puzzled him, for a magician could only scry things that he had already seen, and Eragon was certain he had never laid eyes upon the girl before. He forgot about her, though, as he noticed that the men, and even Nasuada, were armed for battle.

Let us hear their words, suggested Saphira.

The instant Eragon made the needed alteration to the spell, Nasuada's voice emanated from the mirror: "… and confusion will destroy us. Our warriors can afford but one commander during this conflict. Decide who it is to be, Orrin, and quickly too."

Eragon heard a disembodied sigh. "As you wish; the position is yours."

"But, sir, she is untried!"

"Enough, Irwin," ordered the king. "She has more experience in war than anyone in Surda. And the Varden are the only force to have defeated one of Galbatorix's armies. If Nasuada were a Surdan general —which would be peculiar indeed, I admit—you would not hesitate to nominate her for the post. I shall be happy to deal with questions of authority if they arise afterward, for they will mean I'm still on my feet and not lying in a grave. As it is, we are so outnumbered I fear we are doomed unless Hrothgar can reach us before the end of the week. Now, where is that blasted scroll on the supply train? … Ah, thank you, Arya. Three more days without—"

After that the discussion turned to a shortage of bowstrings, which Eragon could glean nothing useful from, so he ended the spell. The mirror cleared, and he found himself staring at his own face.

She lives, he murmured. His relief was overshadowed, though, by the larger meaning of what they had heard.

Saphira looked at him. *We are needed.*

Aye. Why hasn't Oromis told us about this? He must know of it.

Maybe he wanted to avoid disrupting our training.

Troubled, Eragon wondered what else of import was happening in Alagaësia that he was unaware of. *Roran*. With a pang of guilt, Eragon realized that it had been weeks since he last thought of his cousin, and even longer since he scryed him on the way to Ellesméra.

At Eragon's command, the mirror revealed two figures standing against a pure white background. It took Eragon a long moment to recognize the man on the right as Roran. He was garbed in travel-worn clothes, a hammer was stuck under his belt, a thick beard

obscured his face, and he bore a haunted expression that bespoke desperation. To the left was Jeod. The men surged up and down, accompanied by the thunderous crash of waves, which masked anything they said. After a while, Roran turned and walked along what Eragon assumed was the deck of a ship, bringing dozens of other villagers into view.

Where are they, and why is Jeod with them? demanded Eragon, bewildered.

Diverting the magic, he scryed in quick succession Teirm—shocked to see that the city's wharfs had been destroyed—Therinsford, Garrow's old farm, and then Carvahall, whereupon Eragon uttered a wounded cry.

The village was gone.

Every building, including Horst's magnificent house, had been burned to the ground. Carvahall no longer existed except as a sooty blot beside the Anora River. The sole remaining inhabitants were four gray wolves that loped through the wreckage.

The mirror dropped from Eragon's hand and shattered across the floor. He leaned against Saphira, tears burning in his eyes as he grieved anew for his lost home. Saphira hummed deep in her chest and brushed his arm with the side of her jaw, enveloping him in a warm blanket of sympathy. *Take comfort, little one. At least your friends are still alive*.

He shuddered and felt a hard core of determination coalesce in his belly. *We have remained sequestered from the world for far too long. It's high time we leave Ellesméra and confront our fate, whatever it may be. For now, Roran must fend for himself, but the Varden … the Varden we can help*.

Is it time to fight, Eragon? asked Saphira, an odd note of formality in her voice.

He knew what she meant: Was it time to challenge the Empire head-on, time to kill and rampage to the limit of their considerable abilities, time to unleash every ounce of their rage until Galbatorix lay dead before them? Was it time to commit themselves to a campaign that could take decades to resolve?

It is time.

GIFTS

Eragon packed his belongings in less than five minutes. He took the saddle Oromis had given them, strapped it onto Saphira, then slung his bags over her back and buckled them down.

Saphira tossed her head, nostrils flared, and said, *I will wait for you at the field*. With a roar, she launched herself from the tree house, unfolding her blue wings in midair, and flew off, skimming the forest canopy.

Quick as an elf, Eragon ran to Tialdarí Hall, where he found Orik sitting in his usual corner, playing a game of Runes. The dwarf greeted him with a hearty slap on the arm. "Eragon! What brings you here at this time of the morn? I thought you'd be off banging swords with Vanir."

"Saphira and I are leaving," said Eragon.

Orik stopped with his mouth open, then narrowed his eyes, going serious. "You've had news?"

"I'll tell you about it later. Do you want to come?"

"To Surda?"

"Aye."

A wide smile broke across Orik's hairy face. "You'd have to clap me in irons before I'd stay behind. I've done nothing in Ellesméra but grow fat and lazy. A bit of excitement will do me good. When do we leave?"

"As soon as possible. Gather your things and meet us at the sparring grounds. Can you scrounge up a week's worth of provisions for the two of us?"

"A week's? But that won't—"

"We're flying on Saphira."

The skin above Orik's beard turned pale. "We dwarves don't do well with heights, Eragon. We don't do well at all. It'd be better if we could ride horses, like we did coming here."

Eragon shook his head. "That would take too long. Besides, it's easy to ride Saphira. She'll catch you if you fall." Orik grunted, appearing both queasy and unconvinced. Leaving the hall, Eragon sped through the sylvan city until he rejoined Saphira, and then they flew to the Crags of Tel'naeír.

Oromis was sitting upon Glaedr's right forearm when they landed in the clearing. The dragon's scales gilded the landscape with countless

chips of golden light. Neither elf nor dragon stirred. Descending from Saphira's back, Eragon bowed. "Master Glaedr. Master Oromis."

Glaedr said, *You have taken it upon yourself to return to the Varden, have you not?*

We have, replied Saphira.

Eragon's sense of betrayal overcame his self-restraint. "Why did you hide the truth from us? Are you so determined to keep us here that you must resort to such underhand trickery? The Varden are about to be attacked and you didn't even mention it!"

Calm as ever, Oromis asked, "Do you wish to hear why?"

Very much, Master, said Saphira before Eragon could respond. In private, she scolded him, growling, *Be polite!*

"We withheld the tidings for two reasons. Chief among them was that we ourselves did not know until nine days past that the Varden were threatened, and the true size, location, and movements of the Empire's troops remained concealed from us until three days after that, when Lord Däthedr pierced the spells Galbatorix used to deceive our scrying."

"That still doesn't explain why you said nothing of this." Eragon scowled. "Not only that, but once you discovered that the Varden were in danger, why didn't Islanzadí rouse the elves to fight? Are we not allies?"

"She *has* roused the elves, Eragon. The forest echoes with the ring of hammers, the tramp of armored boots, and the grief of those who are about to be parted. For the first time in a century, our race is set to emerge from Du Weldenvarden and challenge our greatest foe. The time has come for elves to once more walk openly in Alagaësia." Gently, Oromis added, "You have been distracted of late, Eragon, and I understand why. Now you must look beyond yourself. The world demands your attention."

Shamefaced, all Eragon could say was, "I am sorry, Master." He remembered Blagden's words and allowed himself a bitter smile. "I'm as blind as a bat."

"Hardly, Eragon. You have done well, considering the enormous responsibilities we have asked you to shoulder." Oromis looked at him gravely. "We expect to receive a missive from Nasuada in the next few days, requesting assistance from Islanzadí and that you rejoin the Varden. I intended to inform you of the Varden's predicament then, when you would still have enough time to reach Surda before swords are drawn. If I told you earlier, you would have been honor-bound to abandon your training and rush to the defense of your liegelord. That is why I and Islanzadí held our tongues."

"My training won't matter if the Varden are destroyed."

"No. But you may be the only person who can prevent them from

being destroyed, for a chance exists—slim but terrible—that Galbatorix will be present at this battle. It is far too late for our warriors to assist the Varden, which means that if Galbatorix is indeed there, you shall confront him alone, without the protection of our spellweavers. Under those circumstances, it seemed vital that your training continue for as long as possible."

In an instant, Eragon's anger melted away and was replaced with a cold, hard, and brutally practical mind-set as he understood the necessity for Oromis's silence. Personal feelings were irrelevant in a situation as dire as theirs. With a flat voice, he said, "You were right. My oath of fealty compels me to ensure the safety of Nasuada and the Varden. However, I'm not ready to confront Galbatorix. Not yet, at least."

"My suggestion," said Oromis, "is that if Galbatorix reveals himself, do everything you can to distract him from the Varden until the battle is decided for good or for ill and avoid directly fighting him. Before you go, I ask but one thing: that you and Saphira vow that—once events permit—you will return here to complete your training, for you still have much to learn."

We shall return, pledged Saphira, binding herself in the ancient language.

"We shall return," repeated Eragon, and sealed their fate.

Appearing satisfied, Oromis reached behind himself and produced an embroidered red pouch that he tugged open. "In anticipation of your departure, I gathered together three gifts for you, Eragon." From the pouch, he withdrew a silver bottle. "First, some faelnirv I augmented with my own enchantments. This potion can sustain you when all else fails, and you may find its properties useful in other circumstances as well. Drink it sparingly, for I only had time to prepare a few mouthfuls."

He handed the bottle to Eragon, then removed a long black-and-blue sword belt from the pouch. The belt felt unusually thick and heavy to Eragon when he ran it through his hands. It was made of cloth threads woven together in an interlocking pattern that depicted a coiling Lianí Vine. At Oromis's instruction, Eragon pulled at a tassel at the end of the belt and gasped as a strip in its center slid back to expose twelve diamonds, each an inch across. Four diamonds were white, four were black, and the remainder were red, blue, yellow, and brown. They glittered cold and brilliant, like ice in the dawn, casting a rainbow of multicolored specks onto Eragon's hands.

"Master …" Eragon shook his head, at a loss for words for several breaths. "Is it safe to give this to me?"

"Guard it well so that none are tempted to steal it. This is the belt of Beloth the Wise—whom you read of in your history of the Year of

Darkness—and is one of the great treasures of the Riders. These are the most perfect gems the Riders could find. Some we traded for with the dwarves. Others we won in battle or mined ourselves. The stones have no magic of their own, but you may use them as repositories for your power and draw upon that reserve when in need. This, in addition to the ruby set in Zar'roc's pommel, will allow you to amass a store of energy so that you do not become unduly exhausted casting spells in battle, or even when confronting enemy magicians."

Last, Oromis brought out a thin scroll protected inside a wooden tube that was decorated with a bas-relief sculpture of the Menoa tree. Unfurling the scroll, Eragon saw the poem he had recited at the Agaetí Blödhren. It was lettered in Oromis's finest calligraphy and illustrated with the elf's detailed ink paintings. Plants and animals twined together inside the outline of the first glyph of each quatrain, while delicate scrollwork traced the columns of words and framed the images.

"I thought," said Oromis, "that you would appreciate a copy for yourself."

Eragon stood with twelve priceless diamonds in one hand and Oromis's scroll in the other, and he knew that it was the scroll he deemed the most precious. Eragon bowed and, reduced to the simplest language by the depth of his gratitude, said, "Thank you, Master."

Then Oromis surprised Eragon by initiating the elves' traditional greeting and thereby indicating his respect for Eragon: "May good fortune rule over you."

"May the stars watch over you."

"And may peace live in your heart," finished the silver-haired elf. He repeated the exchange with Saphira. "Now go and fly as fast as the north wind, knowing that you—Saphira Brightscales and Eragon Shadeslayer—carry the blessing of Oromis, last scion of House Thrándurin, he who is both the Mourning Sage and the Cripple Who Is Whole."

And mine as well, added Glaedr. Extending his neck, he touched the tip of his nose to Saphira's, his gold eyes glittering like swirling pools of embers. *Remember to keep your heart safe, Saphira*. She hummed in response.

They parted with solemn farewells. Saphira soared over the tangled forest and Oromis and Glaedr dwindled behind them, lonely on the crags. Despite the hardships of his stay in Ellesméra, Eragon would miss being among the elves, for with them he had found the closest thing to a home since fleeing Palancar Valley.

I leave here a changed man, he thought, and closed his eyes, clinging to Saphira.

Before going to meet with Orik, they made one more stop: Tialdarí

Hall. Saphira landed in the enclosed gardens, careful not to damage any of the plants with her tail or claws. Without waiting for her to crouch, Eragon leaped straight to the ground, a drop that would have injured him before.

A male elf came out, touched his lips with his first two fingers, and asked if he could help them. When Eragon replied that he sought an audience with Islanzadí, the elf said, "Please wait here, Silver Hand."

Not five minutes later, the queen herself emerged from the wooded depths of Tialdarí Hall, her crimson tunic like a drop of blood among the white-robed elf lords and ladies who accompanied her. After the appropriate forms of address were observed, she said, "Oromis informed me of your intention to leave us. I am displeased by this, but one cannot resist the will of fate."

"No, Your Majesty.… Your Majesty, we came to pay our respects before departing. You have been most considerate of us, and we thank you and your House for clothing, lodging, and feeding us. We are in your debt."

"Never in our debt, Rider. We but repaid a little of what we owe you and the dragons for our miserable failure in the Fall. I am gratified, though, that you appreciate our hospitality." She paused. "When you arrive in Surda, convey my royal salutations to Lady Nasuada and King Orrin and inform them that our warriors will soon attack the northern half of the Empire. If fortune smiles upon us, we shall catch Galbatorix off guard and, given time, divide his forces."

"As you wish."

"Also, know that I have dispatched twelve of our finest spellweavers to Surda. If you are still alive when they arrive, they will place themselves under your command and do their best to shield you from danger both night and day."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Islanzadí extended a hand and one of the elf lords handed her a shallow, unadorned wooden box. "Oromis had his gifts for you, and I have mine. Let them remind you of your time spent with us under the dusky pines." She opened the box, revealing a long, dark bow with reflexed limbs and curled tips nestled on a bed of velvet. Silver fittings chased with dogwood leaves decorated the ears and grip of the bow. Beside it lay a quiver of new arrows fletched with white swan feathers. "Now that you share our strength, it seems only proper that you should have one of our bows. I sang it myself from a yew tree. The string will never break. And so long as you use these arrows, you will be hard-pressed to miss your target, even if the wind should gust during your shot."

Once again, Eragon was overwhelmed by the elves' generosity. He bowed. "What can I say, my Lady? You honor me that you saw fit to

give me the labor of your own hands."

Islanzadí nodded, as if agreeing with him, then stepped past him and said, "Saphira, I brought you no gifts because I could think of nothing you might need or want, but if there is aught of ours you desire, name it and it shall be yours."

Dragons, said Saphira, *do not require possessions to be happy. What use have we for riches when our hides are more glorious than any treasure hoard in existence? No, I am content with the kindness that you have shown Eragon.*

Then Islanzadí bade them a safe journey. Sweeping around, her red cape billowing from her shoulders, she made to leave the gardens, only to stop at the edge of the pleasance and say, "And, Eragon?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"When you meet with Arya, please express my affection to her and tell her that she is sorely missed in Ellesméra." The words were stiff and formal. Without waiting for a reply, she strode away and disappeared among the shadowed boles that guarded the interior of Tialdarí Hall, followed by the elf lords and ladies.

It took Saphira less than a minute to fly to the sparring field, where Orik sat on his bulging pack, tossing his war ax from one hand to the other and scowling ferociously. "About time you got here," he grumbled. He stood and slipped the ax back under his belt. Eragon apologized for the delay, then tied Orik's pack onto the back of his saddle. The dwarf eyed Saphira's shoulder, which loomed high above him. "And how, by Morgothal's black beard, am I supposed to get up there? A cliff has more handholds than you, Saphira."

Here, she said. She lay flat on her belly and pushed her right hind leg out as far as she could, forming a knobby ramp. Pulling himself onto her shin with a loud *huff*, Orik crawled up her leg on hands and knees. A small jet of flame burst from Saphira's nostrils as she snorted. *Hurry up—that tickles!*

Orik paused on the ledge of her haunches, then placed one foot on either side of Saphira's spine and carefully walked his way up her back toward the saddle. He tapped one of the ivory spikes between his legs and said, "There be as good a way to lose your manhood as ever I've seen."

Eragon grinned. "Don't slip." When Orik lowered himself onto the front of the saddle, Eragon mounted Saphira and sat behind the dwarf. To hold Orik in place when Saphira turned or inverted, Eragon loosened the thongs that were meant to secure his arms and had Orik put his legs through them.

As Saphira rose to her full height, Orik swayed, then clutched the spike in front of him. "Garr! Eragon, don't let me open my eyes until we're in the air, else I fear I'll be sick. This is unnatural, it is. Dwarves

aren't meant to ride dragons. It's never been done before."

"Never?"

Orik shook his head without answering.

Clusters of elves drifted out of Du Weldenvarden, gathered along the edge of the field, and with solemn expressions watched Saphira lift her translucent wings in preparation to take off.

Eragon tightened his grip as he felt her mighty thews bunch underneath his legs. With a rush of acceleration, Saphira launched herself into the azure sky, flapping swift and hard to rise above the giant trees. She wheeled over the vast forest—spiraling upward as she gained altitude—and then aimed herself south, toward the Hadarac Desert.

Though the wind was loud in Eragon's ears, he heard an elf woman in Ellesméra raise her clear voice in song, as he had when they first arrived. She sang:

Away, away, you shall fly away,
O'er the peaks and vales
To the lands beyond.
Away, away, you shall fly away,
And never return to me.…

The Maw of the Ocean

The obsidian seas heaved underneath the *Dragon Wing*, propelling the ship high in the air. There it teetered on the precipitous crest of a foam-capped swell before pitching forward and racing down the face of the wave into the black trough below. Billows of stinging mist drove through the frigid air as the wind groaned and howled like a monstrous spirit.

Roran clung to the starboard rigging at the waist of the ship and retched over the gunwale; nothing came up but sour bile. He had prided himself that his stomach never bothered him while on Clovis's barges, but the storm they raced before was so violent that even Uthar's men—seasoned tars each and every one—had difficulty keeping their whisky down.

It felt like a boulder of ice clouted Roran between the shoulder blades as a wave struck the ship crossways, drenching the deck before draining through the scuppers and pouring back into the frothing, furrowed, furious ocean from whence it came. Roran wiped the salty water from his eyes with fingers as clumsy as frozen lumps of wood, and squinted toward the inky horizon to the aft.

Maybe this will shake them off our scent. Three black-sailed sloops had pursued them ever since they passed the Iron Cliffs and rounded what Jeod dubbed Edur Carthungavë and Uthar identified as Rathbar's Spur. "The tailbone of the Spine, that's what it be," Uthar said, grinning. The sloops were faster than the *Dragon Wing*, weighed down with villagers as it was, and had quickly gained upon the merchant ship until they were close enough to exchange volleys of arrows. Worst of all, it seemed that the lead sloop carried a magician, for its arrows were uncannily accurate, splitting ropes, destroying ballistae, and clogging the blocks. From their attacks, Roran deduced that the Empire no longer cared about capturing him and only wanted to stop him from finding sanctuary with the Varden. He had just been preparing the villagers to repel boarding parties when the clouds above ripened to a bruised purple, heavy with rain, and a ravening tempest blew in from the northwest. At the present, Uthar had the *Dragon Wing* tacked crossways to the wind, heading toward the Southern Isles, where he hoped to elude the sloops among the shoals and coves of Beirland.

A sheet of horizontal lightning flickered between two bulbous

thunderheads, and the world became a tableau of pale marble before darkness reigned once more. Every blinding flash imprinted a motionless scene upon Roran's eyes that lingered, pulsing, long after the brazen bolts vanished.

Then came another round of forked lightning, and Roran saw—as if in a series of monochrome paintings—the mizzen topmast twist, crack, and topple into the thrashing sea, port amidships. Grabbing a lifeline, Roran pulled himself to the quarterdeck and, in unison with Bonden, hacked through the cables that still connected the topmast to the *Dragon Wing* and dragged the stern low in the water. The ropes writhed like snakes as they were cut.

Afterward, Roran sank to the deck, his right arm hooked through the gunwale to hold himself in place as the ship dropped twenty … thirty … feet between waves. A swell washed over him, leaching the warmth from his bones. Shivers racked his body.

Don't let me die here, he pleaded, though whom he addressed, he knew not. *Not in these cruel waves. My task is yet unfinished*. During that long night, he clung to his memories of Katrina, drawing solace from them when he grew weary and hope threatened to desert him.

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The storm lasted two full days and broke during the wee hours of the night. The following morning brought with it a pale green dawn, clear skies, and three black sails riding the northern horizon. To the southwest, the hazy outline of Beirland lay underneath a shelf of clouds gathered about the ridged mountain that dominated the island.

Roran, Jeod, and Uthar met in a small fore cabin—since the captain's stateroom was given over to the infirm—where Uthar unrolled sea charts on the table and tapped a point above Beirland. "This'd be where we are now," he said. He reached for a larger map of Alagaësia's coastline and tapped the mouth of the Jiet River. "An' this'd be our destination, since food won't last us to Reavstone. How we get there, though, without being overtaken is beyond me. Without our mizzen topgallant, those accursed sloops will catch us by noon tomorrow, evening if we manage the sails well."

"Can we replace the mast?" asked Jeod. "Vessels of this size carry spars to make just such repairs."

Uthar shrugged. "We could, provided we had a proper ship's carpenter among us. Seeing as we don't, I'd rather not let inexperienced hands mount a spar, only to have it crash down on deck and perhaps injure somebody."

Roran said, "If it weren't for the magician or magicians, I'd say we should stand and fight, since we far outnumber the crews of the

sloops. As it is, I'm chary of battle. It seems unlikely that we could prevail, considering how many ships sent to help the Varden have disappeared."

Grunting, Uthar drew a circle around their current position. "This'd be how far we can sail by tomorrow evening, assuming the wind stays with us. We could make landfall somewhere on Beirland or Nía if we wanted, but I can't see how that'd help us. We'd be trapped. The soldiers on those sloops or the Ra'zac or Galbatorix himself could hunt us at his leisure."

Roran scowled as he considered their options; a fight with the sloops appeared inevitable.

For several minutes, the cabin was silent except for the slap of waves against the hull. Then Jeod placed his finger on the map between Beirland and Nía, looked at Uthar, and asked, "What about the Boar's Eye?"

To Roran's amazement, the scarred sailor actually blanched. "I'd not risk that, Master Jeod, not on my life. I'd rather face the sloops an' die in the open sea than go to that doomed place. There has consumed twice as many ships as in Galbatorix's fleet."

"I seem to recall reading," said Jeod, leaning back in his chair, "that the passage is perfectly safe at high tide and low tide. Is that not so?"

With great and evident reluctance, Uthar admitted, "Aye. But the Eye is so wide, it requires the most precise timing to cross without being destroyed. We'd be hard-pressed to accomplish that with the sloops near on our tail."

"If we could, though," pressed Jeod, "if we could time it right, the sloops would be wrecked or—if their nerve failed them—forced to circumvent Nía. It would give us time to find a place to hide along Beirland."

"If, if … You'd send us to the crushing deep, you would."

"Come now, Uthar, your fear is unreasoning. What I propose is dangerous, I admit, but no more than fleeing Teirm was. Or do you doubt your ability to sail the gap? Are you not man enough to do it?"

Uthar crossed his bare arms. "You've never seen the Eye, have you, sir?"

"I can't say I have."

"It's not that I'm not man enough, but that the Eye far exceeds the strength of men; it puts to shame our biggest ships, our grandest buildings, an' anything else you'd care to name. Tempting it would be like trying to outrun an avalanche; you might succeed, but then you just as well might be ground into dust."

"What," asked Roran, "is this Boar's Eye?"

"The all-devouring maw of the ocean," proclaimed Uthar.

In a milder tone, Jeod said, "It's a whirlpool, Roran. The Eye forms

as the result of tidal currents that collide between Beirland and Nía. When the tide waxes, the Eye rotates north to west. When the tide wanes, it rotates north to east."

"That doesn't sound so dangerous."

Uthar shook his head, queue whipping the sides of his wind-burned neck, and laughed. "Not so dangerous, he says! Ha!"

"What you fail to comprehend," continued Jeod, "is the size of the vortex. On average, the center of the Eye is a league in diameter, while the arms of the pool can be anywhere from ten to fifteen miles across. Ships unlucky enough to be snared by the Eye are borne down to the floor of the ocean and dashed against the jagged rocks therein. Remnants of the vessels are often found as flotsam on the beaches of the two islands."

"Would anyone expect us to take this route?" Roran queried.

"No, an' for good reason," growled Uthar. Jeod shook his head at the same time.

"Is it even possible for us to cross the Eye?"

"It'd be a blasted fool thing to do."

Roran nodded. "I know it's not something you want to risk, Uthar, but our options are limited. I'm no seaman, so I must rely upon your judgment: Can we cross the Eye?"

The captain hesitated. "Maybe, maybe not. You'd have t' be stark raving mad to go nearer'n five miles of that monster."

Pulling out his hammer, Roran banged it on the table, leaving a dent a half-inch deep. "Then I'm stark raving mad!" He held Uthar's gaze until the sailor shifted with discomfort. "Must I remind you, we've only gotten this far by doing what quibbling worrywarts said couldn't, or shouldn't, be done? We of Carvahall dared to abandon our homes and cross the Spine. Jeod dared to imagine we could steal the *Dragon Wing*. What will you dare, Uthar? If we can brave the Eye and live to tell the tale, you shall be hailed as one of the greatest mariners in history. Now answer me and answer me well and true: Can this be done?"

Uthar drew a hand over his face. When he spoke, it was in a low voice, as if Roran's outburst had caused him to abandon all bluster. "I don't know, Stronghammer.… If we wait for the Eye to subside, the sloops may be so close to us that if we escape, they'd escape. An' if the wind should falter, we'd be caught in the current, unable to break free."

"As captain, are you willing to attempt it? Neither Jeod nor I can command the *Dragon Wing* in your place."

Long did Uthar stare down at the charts, one hand clasped over the other. He drew a line or two from their position and worked a table of figures that Roran could make nothing of. At last he said, "I fear we

sail to our doom, but aye, I'll do my best to see us through."

Satisfied, Roran put away his hammer. "So be it."

Running the Boar's Eye

The sloops continued to draw closer to the *Dragon Wing* over the course of the day. Roran watched their progress whenever he could, concerned that they would get near enough to attack before the *Dragon Wing* reached the Eye. Still, Uthar seemed able to outrun them, at least for a little while longer.

At Uthar's orders, Roran and the other villagers worked to tidy up the ship after the storm and prepare for the ordeal that was to come. Their work ended at nightfall, when they extinguished every light on board in an attempt to confuse their pursuers as to the *Dragon Wing*'s heading. The ruse succeeded in part, for when the sun rose, Roran saw that the sloops had fallen back to the northwest another mile or so, though they soon made up the lost distance.

Late that morning, Roran climbed the mainmast and pulled himself up into the crow's nest a hundred and thirty feet above the deck, so high that the men below appeared no larger than his little finger. The water and sky seemed to rock perilously about him as the *Dragon Wing* heeled from side to side.

Taking out the spyglass he had brought with him, Roran put it to his eye and adjusted it until the sloops came into focus not four miles astern and approaching faster than he would have liked. *They must have realized what we intend to do*, he thought. Sweeping the glass around, he searched the ocean for any sign of the Boar's Eye. He stopped as he descried a great disk of foam the size of an island, gyrating from north to east. *We're late*, he thought, a pit in his stomach. High tide had already passed and the Boar's Eye was gathering in speed and strength as the ocean withdrew from land. Roran trained the glass over the edge of the crow's nest and saw that the knotted rope Uthar had tied to the starboard side of the stern—to detect when they entered the pull of the whirlpool—now floated alongside the *Dragon Wing* instead of trailing behind as was usual. The one thing in their favor was that they were sailing with the Eye's current and not against it. If it had been the other way around, they would have had no choice but to wait until the tide turned.

Below, Roran heard Uthar shout for the villagers to man the oars. A moment later, the *Dragon Wing* sprouted two rows of poles along each side, making the ship look like nothing more than a giant water strider. At the beat of an ox-hide drum, accompanied by Bonden's

rhythmic chant as he set the tempo, the oars arched forward, dipped into the sea of green, and swept back across the surface of the water, leaving white streaks of bubbles in their wake. The *Dragon Wing* accelerated quickly, now moving faster than the sloops, which were still outside the Eye's influence.

Roran watched with horrified fascination the play that unfolded around him. The essential plot element, the crux upon which the outcome depended, was time. Though they were late, was the *Dragon Wing*, with its oars and sails combined, fast enough to traverse the Eye? And could the sloops—which had deployed their own oars now —narrow the gap between them and the *Dragon Wing* enough to ensure their own survival? He could not tell. The pounding drum measured out the minutes; Roran was acutely aware of each moment as it trickled by.

He was surprised when an arm reached over the edge of the basket and Baldor's face appeared, looking up at him. "Give me a hand, won't you? I feel like I'm about to fall."

Bracing himself, Roran helped Baldor into the basket. Baldor handed Roran a biscuit and a dried apple and said, "Thought you might like some lunch." With a nod of thanks, Roran tore into the biscuit and resumed gazing through the spyglass. When Baldor asked, "Can you see the Eye?" Roran passed him the glass and concentrated on eating.

Over the next half hour, the foam disk increased the speed of its revolutions until it spun like a top. The water around the foam bulged and began to rise, while the foam itself sank from view into the bottom of a gigantic pit that continued to deepen and enlarge. The air over the vortex filled with a cyclone of twisting mist, and from the ebony throat of the abyss came a tortured howl like the cries of an injured wolf.

The speed with which the Boar's Eye formed amazed Roran. "You'd better go tell Uthar," he said.

Baldor climbed out of the nest. "Tie yourself to the mast or you may get thrown off."

"I will."

Roran left his arms free when he secured himself, making sure that, if needed, he could reach his belt knife to cut himself free. Anxiety filled him as he surveyed the situation. The *Dragon Wing* was but a mile past the median of the Eye, the sloops were but two miles behind her, and the Eye itself was quickly building toward its full fury. Worse, disrupted by the whirlpool, the wind sputtered and gasped, blowing first from one direction and then the other. The sails billowed for a moment, then fell slack, then filled again as the confused wind swirled about the ship.

Perhaps Uthar was right, thought Roran. *Perhaps I've gone too far and pitted myself against an opponent that cannot be overcome by sheer determination. Perhaps I am sending the villagers to their deaths*. The forces of nature were immune to intimidation.

The gaping center of the Boar's Eye was now almost nine and a half miles in circumference, and how many fathoms deep no one could say, except for those who had been trapped within it. The sides of the Eye slanted inward at a forty-five-degree angle; they were striated with shallow grooves, like wet clay being molded on a potter's wheel. The bass howl grew louder, until it seemed to Roran that the entire world must crumble to pieces from the intensity of the vibrations. A glorious rainbow emerged from the mist over the whirling chasm.

The current moved faster than ever, driving the *Dragon Wing* at a breakneck pace as it whipped around the rim of the whirlpool and making it more and more unlikely that the ship could break free at the Eye's southern edge. So prodigious was her velocity, the *Dragon Wing* tilted far to the starboard, suspending Roran out over the rushing water.

Despite the *Dragon Wing*'s progress, the sloops continued to gain on her. The enemy ships sailed abreast less than a mile away, their oars moving in perfect accord, two fins of water flying from each prow as they plowed the ocean. Roran could not help but admire the sight.

He tucked the spyglass away in his shirt; he had no need of it now. The sloops were close enough for the naked eye, while the whirlpool was increasingly obscured by the clouds of white vapor thrown off the lip of the funnel. As it was pulled into the deep, the vapor formed a spiral lens over the gulf, mimicking the whirlpool's appearance.

Then the *Dragon Wing* tacked port, diverging from the current in Uthar's bid for the open sea. The keel chattered across the puckered water, and the ship's speed dropped in half as the *Dragon Wing* fought the deadly embrace of the Boar's Eye. A shudder ran up the mast, jarring Roran's teeth, and the crow's nest swung in the new direction, making him giddy with vertigo.

Fear gripped Roran when they continued to slow. He slashed off his bindings and—with reckless disregard for his own safety—swung himself over the edge of the basket, grabbed the ropes underneath, and shinnied down the rigging so quickly that he lost his grip once and fell several feet before he could catch himself. He jumped to the deck, ran to the fore hatchway, and descended to the first bank of oars, where he joined Baldor and Albriech on an oak pole.

They said not a word, but labored to the sound of their own desperate breathing, the frenzied beat of the drum, Bonden's hoarse shouts, and the roar of the Boar's Eye. Roran could feel the mighty whirlpool resisting with every stroke of the oar.

And yet their efforts could not keep the *Dragon Wing* from coming to a virtual standstill. *We're not going to make it*, thought Roran. His back and legs burned from the exertion. His lungs stabbed. Between the drumbeats, he heard Uthar ordering the hands above deck to trim the sails to take full advantage of the fickle wind.

Two places ahead of Roran, Darmmen and Hamund surrendered their oar to Thane and Ridley, then lay in the middle of the aisle, their limbs trembling. Less than a minute later, someone else collapsed farther down the gallery and was immediately replaced by Birgit and another woman.

If we survive, thought Roran, *it'll only be because we have enough people to sustain this pace however long is necessary*.

It seemed an eternity that he worked the oar in the murky, smoky room, first pushing, then pulling, doing his best to ignore the pain mounting within his body. His neck ached from hunching underneath the low ceiling. The dark wood of the pole was streaked with blood where his skin had blistered and torn. He ripped off his shirt—dropping the spyglass to the floor—wrapped the cloth around the oar, and continued rowing.

At last Roran could do no more. His legs gave way and he fell on his side, slipping across the aisle because he was so sweaty. Orval took his place. Roran lay still until his breath returned, then pushed himself onto his hands and knees and crawled to the hatchway.

Like a fever-mad drunk, he pulled himself up the ladder, swaying with the motion of the ship and often slumping against the wall to rest. When he came out on deck, he took a brief moment to appreciate the fresh air, then staggered aft to the helm, his legs threatening to cramp with every step.

"How goes it?" he gasped to Uthar, who manned the wheel.

Uthar shook his head.

Peering over the gunwale, Roran espied the three sloops perhaps a half mile away and slightly more to the west, closer to the center of the Eye. The sloops appeared motionless in relation to the *Dragon Wing*.

At first, as Roran watched, the positions of the four ships remained unchanged. Then he sensed a shift in the *Dragon Wing*'s speed, as if the ship had crossed some crucial point and the forces restraining her had diminished. It was a subtle difference and amounted to little more than a few additional feet per minute—but it was enough that the distance between the *Dragon Wing* and the sloops began to increase. With every stroke of the oars, the *Dragon Wing* gained momentum.

The sloops, however, could not overcome the whirlpool's dreadful strength. Their oars gradually slowed until, one by one, the ships drifted backward and were drawn toward the veil of mist, beyond

which waited the gyrating walls of ebony water and the gnashing rocks at the bottom of the ocean floor.

They can't keep rowing, realized Roran. *Their crews are too small and they're too tired*. He could not help but feel a pang of sympathy for the fate of the men on the sloops.

At that precise instant, an arrow sprang from the nearest sloop and burst into green flame as it raced toward the *Dragon Wing*. The dart must have been sustained by magic to have flown so far. It struck the mizzen sail and exploded into globules of liquid fire that stuck to whatever they touched. Within seconds, twenty small fires burned along the mizzenmast, the mizzen sail, and the deck below.

"We can't put it out," shouted one of the sailors with a panicked expression.

"Chop off whatever's burning an' throw it overboard!" roared Uthar in reply.

Unsheathing his belt knife, Roran set to work excising a dollop of green fire from the boards by his feet. Several tense minutes elapsed before the unnatural blazes were removed and it became clear that the conflagrations would not spread to the rest of the ship.

Once the cry of "All clear!" was sounded, Uthar relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. "If that was the best their magician can do, then I'd say we have nothing more to fear of him."

"We're going to get out of the Eye, aren't we?" asked Roran, eager to confirm his hope.

Uthar squared his shoulders and flashed a quick grin, both proud and disbelieving. "Not quite this cycle, but we'll be close. We won't make real progress away from that gaping monster until the tide slacks off. Go tell Bonden to lower the tempo a bit; I don't want them fainting at the oars if'n I can help it."

And so it was. Roran took another shift rowing and, by the time he returned to the deck, the whirlpool was subsiding. The vortex's ghastly howl faded into the usual noise of the wind; the water assumed a calm, flat quality that betrayed no hint of the habitual violence visited upon that location; and the contorted fog that had writhed above the abyss melted under the warm rays of the sun, leaving the air as clear as oiled glass. Of the Boar's Eye itself—as Roran saw when he retrieved the spyglass from among the rowers—nothing remained but the selfsame disk of yellow foam rotating upon the water.

And in the center of the foam, he thought he could discern, just barely, three broken masts and a black sail floating round and round and round in an endless circle. But it might have been his imagination.

Leastways, that's what he told himself.

Elain came up beside him, one hand resting on her swollen belly. In a small voice, she said, “We were lucky, Roran, more lucky than we had reason to expect.”

“Aye,” he agreed.

To Aberon

Underneath Saphira, the pathless forest stretched wide to each white horizon, fading as it did from the deepest green to a hazy, washed-out purple. Martins, rooks, and other woodland birds flitted above the gnarled pines, uttering shrieks of alarm when they beheld Saphira. She flew low to the canopy in order to protect her two passengers from the arctic temperatures in the upper reaches of the sky.

Except for when Saphira fled the Ra'zac into the Spine, this was the first time she and Eragon had had the opportunity to fly together over a great stretch of distance without having to stop or hold back for companions on the ground. Saphira was especially pleased with the trip, and she delighted in showing Eragon how Glaedr's tutelage had enhanced her strength and endurance.

After his initial discomfort abated, Orik said to Eragon, "I doubt I could ever be comfortable in the air, but I can understand why you and Saphira enjoy it so. Flying makes you feel free and unfettered, like a fierce-eyed hawk hunting his prey! It sets my heart a-pounding, it does."

To reduce the tedium of the journey, Orik played a game of riddles with Saphira. Eragon excused himself from the contest as he had never been particularly adept at riddles; the twist of thought necessary to solve them always seemed to escape him. In this, Saphira far exceeded him. As most dragons are, she was fascinated by puzzles and found them quite easy to unravel.

Orik said, "The only riddles I know are in Dwarvish. I will do mine best to translate them, but the results may be rough and unwieldy." Then he asked:

Tall I am young.
Short I am old.
While with life I do glow,
Urûr's breath is my foe.

Not fair, growled Saphira. *I know little of your gods*. Eragon had no need to repeat her words, for Orik had granted permission for her to project them directly into his mind.

Orik laughed. "Do you give up?"

Never. For a few minutes, the only sound was the sweep of her wings, until she asked, *Is it a candle?*

"Right you are."

A puff of hot smoke floated back into Orik's and Eragon's faces as she snorted. *I do poorly with such riddles. I've not been inside a house since the day I hatched, and I find enigmas difficult that deal with domestic subjects*. Next she offered:

What herb cures all ailments?

This proved a terrible poser for Orik. He grumbled and groaned and gnashed his teeth in frustration. Behind him, Eragon could not help but grin, for he saw the answer plain in Saphira's mind. Finally, Orik said, "Well, what is it? You have bested me with this."

By the black raven's crime, and by this rhyme,
the answer would be thyme.

Now it was Orik's turn to cry, "Not fair! This is not mine native tongue. You cannot expect me to grasp such wordplay!"

Fair is fair. It was a proper riddle.

Eragon watched the muscles at the back of Orik's neck bunch and knot as the dwarf jutted his head forward. "If *that* is your stance, O Irontooth, then I'd have you solve this riddle that every dwarf child knows."

I am named Morgothal's Forge and Helzvog's Womb.
I veil Nordvig's Daughter and bring gray death,
And make the world anew with Helzvog's Blood.
What be I?

And so they went, exchanging riddles of increasing difficulty while Du Weldenvarden sped past below. Gaps in the thatched branches often revealed patches of silver, sections of the many rivers that threaded the forest. Around Saphira, the clouds billowed in a fantastic architecture: vaulting arches, domes, and columns; crenelated ramparts; towers the size of mountains; and ridges and valleys suffused with a glowing light that made Eragon feel as if they flew through a dream.

So fast was Saphira that, when dusk arrived, they had already left Du Weldenvarden behind and entered the auburn fields that separated

the great forest from the Hadarac Desert. They made their camp among the grass and hunkered round their small fire, utterly alone upon the flat face of the earth. They were grim-faced and said little, for words only emphasized their insignificance in that bare and empty land.

Eragon took advantage of their stop to store some of his energy in the ruby that adorned Zar'roc's pommel. The gem absorbed all the power he gave it, as well as Saphira's when she lent her strength. It would, concluded Eragon, be a number of days before they could saturate both the ruby and the twelve diamonds concealed within the belt of Beloth the Wise.

Weary from the exercise, he wrapped himself in blankets, lay beside Saphira, and drifted into his waking sleep, where his night phantasms played out against the sea of stars above.

✷ ✷ ✷

Soon after they resumed their journey the following morning, the rippling grass gave way to tan scrub, which grew ever more scarce until, in turn, it was replaced by sunbaked ground bare of all but the most hardy plants. Reddish gold dunes appeared. From his vantage on Saphira, they looked to Eragon like lines of waves forever sailing toward a distant shore.

As the sun began its descent, he noticed a cluster of mountains in the distant east and knew he beheld Du Fells Nángoröth, where the wild dragons had gone to mate, to raise their young, and eventually to die. *We must visit there someday*, said Saphira, following his gaze.

Aye.

That night, Eragon felt their solitude even more keenly than before, for they were camped in the emptiest region of the Hadarac Desert, where so little moisture existed in the air that his lips soon cracked, though he smeared them with nalgask every few minutes. He sensed little life in the ground, only a handful of miserable plants interspersed with a few insects and lizards.

As he had when they fled Gil'ead through the desert, Eragon drew water from the soil to replenish their waterskins, and before he allowed the water to drain away, he scryed Nasuada in the pool's reflection to see if the Varden had been attacked yet. To his relief, they had not.

On the third day since leaving Ellesméra, the wind rose up behind them and wafted Saphira farther than she could have flown on her own, carrying them entirely out of the Hadarac Desert.

Near the edge of the waste, they passed over a number of horse-

mounted nomads who were garbed in flowing robes to ward against the heat. The men shouted in their rough tongue and shook their swords and spears at Saphira, though none of them dared loose an arrow at her.

Eragon, Saphira, and Orik bivouacked for the night at the southernmost end of Silverwood Forest, which lay along Lake Tüdosten and was named so because it was composed almost entirely of beeches, willows, and trembling poplars. In contrast to the endless twilight that lay beneath the brooding pines of Du Weldenvarden, Silverwood was filled with bright sunshine, larks, and the gentle rustling of green leaves. The trees seemed young and happy to Eragon, and he was glad to be there. And though all signs of the desert had vanished, the weather remained far warmer than he was accustomed to at that time of year. It felt more like summer than spring.

From there they flew straight to Aberon, the capital of Surda, guided by directions Eragon gleaned from the memories of birds they encountered. Saphira made no attempt to conceal herself along the way, and they often heard cries of amazement and alarm from the villages she swept over.

It was late afternoon when they arrived at Aberon, a low, walled city centered around a bluff in an otherwise flat landscape. Borromeo Castle occupied the top of the bluff. The rambling citadel was protected by three concentric layers of walls, numerous towers, and, Eragon noted, hundreds of ballistae made for shooting down a dragon. The rich amber light from the low sun cast Aberon's buildings in sharp relief and illuminated a plume of dust rising from the city's western gate, where a line of soldiers sought entrance.

As Saphira descended toward the inner ward of the castle, she brought Eragon into contact with the combined thoughts of the people in the capital. The noise overwhelmed him at first—how was he supposed to listen for foes and still function at the same time?—until he realized that, as usual, he was concentrating too much on specifics. All he had to do was sense people's general intentions. He broadened his focus, and the individual voices clamoring for his attention subsided into a continuum of the emotions surrounding him. It was like a sheet of water that lay draped over the nearby landscape, undulating with the rise and fall of people's feelings and spiking whenever someone was racked by extremes of passion.

Thus, Eragon was aware of the alarm that gripped the people below as word of Saphira spread. *Careful*, he told her. *We don't want them to attack us*.

Dirt billowed into the air with each beat of Saphira's powerful wings as she settled in the middle of the courtyard, sinking her claws

into the bare ground to steady herself. The horses tethered in the yard neighed with fear, creating such an uproar that Eragon finally inserted himself in their minds and calmed them with words from the ancient language.

Eragon dismounted after Orik, eyeing the many soldiers that lined the parapets and the drawn ballistae they manned. He did not fear the weapons, but he had no desire to become engaged in a fight with his allies.

A group of twelve men, some soldiers, hurried out of the keep toward Saphira. They were led by a tall man with the same dark skin as Nasuada, only the third person Eragon had met with such a complexion. Halting ten paces away, the man bowed—as did his followers—then said, "Welcome, Rider. I am Dahwar, son of Kedar. I am King Orrin's seneschal."

Eragon inclined his head. "And I, Eragon Shadeslayer, son of none."

"And I, Orik, Thrifk's son."

And I, Saphira, daughter of Vervada, said Saphira, using Eragon as her mouthpiece.

Dahwar bowed again. "I apologize that no one of higher rank than myself is present to greet guests as noble as you, but King Orrin, Lady Nasuada, and all the Varden have long since marched to confront Galbatorix's army." Eragon nodded. He had expected as much. "They left orders that if you came here seeking them, you should join them directly, for your prowess is needed if we are to prevail."

"Can you show us on a map how to find them?" asked Eragon.

"Of course, sir. While I have that fetched, would you care to step out of the heat and partake of some refreshments?"

Eragon shook his head. "We have no time to waste. Besides, it is not I who needs to see the map but Saphira, and I doubt she would fit in your halls."

That seemed to catch the seneschal off guard. He blinked and ran his eyes over Saphira, then said, "Quite right, sir. In either case, our hospitality is yours. If there is aught you and your companions desire, you have but to ask."

For the first time, Eragon realized that he could issue commands and expect them to be followed. "We need a week's worth of provisions. For me, only fruit, vegetables, flour, cheese, bread—things like that. We also need our waterskins refilled." He was impressed that Dahwar did not question his avoidance of meat. Orik added his requests then for jerky, bacon, and other such products.

Snapping his fingers, Dahwar sent two servants running back into the keep to collect the supplies. While everyone in the ward waited for the men to return, he asked, "May I assume by your presence here, Shadeslayer, that you completed your training with the elves?"

“My training shall never end so long as I’m alive.”

“I see.” Then, after a moment, Dahwar said, “Please excuse my impertinence, sir, for I am ignorant of the ways of the Riders, but are you not human? I was told you were.”

“That he is,” growled Orik. “He was … changed. And you should be glad he was, or our predicament would be far worse than it is.” Dahwar was tactful enough not to pursue the subject, but from his thoughts Eragon concluded that the seneschal would have paid a handsome price for further details—any information about Eragon or Saphira was valuable in Orrin’s government.

The food, water, and map were soon brought by two wide-eyed pages. At Eragon’s word, they deposited the items beside Saphira, looking terribly frightened as they did, then retreated behind Dahwar. Kneeling on the ground, Dahwar unrolled the map—which depicted Surda and the neighboring lands—and drew a line northwest from Aberon to Cithrí. He said, “Last I heard, King Orrin and Lady Nasuada stopped here for provender. They did not intend to stay, however, because the Empire is advancing south along the Jiet River and they wished to be in place to confront Galbatorix’s army when it arrives. The Varden could be anywhere between Cithrí and the Jiet River. This is only my humble opinion, but I would say the best place to look for them would be the Burning Plains.”

“The Burning Plains?”

Dahwar smiled. “You may know them by their old name, then, the name the elves use: Du Völlar Eldrvarya.”

“Ah, yes.” Now Eragon remembered. He had read about them in one of the histories Oromis assigned him. The plains—which contained huge deposits of peat—lay along the eastern side of the Jiet River where Surda’s border crossed it and had been the site of a skirmish between the Riders and the Forsworn. During the fight, the dragons inadvertently lit the peat with the flames from their mouths and the fire had burrowed underground, where it remained smoldering ever since. The land had been rendered uninhabitable by the noxious fumes that poured out of the glowing vents in the charred earth.

A shiver crawled down Eragon’s left side as he recalled his premonition: banks of warriors colliding upon an orange and yellow field, accompanied by the harsh screams of gore-crows and the whistle of black arrows. He shivered again. *Fate is converging upon us*, he said to Saphira. Then, gesturing at the map: *Have you seen enough?*

I have.

In short order, he and Orik packed the supplies, remounted Saphira, and from her back thanked Dahwar for his service. As Saphira was about to take off again, Eragon frowned; a note of discord had entered the minds he was monitoring. “Dahwar, two grooms in the stables

have gotten into an argument and one of them, Tathal, intends to commit murder. You can stop him, though, if you send men right away."

Dahwar widened his eyes in an expression of astonishment, and even Orik twisted round to look at Eragon. The seneschal asked, "How do you know this, Shadeslayer?"

Eragon merely said, "Because I am a Rider."

Then Saphira unfurled her wings, and everyone on the ground ran back to avoid being battered by the rush of air as she flapped downward and soared into the sky. As Borromeo Castle dwindled behind them, Orik said, "Can you hear my thoughts, Eragon?"

"Do you want me to try? I haven't, you know."

"Try."

Frowning, Eragon concentrated his attention on the dwarf's consciousness and was surprised to find Orik's mind well protected behind thick mental barriers. He could sense Orik's presence, but not his thoughts and feelings. "Nothing."

Orik grinned. "Good. I wanted to make sure I hadn't forgotten my old lessons."

By unspoken consent, they did not stop for the night, but rather forged onward through the blackened sky. Of the moon and stars they saw no sign, no flash or pale gleam to breach the oppressive gloom. The dead hours bloated and sagged and, it seemed to Eragon, clung to each second as if reluctant to surrender to the past.

When the sun finally returned—bringing with it its welcome light—Saphira landed by the edge of a small lake so Eragon and Orik could stretch their legs, relieve themselves, and eat breakfast without the constant movement they experienced on her back.

They had just taken off again when a long, low brown cloud appeared on the edge of the horizon, like a smudge of walnut ink on a sheet of white paper. The cloud grew wider and wider as Saphira approached it, until by late morning it obscured the entire land beneath a pall of foul vapors.

They had reached the Burning Plains of Alagaësia.

The Burning Plains

Eragon coughed as Saphira descended through the layers of smoke, angling toward the Jiet River, which was hidden behind the haze. He blinked and wiped back tears. The fumes made his eyes smart.

Closer to the ground, the air cleared, giving Eragon an unobstructed view of their destination. The rippling veil of black and crimson smoke filtered the sun's rays in such a way that everything below was bathed in a lurid orange. Occasional rents in the besmirched sky allowed pale bars of light to strike the ground, where they remained, like pillars of translucent glass, until they were truncated by the shifting clouds.

The Jiet River lay before them, as thick and turgid as a gorged snake, its crosshatched surface reflecting the same ghastly hue that pervaded the Burning Plains. Even when a splotch of undiluted light happened to fall upon the river, the water appeared chalky white, opaque and opalescent—almost as if it were the milk of some fearsome beast—and seemed to glow with an eerie luminescence all its own.

Two armies were arrayed along the eastern banks of the oozing waterway. To the south were the Varden and the men of Surda, entrenched behind multiple layers of defense, where they displayed a fine panoply of woven standards, ranks of proud tents, and the picketed horses of King Orrin's cavalry. Strong as they were, their numbers paled in comparison to the size of the force assembled in the north. Galbatorix's army was so large, it measured three miles across on its leading edge and how many in length it was impossible to tell, for the individual men melded into a shadowy mass in the distance.

Between the mortal foes was an empty span of perhaps two miles. This land, and the land that the armies camped on, was pocked with countless ragged orifices in which danced green tongues of fire. From those sickly torches billowed plumes of smoke that dimmed the sun. Every scrap of vegetation had been scorched from the parched soil, except for growths of black, orange, and chartreuse lichen that, from the air, gave the earth a scabbed and infected appearance.

It was the most forbidding vista Eragon had clapped eyes upon.

Saphira emerged over the no-man's-land that separated the grim armies, and now she twisted and dove toward the Varden as fast as she dared, for so long as they remained exposed to the Empire, they

were vulnerable to attacks from enemy magicians. Eragon extended his awareness as far as he could in every direction, hunting for hostile minds that could feel his probing touch and would react to it—the minds of magicians and those trained to fend off magicians.

What he felt instead was the sudden panic that overwhelmed the Varden's sentinels, many of whom, he realized, had never before seen Saphira. Fear made them ignore their common sense, and they released a flock of barbed arrows that arched up to intercept her.

Raising his right hand, Eragon cried, "Letta orya thorna!" The arrows froze in place. With a flick of his wrist and the word "Gánga," he redirected them, sending the darts boring toward the no-man's-land, where they could bury themselves in the barren soil without causing harm. He missed one arrow, though, which was fired a few seconds after the first volley.

Eragon leaned as far to his right as he could and, faster than any normal human, plucked the arrow from the air as Saphira flew past it.

Only a hundred feet above the ground, Saphira flared her wings to slow her steep descent before alighting first on her hind legs and then her front legs as she came to a running stop among the Varden's tents.

"Werg," growled Orik, loosening the thongs that held his legs in place. "I'd rather fight a dozen Kull than experience such a fall again." He let himself hang off one side of the saddle, then dropped to Saphira's foreleg below and, from there, to the ground.

Even as Eragon dismounted, dozens of warriors with awestruck expressions gathered around Saphira. From within their midst strode a big bear of a man whom Eragon recognized: Fredric, the Varden's weapon master from Farthen Dûr, still garbed in his hairy ox-hide armor. "Come on, you slack-jawed louts!" roared Fredric. "Don't stand here gawking; get back to your posts or I'll have the lot of you chalked up for extra watches!" At his command, the men began to disperse with many a grumbled word and backward glance. Then Fredric drew nearer and, Eragon could tell, was startled by the change in Eragon's countenance. The bearded man did his best to conceal the reaction by touching his brow and saying, "Welcome, Shadeslayer. You've arrived just in time.… I can't tell you how ashamed I am you were attacked. The honor of every man here has been blackened by this mistake. Were the three of you hurt?"

"No."

Relief spread across Fredric's face. "Well, there's that to be grateful for. I've had the men responsible pulled from duty. They'll each be whipped and reduced in rank.… Will that punishment satisfy you, Rider?"

"I want to see them," said Eragon.

Sudden concern emanated from Fredric; it was obvious he feared

that Eragon wanted to enact some terrible and unnatural retribution on the sentinels. Fredric did not voice his concern, however, but said, "If you'd follow me, then, sir."

He led them through the camp to a striped command tent where twenty or so miserable-looking men were divesting themselves of their arms and armor under the watchful eye of a dozen guards. At the sight of Eragon and Saphira, the prisoners all went down on one knee and remained there, gazing at the ground. "Hail, Shadeslayer!" they cried.

Eragon said nothing, but walked along the line of men while he studied their minds, his boots sinking through the crust of the baked earth with an ominous crunch. At last he said, "You should be proud that you reacted so quickly to our appearance. If Galbatorix attacks, that's exactly what you should do, though I doubt arrows would prove any more effective against him than they were against Saphira and me." The sentinels glanced at him with disbelief, their upturned faces tinted the color of tarnished brass by the variegated light. "I only ask that, in the future, you take a moment to identify your target before shooting. Next time I might be too distracted to stop your missiles. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Shadeslayer!" they shouted.

Stopping before the second-to-last man in the line, Eragon held out the arrow he had snared from Saphira's back. "I believe this is yours, Harwin."

With an expression of wonder, Harwin accepted the arrow from Eragon. "So it is! It has the white band I always paint on my shafts so I can find them later. Thank you, Shadeslayer."

Eragon nodded and then said to Fredric so all could hear, "These are good and true men, and I want no misfortune to befall them because of this event."

"I will see to it personally," said Fredric, and smiled.

"Now, can you take us to Lady Nasuada?"

"Yes, sir."

As he left the sentinels, Eragon knew that his kindness had earned him their undying loyalty, and that tidings of his deed would spread throughout the Varden.

The path Fredric took through the tents brought Eragon into close contact with more minds than he had ever touched before. Hundreds of thoughts, images, and sensations pressed against his consciousness. Despite his effort to keep them at a distance, he could not help absorbing random details of people's lives. Some revelations he found shocking, some meaningless, others touching or, conversely, disgusting, and many embarrassing. A few people perceived the world so differently, their minds leaped out at him on account of that very difference.

How easy it is to view these men as nothing more than objects that I and a few others can manipulate at will. Yet they each possess hopes and dreams, potential for what they might achieve and memories of what they have already accomplished. And they all feel pain.

A handful of the minds he touched were aware of the contact and recoiled from it, hiding their inner life behind defenses of varying strength. At first Eragon was concerned—imagining that he had discovered a great many enemies who had infiltrated the Varden—but then he realized from his quick glimpse that they were the individual members of Du Vrangr Gata.

Saphira said, *They must be scared out of their wits, thinking that they're about to be assaulted by some strange magician.*

I can't convince them otherwise while they block me like this.

You should meet them in person, and soon too, before they decide to band together and attack.

Aye, although I don't think they pose a threat to us.… Du Vrangr Gata —their very name betrays their ignorance. Properly, in the ancient language, it should be Du Gata Vrangr.

Their trip ended near the back of the Varden, at a large red pavilion flying a pennant embroidered with a black shield and two parallel swords slanting underneath. Fredric pulled back the flap and Eragon and Orik entered the pavilion. Behind them, Saphira pushed her head through the opening and peered over their shoulders.

A broad table occupied the center of the furnished tent. Nasuada stood at one end, leaning on her hands, studying a slew of maps and scrolls. Eragon's stomach clenched as he saw Arya opposite her. Both women were armored as men for battle.

Nasuada turned her almond-shaped face toward him. "Eragon?" she whispered.

He was unprepared for how glad he was to see her. With a broad grin, he twisted his hand over his sternum in the elves' gesture of fealty and bowed. "At your service."

"Eragon!" This time Nasuada sounded delighted and relieved. Arya, too, appeared pleased. "How did you get our message so quickly?"

"I didn't; I learned about Galbatorix's army from my scrying and left Ellesméra the same day." He smiled at her again. "It's good to be back with the Varden."

While he spoke, Nasuada studied him with a wondering expression. "What has happened to you, Eragon?"

Arya must not have told her, said Saphira.

And so Eragon gave a full account of what had befallen Saphira and him since they left Nasuada in Farthen Dûr so long ago. Much of what he said, he sensed that she had already heard, either from the dwarves or from Arya, but she let him speak without interrupting. Eragon had

to be circumspect about his training. He had given his word not to reveal Oromis's existence without permission, and most of his lessons were not to be shared with outsiders, but he did his best to give Nasuada a good idea of his skills and their attendant risks. Of the Agaetí Blödhren, he merely said, "… and during the celebration, the dragons worked upon me the change you see, giving me the physical abilities of an elf and healing my back."

"Your scar is gone, then?" asked Nasuada. He nodded. A few more sentences served to end his narrative, briefly mentioning the reason they had left Du Weldenvarden and then summarizing their journey thence. She shook her head. "What a tale. You and Saphira have experienced so much since you left Farthen Dûr."

"As have you." He gestured at the tent. "It's amazing what you've accomplished. It must have taken an enormous amount of work to get the Varden to Surda.… Has the Council of Elders caused you much trouble?"

"A bit, but nothing extraordinary. They seem to have resigned themselves to my leadership." Her mail clinking together, Nasuada seated herself in a large, high-backed chair and turned to Orik, who had yet to speak. She welcomed him and asked if he had aught to add to Eragon's tale. Orik shrugged and provided a few anecdotes from their stay in Ellesméra, though Eragon suspected that the dwarf kept his true observations a secret for his king.

When he finished, Nasuada said, "I am heartened to know that if we can weather this onslaught, we shall have the elves by our side. Did any of you happen to see Hrothgar's warriors during your flight from Aberon? We are counting on their reinforcements."

No, answered Saphira through Eragon. *But then, it was dark and I was often above or between clouds. I could have easily missed a camp under those conditions. In any case, I doubt we would have crossed paths, for I flew straight from Aberon, and it seems likely the dwarves would choose a different route—perhaps following established roads—rather than march through the wilderness*.

"What," asked Eragon, "is the situation here?"

Nasuada sighed and then told of how she and Orrin had learned about Galbatorix's army and the desperate measures they had resorted to since in order to reach the Burning Plains before the king's soldiers. She finished by saying, "The Empire arrived three days ago. Since then, we've exchanged two messages. First they asked for our surrender, which we refused, and now we wait for their reply."

"How many of them are there?" growled Orik. "It looked a mighty number from Saphira's back."

"Aye. We estimate Galbatorix mustered as many as a hundred thousand soldiers."

Eragon could not contain himself: “A hundred thousand! Where did they come from? It seems impossible that he could find more than a handful of people willing to serve him.”

“They were conscripted. We can only hope that the men who were torn from their homes won’t be eager to fight. If we can frighten them badly enough, they may break ranks and flee. Our numbers are greater than in Farthen Dûr, for King Orrin has joined forces with us and we have received a veritable flood of volunteers since we began to spread the word about you, Eragon, although we are still far weaker than the Empire.”

Then Saphira asked, and Eragon was forced to repeat the dreadful question: *What do you think our chances of victory are?*

“That,” said Nasuada, putting emphasis on the word, “depends a great deal upon you and Eragon, and the number of magicians seeded throughout their troops. If you can find and destroy those magicians, then our enemies shall be left unprotected and you can slay them at will. Outright victory, I think, is unlikely at this point, but we might be able to hold them at bay until their supplies run low or until Islanzadí can come to our assistance. That is … if Galbatorix doesn’t fly into battle himself. In that case, I fear retreat will be our only option.”

Just then, Eragon felt a strange mind approaching, one that knew he was watching and yet did not shrink from the contact. One that felt cold and hard, calculating. Alert for danger, Eragon turned his gaze toward the rear of the pavilion, where he saw the same black-haired girl who had appeared when he scryed Nasuada from Ellesméra. The girl stared at him with violet eyes, then said, “Welcome, Shadeslayer. Welcome, Saphira.”

Eragon shivered at the sound of her voice, the voice of an adult. He wet his dry mouth and asked, “Who are you?”

Without answering, the girl brushed back her glossy bangs and exposed a silvery white mark on her forehead, exactly like Eragon’s gedwëy ignasia. He knew then whom he faced.

No one moved as Eragon went to the girl, accompanied by Saphira, who extended her neck farther into the pavilion. Dropping to one knee, Eragon took the girl’s right hand in his own; her skin burned as if with fever. She did not resist him, but merely left her hand limp in his grip. In the ancient language—and also with his mind, so that she would understand—Eragon said, “I am sorry. Can you forgive me for what I did to you?”

The girl’s eyes softened, and she leaned forward and kissed Eragon upon the brow. “I forgive you,” she whispered, for the first time sounding her age. “How could I not? You and Saphira created who I am, and I know you meant no harm. I forgive you, but I shall let this

knowledge torture your conscience: You have condemned me to be aware of all the suffering around me. Even now your spell drives me to rush to the aid of a man not three tents away who just cut his hand, to help the young flag carrier who broke his left index finger in the spokes of a wagon wheel, and to help countless others who have been or are about to be hurt. It costs me dearly to resist those urges, and even more if I consciously cause someone discomfort, as I do by saying this.… I cannot even sleep at night for the strength of my compulsion. *That* is your legacy, O Rider." By the end, her voice had regained its bitter, mocking edge.

Saphira interposed herself between them and, with her snout, touched the girl in the center of her mark. *Peace, Changeling. You have much anger in your heart.*

"You don't have to live like this forever," said Eragon. "The elves taught me how to undo a spell, and I believe I can free you of this curse. It won't be easy, but it can be done."

For a moment, the girl seemed to lose her formidable self-control. A small gasp escaped her lips, her hand trembled against Eragon's, and her eyes glistened with a film of tears. Then just as quickly, she hid her true emotions behind a mask of cynical amusement. "Well, we shall see. Either way, you shouldn't try until after this battle."

"I could save you a great deal of pain."

"It wouldn't do to exhaust you when our survival may depend on your talents. I do not deceive myself; you are more important than me." A sly grin crossed her face. "Besides, if you remove your spell now, I won't be able to help any of the Varden if they are threatened. You wouldn't want Nasuada to die because of that, would you?"

"No," admitted Eragon. He paused for a long time, considering the issue, then said, "Very well, I will wait. But I swear to you: If we win this fight, I shall right this wrong."

The girl tilted her head to one side. "I will hold you to your word, Rider."

Rising from her chair, Nasuada said, "Elva was the one who saved me from an assassin in Aberon."

"Did she? In that case, I am in your debt … Elva … for protecting my liegelord."

"Come now," said Nasuada. "I must introduce the three of you to Orrin and his nobles. Have you met the king before, Orik?"

The dwarf shook his head. "I've never been this far west."

As they left the pavilion—Nasuada in the lead, with Elva by her side—Eragon tried to position himself so he could talk with Arya, but when he neared her, she quickened her pace until she was level with Nasuada. Arya never even looked at him while she walked, a slight that caused him more anguish than any physical wound he had

endured. Elva glanced back at him, and he knew that she was aware of his distress.

They soon arrived at another large pavilion, this one white and yellow—although it was difficult to determine the exact hue of the colors, given the garish orange that glazed everything on the Burning Plains. Once they were granted entrance, Eragon was astonished to find the tent crammed with an eccentric collection of beakers, alembics, retorts, and other instruments of natural philosophy. *Who would bother toting all this onto a battlefield?* he wondered, bewildered.

"Eragon," said Nasuada, "I would like you to meet Orrin, son of Larkin and monarch of the realm of Surda."

From the depths of the tangled piles of glass emerged a rather tall, handsome man with shoulder-length hair held back by the gold coronet resting upon his head. His mind, like Nasuada's, was protected behind walls of iron; it was obvious he had received extensive training in that skill. Orrin seemed pleasant enough to Eragon from their discussion, if a bit green and untried when it came to commanding men in war and more than a little odd in the head. On the whole, Eragon trusted Nasuada's leadership more.

After fending off scores of questions from Orrin about his stay among the elves, Eragon found himself smiling and nodding politely as one earl after another paraded past, each of whom insisted on shaking his hand, telling him what an honor it was to meet a Rider, and inviting him to their respective estates. Eragon dutifully memorized their many names and titles—as he knew Oromis would expect—and did his best to maintain a calm demeanor, despite his growing frustration.

We're about to engage one of the largest armies in history, and here we are, stuck exchanging pleasantries.

Patience, counseled Saphira. *There aren't that many more.… Besides, look at it this way: if we win, they'll owe us an entire year of free dinners, what with all their promises*.

He stifled a chuckle. *I think it would dismay them to know what it takes to feed you. Not to mention that you could empty their cellars of beer and wine in a single night*.

I would never, she sniffed, then relented. *Maybe in two nights*.

When at last they won free of Orrin's pavilion, Eragon asked Nasuada, "What shall I do now? How can I serve you?"

Nasuada eyed him with a curious expression. "How do *you* think you can best serve me, Eragon? You know your own abilities far better than I do." Even Arya watched him now, waiting to hear his response.

Eragon gazed up at the bloody sky while he pondered her question. "I shall take control of Du Vrangr Gata, as they once asked me to, and organize them underneath me so I can lead them into battle. Working

together will give us the best chance of foiling Galbatorix's magicians."

"That seems an excellent idea."

Is there a place, asked Saphira, *where Eragon can leave his bags? I don't want to carry them or this saddle any longer than I have to.*

When Eragon repeated her question, Nasuada said, "Of course. You may leave them in my pavilion, and I will arrange to have a tent erected for you, Eragon, where you can keep them permanently. I suggest, though, that you don your armor before parting with your bags. You might need it at any moment.… That reminds me: we have your armor with us, Saphira. I shall have it unpacked and brought to you."

"And what of me, Lady?" asked Orik.

"We have several knurlan with us from Dûrgrimst Ingeitum who have lent their expertise to the construction of our earthen defenses. You may take command of them if you wish."

Orik seemed heartened by the prospect of seeing fellow dwarves, especially ones from his own clan. He clapped his fist to his chest and said, "I think I will at that. If you'll excuse me, I'll see to it at once." Without a backward glance, he trundled off through the camp, heading north toward the breastwork.

Returning to her pavilion with the four who remained, Nasuada said to Eragon, "Report to me once you have settled matters with Du Vrangr Gata." Then she pushed aside the entrance flap to the pavilion and disappeared with Elva through the dark opening.

As Arya started to follow, Eragon reached toward her and, in the ancient language, said, "Wait." The elf paused and looked at him, betraying nothing. He held her gaze without wavering, staring deep into her eyes, which reflected the strange light around them. "Arya, I won't apologize for how I feel about you. However, I wanted you to know that I *am* sorry for how I acted during the Blood-oath Celebration. I wasn't myself that night; otherwise, I would have never been so forward with you."

"And you won't do it again?"

He suppressed a humorless laugh. "It wouldn't get me anywhere if I did, now would it?" When she remained silent, he said, "No matter. I don't want to trouble you, even if you—" He bit off the end of his sentence before he made a remark he knew he would regret.

Arya's expression softened. "I'm not trying to hurt you, Eragon. You must understand that."

"I understand," he said, but without conviction.

An awkward pause stretched between them. "Your flight went well, I trust?"

"Well enough."

"You encountered no difficulty in the desert?"

"Should we have?"

"No. I only wondered." Then, in an even gentler voice, Arya asked, "What of you, Eragon? How have you been since the celebration? I heard what you said to Nasuada, but you mentioned nothing other than your back."

"I …" He tried to lie—not wanting her to know how much he had missed her—but the ancient language stopped the words dead in his mouth and rendered him mute. Finally, he resorted to a technique of the elves: telling only part of the truth in order to create an impression opposite the whole truth. "I'm better than before," he said, meaning, in his mind, the condition of his back.

Despite his subterfuge, Arya appeared unconvinced. She did not press him on the subject, though, but rather said, "I am glad." Nasuada's voice emanated from inside the pavilion, and Arya glanced toward it before facing him again. "I am needed elsewhere, Eragon.… We are both needed elsewhere. A battle is about to take place." Lifting the canvas flap, she stepped halfway into the gloomy tent, then hesitated and added, "Take care, Eragon Shadeslayer."

Then she was gone.

Dismay rooted Eragon in place. He had accomplished what he wanted to, but it seemed to have changed nothing between him and Arya. He balled his hands into fists and hunched his shoulders and glared at the ground without seeing it, simmering with frustration.

He started when Saphira nosed him on the shoulder. *Come on, little one*, she said gently. *You can't stay here forever, and this saddle is beginning to itch.*

Going to her side, Eragon pulled on her neck strap, muttering under his breath when it caught in the buckle. He almost hoped the leather would break. Undoing the rest of the straps, he let the saddle and everything tied to it fall to the ground in a jumbled heap. *It feels good to have that off*, said Saphira, rolling her massive shoulders.

Digging his armor out of the saddlebags, Eragon outfitted himself in the bright dress of war. First he pulled his hauberk over his elven tunic, then strapped his chased greaves to his legs and his inlaid bracers to his forearms. On his head went his padded leather cap, followed by his coif of tempered steel and then his gold and silver helm. Last of all, he replaced his regular gloves with his mail-backed gauntlets.

Zar'roc he hung on his left hip using the belt of Beloth the Wise. Across his back, he placed the quiver of white swan feathers Islanzadí had given him. The quiver, he was pleased to find, could also hold the bow the elf queen had sung for him, even when it was strung.

After depositing his and Orik's belongings into the pavilion, Eragon

and Saphira set out together to find Trianna, the current leader of Du Vrangr Gata. They had gone no more than a few paces when Eragon sensed a nearby mind that was shielded from his view. Assuming that it was one of the Varden's magicians, they veered toward it.

Twelve yards from their starting point, they came upon a small green tent with a donkey picketed in front. To the left of the tent, a blackened iron cauldron hung from a metal tripod placed over one of the malodorous flames birthed deep within the earth. Cords were strung about the cauldron, over which were draped nightshade, hemlock, rhododendron, savin, bark of the yew tree, and numerous mushrooms, such as death cap and spotted cort, all of which Eragon recognized from Oromis's lessons on poison. And standing next to the cauldron, wielding a long wood paddle with which she stirred the brew, was Angela the herbalist. At her feet sat Solembum.

The werecat uttered a mournful meow, and Angela looked up from her task, her corkscrew hair forming a billowing thundercloud around her glistening face. She frowned, and her expression became positively ghoulish, for it was lit from beneath by the flickering green flame. "So you've returned, eh!"

"We have," said Eragon.

"Is that all you have to say for yourself? Have you seen Elva yet? Have you seen what you did to that poor girl?"

"Aye."

"Aye!" cried Angela. "How inarticulate can a person be? All this time in Ellesméra being tutored by the elves, and *aye* is the best you can manage? Let me tell you something, blockhead: anyone who is stupid enough to do what you did deserves—"

Eragon clasped his hands behind his back and waited as Angela informed him, in many explicit, detailed, and highly inventive terms, exactly how great a blockhead he was; what kind of ancestors he must possess to be such a monumental blockhead—she even went so far as to insinuate that one of his grandparents had mated with an Urgal—and the quite hideous punishments he ought to receive for his idiocy. If anyone else had insulted him in that manner, Eragon would have challenged them to a duel, but he tolerated her spleen because he knew he could not judge her behavior by the same standards as he did others, and because he knew her outrage was justified; he had made a dreadful mistake.

When she finally paused for breath, he said, "You're quite right, and I'm going to try to remove the spell once the battle is decided."

Angela blinked three times, one right after the other, and her mouth remained open for a moment in a small "O" before she clamped it shut. With a glare of suspicion, she asked, "You're not saying that just to placate me, are you?"

"I would never."

"And you really intend to undo your curse? I thought such things were irrevocable."

"The elves have discovered many uses of magic."

"Ah … Well, then, that's settled, isn't it?" She flashed him a wide smile and then strode past him to pat Saphira on her jowls. "It's good to see you again, Saphira. You've grown."

Well met indeed, Angela.

As Angela returned to stirring her concoction, Eragon said, "That was an impressive tirade you gave."

"Thank you. I worked on it for several weeks. It's a pity you didn't get to hear the ending; it's *memorable*. I could finish it for you if you want."

"No, that's all right. I can imagine what it's like." Glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, Eragon then said, "You don't seem surprised by how I've changed."

The herbalist shrugged. "I have my sources. It's an improvement, in my opinion. You were a bit … oh, how shall I say it? … *unfinished* before."

"That I was." He gestured at the hanging plants. "What do you plan to do with these?"

"Oh, it's just a little project of mine—an experiment, if you will."

"Mmm." Examining the pattern of colors on a dried mushroom that dangled before him, Eragon asked, "Did you ever figure out if toads exist or not?"

"As a matter of fact, I did! It seems that all toads are frogs, but not all frogs are toads. So in that sense, toads don't really exist, which means that I was right all along." She stopped her patter abruptly, leaned to the side, grabbed a mug from a bench next to her, and offered it to Eragon. "Here, have a cup of tea."

Eragon glanced at the deadly plants surrounding them and then back at Angela's open face before he accepted the mug. Under his breath—so the herbalist would not hear—he muttered three spells to detect poison. Only once he ascertained that the tea was free of contamination did he dare drink. The tea was delicious, though he could not identify the ingredients.

At that moment, Solembum padded over to Saphira and began to arch his back and rub himself up against her leg, just as any normal cat would. Twisting her neck, Saphira bent down and with the tip of her nose brushed the werecat the length of his spine. She said, *I met someone in Ellesméra who knows you.*

Solembum stopped rubbing and cocked his head. *Is that so?*

Yes. Her name was Quickpaw and The Dream Dancer and also Maud.

Solembum's golden eyes widened. A deep, throaty purr rumbled in

his chest, and he rubbed against Saphira with renewed vigor.

"So," said Angela, "I assume you already spoke with Nasuada, Arya, and King Orrin." He nodded. "And what did you think of dear old Orrin?"

Eragon chose his words with care, for he was aware that they *were* talking about a king. "Well … he seems to have a great many interests."

"Yes, he's as balmy as a moonstruck fool on Midsummer Night Eve. But then everyone is, in one way or another."

Amused by her forthrightness, Eragon said, "He must be crazy to have carted so much glass all the way from Aberon."

Angela raised an eyebrow. "What's this now?"

"Haven't you seen the inside of his tent?"

"Unlike some people," she sniffed, "I don't ingratiate myself with every monarch I meet." So he described for her the mass of instruments Orrin had brought to the Burning Plains. Angela abandoned her stirring as he spoke and listened with great interest. The instant he finished, she began bustling around the cauldron, gathering the plants off the lines—often using tongs to do so—and saying, "I think I had best pay Orrin a visit. The two of you will have to tell me about your trip to Ellesméra at a later time.… Well, go on, both of you. Be gone!"

Eragon shook his head as the short little woman drove him and Saphira away from her tent, and he still holding the cup of tea. *Talking with her is always …*

Different? suggested Saphira.

Exactly.

From there it took them almost half an hour to locate Trianna's tent, which apparently served as the unofficial headquarters of Du Vrangr Gata. They had difficulty finding the tent because few people knew of its existence, and even fewer could tell them where it lay because the tent was hidden behind a spur of rock that served to conceal it from the gaze of enemy magicians in Galbatorix's army.

As Eragon and Saphira approached the black tent, the entrance was thrust open and Trianna strode out, her arms bare to the elbow in preparation to use magic. Behind her clustered a group of determined if frightened-looking spellcasters, many of whom Eragon had seen during the battle in Farthen Dûr, either fighting or healing the wounded.

Eragon watched as Trianna and the others reacted with the now-expected surprise at his altered appearance. Lowering her arms, Trianna said, "Shadeslayer, Saphira. You should have told us sooner that you were here. We've been preparing to confront and battle what we thought was a mighty foe."

"I didn't mean to upset you," said Eragon, "but we had to report to Nasuada and King Orrin immediately after we landed."

"And why have you graced us with your presence now? You never deigned to visit us before, we who are more your brethren than any in the Varden."

"I have come to take command of Du Vrangr Gata." The assembled spellcasters muttered with surprise at his announcement, and Trianna stiffened. Eragon felt several magicians probe his consciousness in an attempt to divine his true intentions. Instead of guarding himself—which would blind him to impending attacks—Eragon retaliated by jabbing the minds of the would-be invaders hard enough that they retreated behind their own barriers. As he did, Eragon had the satisfaction of seeing two men and a woman flinch and avert their gazes.

"By whose order?" demanded Trianna.

"By Nasuada's."

"Ah," said the sorceress with a triumphant smile, "but Nasuada has no direct authority over us. We help the Varden of our own free will."

Her resistance puzzled Eragon. "I'm sure Nasuada would be surprised to hear that, after everything she, and her father, have done

for Du Vrangr Gata. It might give her the impression that you no longer wanted the support and protection of the Varden." He let the threat hang in the air for a moment. "Besides, I seem to remember you were willing to give me this post before. Why not now?"

Trianna lifted an eyebrow. "You refused my offer, Shadeslayer … or have you forgotten?" Composed as she was, a trace of defensiveness colored her response, and Eragon suspected she knew her position was untenable. She seemed more mature to him than when they last met, and he had to remind himself of the hardships she must have endured since: marching across Alagaësia to Surda, supervising the magicians of Du Vrangr Gata, and preparing for war.

"We could not accept then. It was the wrong time."

Abruptly changing tack, she asked, "Why does Nasuada believe you should command us anyway? Surely you and Saphira would be more useful elsewhere."

"Nasuada wants me to lead you, Du Vrangr Gata, in the coming battle, and so I shall." Eragon thought it best not to mention that it was his idea.

A dark scowl gave Trianna a fierce appearance. She pointed at the cluster of spellcasters behind her. "We have devoted our lives to the study of our art. You have been casting spells for less than two years. What makes you more qualified for this task than any of us? … No matter. Tell me: What is your strategy? How do you plan to employ us?"

"My plan is simple," he said. "The lot of you will join minds and search for enemy spellcasters. When you find one, I'll add my strength to yours, and together we can crush the spellcaster's resistance. Then we can slay the troops that previously were protected by his or her wards."

"And what will you be doing the rest of the time?"

"Fighting alongside Saphira."

After an awkward silence, one of the men behind Trianna said, "It's a good plan." He quailed as Trianna cast an angry glare at him.

She slowly faced Eragon again. "Ever since the Twins died, I have led Du Vrangr Gata. Under my guidance, they have provided the means to fund the Varden's war effort, ferreted out the Black Hand—Galbatorix's network of spies that tried to assassinate Nasuada—as well as performing innumerable other services. I do not boast when I say these are no mean accomplishments. And I'm certain I can continue to produce such results.… Why, then, does Nasuada want to depose me? How have I displeased her?"

Everything became clear to Eragon, then. *She has grown accustomed to power and doesn't want to surrender it. But more than that, she thinks that my replacing her is a criticism of her leadership*.

You need to resolve this debate, and quickly too, said Saphira. *Our time grows short.*

Eragon racked his brain for a way to establish his authority in Du Vrangr Gata without further alienating Trianna. At last he said, "I didn't come here to stir up trouble. I came to ask for your help." He spoke to the entire congregation but looked only at the sorceress. "I am strong, yes. Saphira and I could probably defeat any number of Galbatorix's pet magicians. But we cannot protect everyone in the Varden. We cannot *be* everywhere. And if the Empire's battle-mages join forces against us, then even we will be hard-pressed to survive.… We cannot fight this battle alone. You are quite right, Trianna—you have done well with Du Vrangr Gata, and I'm not here to usurp your authority. It's only that—as a magician—I need to work with Du Vrangr Gata, and—as a Rider—I may also need to give you orders, orders that I have to know will be obeyed without question. The chain of command must be established. That said, you will retain the greater part of your autonomy. Most times I'll be too busy to devote my attention to Du Vrangr Gata. Nor do I intend to ignore your counsel, for I'm aware that you have far more experience than I.… So I ask again, will you help us, for the good of the Varden?"

Trianna paused, then bowed. "Of course, Shadeslayer—for the good of the Varden. It will be an honor to have you lead Du Vrangr Gata."

"Then let us begin."

Over the next few hours, Eragon talked with every one of the assembled magicians, although a fair number were absent, being occupied with one task or another to help the Varden. He did his best to acquaint himself with their knowledge of magic. He learned that the majority of men and women in Du Vrangr Gata had been introduced to their craft by a relative, and usually in profound secrecy to avoid attracting attention from those who feared magic—and, of course, Galbatorix himself. Only a handful had received proper apprenticeships. As a result, most of the spellcasters knew little about the ancient language—none could truly speak it fluently—their beliefs about magic were often distorted by religious superstitions, and they were ignorant of numerous applications of gramarye.

No wonder the Twins were so desperate to extract your vocabulary of the ancient language when they tested you in Farthen Dûr, observed Saphira. *With it they could have easily conquered these lesser magicians*.

They're all we have to work with, though.

True. I hope you can see now I was right about Trianna. She places her own desires before the good of the many.

You were right, he agreed. *But I don't condemn her for it. Trianna deals with the world in the best way she can, as do we all. I understand that, even if I don't approve, and understanding—as Oromis said—breeds*

empathy.

A bit more than a third of the spellcasters specialized as healers. Those Eragon sent on their way after giving them a quintet of new spells to memorize, enchantments that would allow them to treat a greater range of injuries. The remaining spellcasters Eragon worked with to establish a clear chain of command—he appointed Trianna his lieutenant and let her ensure that his orders were carried out—and to weld their disparate personalities into a cohesive fighting unit. Trying to convince magicians to cooperate, he discovered, was like trying to get a pack of dogs to share a meat bone. Nor did it help that they were in evident awe of him, for he could find no way of using his influence to smooth relations among the contentious magicians.

In order to gain a better idea of their exact proficiency, Eragon had them cast a series of spells. As he watched them struggle with enchantments that he now considered simple, Eragon became aware of just how far his own powers had advanced. To Saphira, he marveled, *And to think I once had trouble lifting a pebble in the air*.

And to think, she replied, *Galbatorix has had over a century to hone his talent.*

The sun was low in the west, intensifying the fermented orange light until the Varden's camp, the livid Jiet River, and the entirety of the Burning Plains glowed in the mad, marbled effulgence, as if in a scene from a lunatic's dreams. The sun was no more than a finger's breadth above the horizon when a runner arrived at the tent. He told Eragon that Nasuada ordered him to attend her at once. "An' I think you'd better hurry, Shadeslayer, if you don't mind me saying so."

After extracting a promise from Du Vrangr Gata that they would be ready and willing when he called upon them for assistance, Eragon ran alongside Saphira through the rows of gray tents toward Nasuada's pavilion. A harsh tumult above them caused Eragon to lift his eyes from the treacherous ground long enough to glance overhead.

What he saw was a giant flock of birds wheeling between the two armies. He spotted eagles, hawks, and falcons, along with countless greedy crows and their larger, dagger-beaked, blue-backed, rapacious cousin, the raven. Each bird shrieked for blood to wet its throat and enough hot meat to fill its belly and sate its hunger. By experience and instinct, they knew that whenever armies appeared in Alagaësia, they could expect to feast on acres of carrion.

The clouds of war are gathering, observed Eragon.

NAR GARZHVOG

Eragon entered the pavilion, Saphira pushing her head through after him. He was met by a steely rasp as Jörmundur and a half-dozen of Nasuada's commanders drew their swords at the intruders. The men lowered their weapons as Nasuada said, "Come here, Eragon."

"What is your bidding?" Eragon asked.

"Our scouts report that a company of some hundred Kull approach from the northeast."

Eragon frowned. He had not expected to encounter Urgals in this battle, since Durza no longer controlled them and so many had been killed in Farthen Dûr. But if they had come, they had come. He felt his bloodlust rise and allowed himself a savage grin as he contemplated destroying Urgals with his new strength. Clapping his hand to Zar'roc's hilt, he said, "It will be a pleasure to eliminate them. Saphira and I can handle it by ourselves, if you want."

Nasuada watched his face carefully as she said, "We can't do that, Eragon. They're flying a white flag, and they have asked to talk with me."

Eragon gaped at her. "Surely you don't intend to grant them an audience?"

"I will offer them the same courtesies I would to any foe who arrives under the banner of truce."

"They're brutes, though. Monsters! It's folly to allow them into the camp.… Nasuada, I have seen the atrocities Urgals commit. They relish pain and suffering and deserve no more mercy than a rabid dog. There is no need for you to waste time over what is surely a trap. Just give the word and I and every last one of your warriors will be more than willing to kill these foul creatures for you."

"In this," said Jörmundur, "I agree with Eragon. If you won't listen to us, Nasuada, at least listen to him."

First Nasuada said to Eragon in a murmur low enough that no one else could hear, "Your training is indeed unfinished if you are so blinded." Then she raised her voice, and in it Eragon heard the same adamantine notes of command that her father had possessed: "You all forget that I fought in Farthen Dûr, the same as you, and that I saw the savagery of the Urgals.… However, I also saw our own men commit acts just as heinous. I shall not denigrate what we have endured at the Urgals' hands, but neither shall I ignore potential allies

when we are so greatly outnumbered by the Empire."

"My Lady, it's too dangerous for you to meet with a Kull."

"Too dangerous?" Nasuada raised an eyebrow. "While I am protected by Eragon, Saphira, Elva, and all the warriors around me? I think not."

Eragon gritted his teeth with frustration. *Say something, Saphira*. You *can convince her to abandon this harebrained scheme*.

No, I won't. Your mind is clouded on this issue.

You can't agree with her! exclaimed Eragon, aghast. *You were there in Yazuac with me; you know what the Urgals did to the villagers. And what about when we left Teirm, my capture at Gil'ead, and Farthen Dûr? Every time we've encountered Urgals, they've tried to kill us or worse. They're nothing more than vicious animals*.

The elves believed the same thing about dragons during Du Fyrn Skulblaka.

At Nasuada's behest, her guards tied back the front and side panels of the pavilion, leaving it open for all to see and allowing Saphira to crouch low next to Eragon. Then Nasuada seated herself in her high-backed chair, and Jörmundur and the other commanders arranged themselves in two parallel rows so that anyone who sought an audience with her had to walk between them. Eragon stood at her right hand, Elva by her left.

Less than five minutes later, a great roar of anger erupted from the eastern edge of the camp. The storm of jeers and insults grew louder and louder until a single Kull entered their view, walking toward Nasuada while a mob of the Varden peppered him with taunts. The Urgal—or ram, as Eragon remembered they were called—held his head high and bared his yellow fangs, but did not otherwise react to the abuse directed at him. He was a magnificent specimen, eight and a half feet tall, with strong, proud—if grotesque—features, thick horns that spiraled all the way around, and a fantastic musculature that made it seem he could kill a bear with a single blow. His only clothing was a knotted loincloth, a few plates of crude iron armor held together with scraps of mail, and a curved metal disk nestled between his two horns to protect the top of his head. His long black hair was in a queue.

Eragon felt his lips tighten in a grimace of hate; he had to struggle to keep from drawing Zar'roc and attacking. Yet despite himself, he could not help but admire the Urgal's courage in confronting an entire army of enemies alone and unarmed. To his surprise, he found the Kull's mind strongly shielded.

When the Urgal stopped before the eaves of the pavilion, not daring to come any closer, Nasuada had her guards shout for quiet to settle the crowd. Everyone looked at the Urgal, wondering what he would

do next.

The Urgal lifted his bulging arms toward the sky, inhaled a mighty breath, and then opened his maw and bellowed at Nasuada. In an instant, a thicket of swords pointed at the Kull, but he paid them no attention and continued his ululation until his lungs were empty. Then he looked at Nasuada, ignoring the hundreds of people who, it was obvious, longed to kill him, and growled in a thick, guttural accent, "What treachery is this, Lady Nightstalker? I was promised safe passage. Do humans break their word so easily?"

Leaning toward her, one of Nasuada's commanders said, "Let us punish him, Mistress, for his insolence. Once we have taught him the meaning of respect, *then* you can hear his message, whatever it is."

Eragon longed to remain silent, but he knew his duty to Nasuada and the Varden, so he bent down and said in Nasuada's ear, "Don't take offense. This is how they greet their war chiefs. The proper response is to then butt heads, but I don't think you want to try that."

"Did the elves teach you this?" she murmured, never taking her eyes off the waiting Kull.

"Aye."

"What else did they teach you of the Urgals?"

"A great deal," he admitted reluctantly.

Then Nasuada said to the Kull and also to her men beyond, "The Varden are not liars like Galbatorix and the Empire. Speak your mind; you need fear no danger while we hold council under the conditions of truce."

The Urgal grunted and raised his bony chin higher, baring his throat; Eragon recognized it as a gesture of friendship. To lower one's head was a threat in their race, for it meant that an Urgal intended to ram you with his horns. "I am Nar Garzhvog of the Bolvek tribe. I speak for my people." It seemed as if he chewed on each word before spitting it out. "Urgals are hated more than any other race. Elves, dwarves, humans all hunt us, burn us, and drive us from our halls."

"Not without good reason," pointed out Nasuada.

Garzhvog nodded. "Not without reason. Our people love war. Yet how often are we attacked just because you find us as ugly as we find you? We have thrived since the fall of the Riders. Our tribes are now so large, the harsh land we live in can no longer feed us."

"So you made a pact with Galbatorix."

"Aye, Lady Nightstalker. He promised us good land if we killed his enemies. He tricked us, though. His flame-haired shaman, Durza, bent the minds of our war chiefs and forced our tribes to work together, as is not our way. When we learned this in the dwarves' hollow mountain, the Herndall, the dams who rule us, sent my brood mate to Galbatorix to ask why he used us so." Garzhvog shook his ponderous

head. “She did not return. Our finest rams died for Galbatorix, then he abandoned us like a broken sword. He is *drajl* and snake-tongued and a lack-horned betrayer. Lady Nightstalker, we are fewer now, but we will fight with you if you let us.”

“What is the price?” asked Nasuada. “Your Herndall must want something in return.”

“Blood. Galbatorix’s blood. And if the Empire falls, we ask that you give us land, land for breeding and growing, land to avoid more battles in the future.”

Eragon guessed Nasuada’s decision by the set of her face, even before she spoke. So apparently did Jörmundur, for he leaned toward her and said in an undertone, “Nasuada, you can’t do this. It goes against nature.”

“Nature can’t help us defeat the Empire. We *need* allies.”

“The men will desert before they’ll fight with Urgals.”

“That can be worked around. Eragon, will they keep their word?”

“Only so long as we share a common enemy.”

With a sharp nod, Nasuada again lifted her voice: “Very well, Nar Garzhvog. You and your warriors may bivouac along the eastern flank of our army, away from the main body, and we shall discuss the terms of our pact.”

“Ahgrat ukmar,” growled the Kull, clapping his fists to his brow. “You are a wise Herndall, Lady Nightstalker.”

“Why do you call me that?”

“Herndall?”

“No, Nightstalker.”

Garzhvog made a *ruk-ruk* sound in his throat that Eragon interpreted as laughter. “Nightstalker is the name we gave your sire because of how he hunted us in the dark tunnels under the dwarf mountain and because of the color of his hide. As his cub, you are worthy of the same name.” With that he turned on his heel and strode out of the camp.

Standing, Nasuada proclaimed, “Anyone who attacks the Urgals shall be punished as if he attacked a fellow human. See that word of this is posted in every company.”

No sooner had she finished than Eragon noticed King Orrin approaching at a quick pace, his cape flapping around him. When he was close enough, he cried, “Nasuada! Is it true you met with an Urgal? What do you mean by it, and why wasn’t I alerted sooner? I don’t—”

He was interrupted as a sentry emerged from the ranks of gray tents, shouting, “A horseman approaches from the Empire!”

In an instant, King Orrin forgot his argument and joined Nasuada as she hurried toward the vanguard of the army, followed by at least a

hundred people. Rather than stay among the crowd, Eragon pulled himself onto Saphira and let her carry him to their destination.

When Saphira halted at the ramparts, trenches, and rows of sharpened poles that protected the Varden's leading edge, Eragon saw a lone soldier riding at a furious clip across the bleak no-man's-land. Above him, the birds of prey swooped low to discover if the first course of their feast had arrived.

The soldier reined in his black stallion some thirty yards from the breastwork, keeping as much distance as possible between him and the Varden. He shouted, "By refusing King Galbatorix's generous terms of surrender, you choose death as your fate. No more shall we negotiate. The hand of friendship has turned into the fist of war! If any of you still hold regard for your rightful sovereign, the all-knowing, all-powerful King Galbatorix, then flee! None may stand before us once we set forth to cleanse Alagaësia of every miscreant, traitor, and subversive. And though it pains our lord—for he knows that most of these rebellious acts are instigated by bitter and misguided leaders—we shall gently chastise the unlawful territory known as Surda and return it to the benevolent rule of King Galbatorix, he who sacrifices himself day and night for the good of his people. So flee, I say, or suffer the doom of your herald."

With that the soldier untied a canvas sack and flourished a severed head. He threw it into the air and watched it fall among the Varden, then turned his stallion, dug in his spurs, and galloped back toward the dark mass of Galbatorix's army.

"Shall I kill him?" asked Eragon.

Nasuada shook her head. "We will have our due soon enough. I won't violate the sanctity of envoys, even if the Empire has."

"As you—" He yelped with surprise and clutched Saphira's neck to keep from falling as she reared above the ramparts, planting her front legs upon the chartreuse bank. Opening her jaws, Saphira uttered a long, deep roar, much like Garzhvog had done, only this roar was a defiant challenge to their enemies, a warning of the wrath they had roused, and a clarion call to all who hated Galbatorix.

The sound of her trumpeting voice frightened the stallion so badly, he jinked to the right, slipped on the heated ground, and fell on his side. The soldier was thrown free of the horse and landed in a gout of fire that erupted at that very instant. He uttered a single cry so horrible, it made Eragon's scalp prickle, then was silent and still forevermore.

The birds began to descend.

The Varden cheered Saphira's accomplishment. Even Nasuada allowed herself a small smile. Then she clapped her hands and said, "They will attack at dawn, I think. Eragon, gather Du Vrangr Gata and

prepare yourself for action. I will have orders for you within the hour." Taking Orrin by the shoulder, she guided him back toward the center of the compound, saying, "Sire, there are decisions we must make. I have a certain plan, but it will require …"

Let them come, said Saphira. The tip of her tail twitched like that of a cat stalking a rabbit. *They will all burn.*

Witch's Brew

Night had fallen on the Burning Plains. The roof of opaque smoke covered the moon and stars, plunging the land into profound darkness that was broken only by the sullen glow of the sporadic peat fires, and by the thousands of torches each army lit. From Eragon's position near the fore of the Varden, the Empire looked a dense nest of uncertain orange lights as large as any city.

As Eragon buckled the last piece of Saphira's armor onto her tail, he closed his eyes to maintain better contact with the magicians from Du Vrangr Gata. He had to learn to locate them at a moment's notice; his life would depend on communicating with them in a quick and timely manner. In turn, the magicians had to learn to recognize the touch of his mind so they did not block him when he needed their assistance.

Eragon smiled and said, "Hello, Orik." He opened his eyes to see Orik clambering up the low knuckle of rock where he and Saphira sat. The dwarf, who was fully armored, carried his Urgal-horn bow in his left hand.

Hunkering beside Eragon, Orik wiped his brow and shook his head. "How'd you know it was me? I was shielding myself."

Every consciousness feels different, explained Saphira. *Just like no two voices sound exactly the same*.

"Ah."

Eragon asked, "What brings you here?"

Orik shrugged. "It struck me you might appreciate a spot of company in this grim night. Especially since Arya's otherwise engaged and you don't have Murtagh with you for this battle."

And I wish I did, thought Eragon. Murtagh had been the only human who matched Eragon's skill with a sword, at least before the Agaetí Blödhren. Sparring with him had been one of Eragon's few pleasures during their time together. *I would have enjoyed fighting with you again, old friend.*

Remembering how Murtagh was killed—dragged underground by Urgals in Farthen Dûr—forced Eragon to confront a sobering truth: No matter how great a warrior you were, as often as not, pure chance dictated who lived and who died in war.

Orik must have sensed his mood, for he clapped Eragon on the shoulder and said, "You'll be fine. Just imagine how the soldiers out there feel, knowing they have to face *you* before long!"

Gratitude made Eragon smile again. “I’m glad you came.”

The tip of Orik’s nose reddened, and he glanced down, rolling his bow between gnarled hands. “Ah, well,” he grumbled, “Hrothgar wouldn’t much like it if I let something happen to you. Besides, we’re foster brothers now, eh?”

Through Eragon, Saphira asked, *What about the other dwarves? Aren’t they under your command?*

A twinkle sprang into Orik’s eyes. “Why, yes, so they are. And they’ll be joining us before long. Seeing as Eragon’s a member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, it’s only right we fight the Empire together. That way, the two of you won’t be so vulnerable; you can concentrate on finding Galbatorix’s magicians instead of defending yourselves from constant attacks.”

“A good idea. Thank you.” Orik grunted an acknowledgment. Then Eragon asked, “What do you think about Nasuada and the Urgals?”

“She made the right choice.”

“You agree with her!”

“I do. I don’t like it any more than you, but I do.”

Silence enveloped them after that. Eragon sat against Saphira and stared out at the Empire, trying to prevent his growing anxiety from overwhelming him. Minutes dragged by. To him, the interminable waiting before a battle was as stressful as the actual fighting. He oiled Saphira’s saddle, polished rust off his hauberk, and then resumed familiarizing himself with the minds of Du Vrangr Gata, anything to pass the time.

Over an hour later, he paused as he sensed two beings approaching from across the no-man’s-land. *Angela? Solembum?* Puzzled and alarmed, he woke Orik—who had dozed off—and told him what he had discovered.

The dwarf frowned and drew his war ax from his belt. “I’ve only met the herbalist a few times, but she didn’t seem like the sort who would betray us. She’s been welcome among the Varden for decades.”

“We should still find out what she was doing,” said Eragon.

Together they picked their way through the camp to intercept the duo as they approached the fortifications. Angela soon trotted into the light, Solembum at her heels. The witch was muffled in a dark, full-length cloak that allowed her to blend into the mottled landscape. Displaying a surprising amount of alacrity, strength, and flexibility, she clambered over the many rows of breastwork the dwarves had engineered, swinging from pole to pole, leaping over trenches, and finally running helter-skelter down the steep face of the last rampart to stop, panting, by Saphira.

Throwing back the hood of her cloak, Angela flashed them a bright smile. “A welcoming committee! How thoughtful of you.” As she

spoke, the werecat shivered along his length, fur rippling. Then his outline blurred as if seen through cloudy water, resolving once more into the nude figure of a shaggy-haired boy. Angela dipped her hand into a leather purse at her belt and passed a child's tunic and breeches back to Solembum, along with the small black dagger he fought with.

"What were you doing out there?" asked Orik, peering at them with a suspicious gaze.

"Oh, this and that."

"I think you better tell us," said Eragon.

Her face hardened. "Is that so? Don't you trust Solembum and me?" The werecat bared his pointed teeth.

"Not really," admitted Eragon, but with a small smile.

"That's good," said Angela. She patted him on the cheek. "You'll live longer. If you must know, then, I was doing my best to help defeat the Empire, only *my* methods don't involve yelling and running around with a sword."

"And what exactly are your methods?" growled Orik.

Angela paused to roll up her cloak into a tight bundle, which she stored in her purse. "I'd rather not say; I want it to be a surprise. You won't have to wait long to find out. It'll start in a few hours."

Orik tugged on his beard. "What will start? If you can't give us a straight answer, we'll have to take you to Nasuada. Maybe she can wring some sense out of you."

"It's no use dragging me off to Nasuada," said Angela. "She gave me permission to cross lines."

"So you say," challenged Orik, ever more belligerent.

"And so *I* say," announced Nasuada, walking up to them from behind, as Eragon knew she would. He also sensed that she was accompanied by four Kull, one of whom was Garzhvog. Scowling, he turned to face them, making no attempt to hide his anger at the Urgals' presence.

"My Lady," muttered Eragon.

Orik was not as composed; he jumped back with a mighty oath, grasping his war ax. He quickly realized that they were not under attack and gave Nasuada a terse greeting. But his hand never left the haft of his weapon and his eyes never left the hulking Urgals. Angela seemed to have no such inhibitions. She paid Nasuada the respect due to her, then addressed the Urgals in their own harsh language, to which they answered with evident delight.

Nasuada drew Eragon off to the side so they could have a measure of privacy. There, she said, "I need you to put aside your feelings for a moment and judge what I am about to tell you with logic and reason. Can you do that?" He nodded, stiff-faced. "Good. I'm doing everything I can to ensure we don't lose tomorrow. It doesn't matter, though, how

well we fight, or how well I lead the Varden, or even if we rout the Empire if *you*," she poked him in the chest, "are killed. Do you understand?" He nodded again. "There's nothing I can do to protect you if Galbatorix reveals himself; if he does, you will face him alone. Du Vrangr Gata poses no more of a threat to him than they do to you, and I'll not have them eradicated without reason."

"I have always known," said Eragon, "that I would face Galbatorix alone but for Saphira."

A sad smile touched Nasuada's lips. She looked very tired in the flickering torchlight. "Well, there's no reason to invent trouble where none exists. It's possible Galbatorix isn't even here." She did not seem to believe her own words, though. "In any case, I can at least keep you from dying from a sword in the gut. I heard what the dwarves intend to do, and I thought I could improve upon the concept. I asked Garzhvog and three of his rams to be your guards, so long as they agreed—which they have—to let you examine their minds for treachery."

Eragon went rigid. "You can't expect me to fight with those *monsters*. Besides, I already accepted the dwarves' offer to defend Saphira and me. They would take it poorly if I rejected them in favor of Urgals."

"Then they can both guard you," retorted Nasuada. She searched his face for a long time, looking for what he could not tell. "Oh, Eragon. I'd hoped you could see past your hate. What else would you do in my position?" She sighed when he remained silent. "If anyone has cause to hold a grudge against the Urgals, it is I. They killed my father. Yet I cannot allow that to interfere with deciding what's best for the Varden.… At least ask Saphira's opinion before you say yea or nay. I can order you to accept the Urgals' protection, but I would rather not."

You're being foolish, observed Saphira without prompting.

Foolish to not want Kull watching my back?

No, foolish to refuse help, no matter where it comes from, in our present situation. Think. You know what Oromis would do, and you know what he would say. Don't you trust his judgment?

He can't be right about everything, said Eragon.

That's no argument.… Search yourself, Eragon, and tell me whether I speak the truth. You know the correct path. I would be disappointed if you could not bring yourself to embrace it.

Saphira and Nasuada's cajoling only made Eragon more reluctant to agree. Still, he knew he had no choice. "All right, I'll let them guard me, but only if I find nothing suspicious in their minds. Will you promise that, after this battle, you won't make me work with an Urgal again?"

Nasuada shook her head. “I can’t do that, not when it might hurt the Varden.” She paused and said, “Oh, and Eragon?”

“Yes, my Lady?”

“In the event of my death, I have chosen you as my successor. If that should happen, I suggest you rely upon Jörmundur’s advice—he has more experience than the other members of the Council of Elders—and I would expect you to place the welfare of those underneath you before all else. Am I clear, Eragon?”

Her announcement caught him by surprise. Nothing meant more to her than the Varden. Offering it to him was the greatest act of trust she could make. Her confidence humbled and touched him; he bowed his head. “I would strive to be as good a leader as you and Ajihad have been. You honor me, Nasuada.”

“Yes, I do.” Turning away from him, she rejoined the others.

Still overwhelmed by Nasuada’s revelation, and finding his anger tempered by it, Eragon slowly walked back to Saphira. He studied Garzhvog and the other Urgals, trying to gauge their mood, but their features were so different from those he was accustomed to, he could discern nothing more than the broadest of emotions. Nor could he find any empathy within himself for the Urgals. To him, they were feral beasts that would kill him as soon as not and were incapable of love, kindness, or even true intelligence. In short, they were lesser beings.

Deep within his mind, Saphira whispered, *I’m sure Galbatorix is of the same opinion.*

And for good reason, he growled, intending to shock her. Suppressing his revulsion, he said out loud, “Nar Garzhvog, I am told that the four of you agreed to allow me within your minds.”

“That is so, Firesword. Lady Nightstalker told us what was required. We are honored to have the chance to battle alongside such a mighty warrior, and one who has done so much for us.”

“What do you mean? I have killed scores of your kin.” Unbidden, excerpts from one of Oromis’s scrolls rose in Eragon’s memory. He remembered reading that Urgals, both male and female, determined their rank in society through combat, and that it was this practice, above all else, that had led to so many conflicts between Urgals and other races. Which meant, he realized, that if they admired his feats in battle, then they may have accorded him the same status as one of their war chiefs.

“By killing Durza, you freed us from his control. We are in your debt, Firesword. None of our rams will challenge you, and if you visit our halls, you and the dragon, Flametongue, will be welcomed as no outsiders ever before.”

Of all the responses Eragon had expected, gratitude was the last, and it was the one he was least prepared to deal with. Unable to think

of anything else, he said, “I won’t forget.” He switched his gaze to the other Urgals, then returned it to Garzhvog and his yellow eyes. “Are you ready?”

“Aye, Rider.”

As Eragon reached toward Garzhvog’s consciousness, it reminded him of how the Twins invaded his mind when he first entered Farthen Dûr. That observation was swept away as he immersed himself in the Urgal’s identity. The very nature of his search—looking for malevolent intent perhaps hidden somewhere in Garzhvog’s past—meant Eragon had to examine years of memories. Unlike the Twins, Eragon avoided causing deliberate pain, but he was not overly gentle. He could feel Garzhvog flinch with occasional pangs of discomfort. Like dwarves and elves, the mind of an Urgal possessed different elements than a human mind. Its structure emphasized rigidity and hierarchy—a result of the tribes the Urgals organized themselves into—but it felt rough and raw, brutal and cunning: the mind of a wild animal.

Though he made no effort to learn more about Garzhvog as an individual, Eragon could not help absorbing pieces of the Urgal’s life. Garzhvog did not resist. Indeed, he seemed eager to share his experiences, to convince Eragon that Urgals were not his born enemies. *We cannot afford to have another Rider rise up who seeks to destroy us*, said Garzhvog. *Look well, O Firesword, and see if we are truly the monsters you call us.…*

So many images and sensations flashed between them, Eragon almost lost track: Garzhvog’s childhood with the other members of his brood in a ramshackle village built deep in the heart of the Spine; his dam brushing his hair with an antler comb and singing a soft song; learning to hunt deer and other prey with his bare hands; growing larger and larger until it was apparent that the old blood still flowed in his veins and he would stand over eight feet tall, making him a Kull; the dozens of challenges he made, accepted, and won; venturing out of the village to gain renown, so he might mate, and gradually learning to hate, distrust, and fear—yes, *fear*—a world that had condemned his race; fighting in Farthen Dûr; discovering they had been manipulated by Durza; and realizing that their only hope of a better life was to put aside old differences, befriend the Varden, and see Galbatorix overthrown. Nowhere was there evidence that Garzhvog lied.

Eragon could not understand what he had seen. Tearing himself from Garzhvog’s mind, he dove into each of the three remaining Urgals. Their memories confirmed the facts presented by Garzhvog. They made no attempt to conceal that they had killed humans, but it had been done at the command of Durza when the sorcerer controlled them, or when fighting humans over food or land. *We did what we had*

to in order to care for our families, they said.

When he finished, Eragon stood before Garzhvog and knew the Urgal's bloodline was as regal as any prince's. He knew that, though uneducated, Garzhvog was a brilliant commander and as great a thinker and philosopher as Oromis himself. *He's certainly brighter than me*, admitted Eragon to Saphira. Baring his throat as a sign of respect, he said out loud, "Nar Garzhvog," and for the first time, he was aware of the lofty origins of the title *nar*. "I am proud to have you at my side. You may tell the Herndall that so long as the Urgals remain true to their word and do not turn against the Varden, I shall not oppose you." Eragon doubted that he would ever *like* an Urgal, but the iron certitude of his prejudice only a few minutes before now seemed ignorant, and he could not retain it in good conscience.

Saphira flicked him on the arm with her barbed tongue, making the mail clink together. *It takes courage to admit you were wrong*.

Only if you are afraid of looking foolish, and I would have looked far more foolish if I persisted with an erroneous belief.

Why, little one, you just said something wise. Despite her teasing, he could sense her warm pride in what he had accomplished.

"Again, we are in your debt, Firesword," said Garzhvog. He and the other Urgals pressed their fists against their jutting brows.

Eragon could tell that Nasuada wanted to know the details of what had just transpired but that she restrained herself. "Good. Now that this is settled, I must be off. Eragon, you'll receive my signal from Trianna when the time has arrived." With that she strode away into the darkness.

As Eragon settled against Saphira, Orik sidled up to him. "It's lucky we dwarves are going to be here, eh? We'll watch the Kull like hawks, we will. We won't let them catch you while your back is turned. The moment they attack, we'll cut their legs out from under them."

"I thought you agreed with Nasuada's accepting the Urgals' offer."

"That doesn't mean I trust them or want to be right alongside them, now does it?" Eragon smiled and did not bother to argue; it would be impossible to convince Orik that the Urgals were not rapacious killers when he himself had refused to consider the possibility until sharing an Urgal's memories.

The night lay heavy around them as they waited for dawn. Orik removed a whetstone from his pocket and proceeded to hone the edge of his curved ax. Once they arrived, the six other dwarves did the same, and the rasp of metal on stone filled the air with a grating chorus. The Kull sat back to back, chanting death songs under their breaths. Eragon spent the time casting wards about himself, Saphira, Nasuada, Orik, and even Arya. He knew that it was dangerous to protect so many, but he could not bear it if they were harmed. When

he finished, he transferred what power he dared into the diamonds embedded within the belt of Beloth the Wise.

Eragon watched with interest as Angela clad herself in green and black armor and then, taking out a carved-wood case, assembled her staff-sword from two separate handles that attached in the middle and two blades of watered steel that threaded into the ends of the resulting pole. She twirled the completed weapon around her head a few times before seeming satisfied that it would hold up to the shock of battle.

The dwarves eyed her with disapproval, and Eragon heard one grumble, "… blasphemy that any but Dûrgrimst Quan should wield the hûthvír."

After that the only sound was the discordant music of the dwarves honing their blades.

It was near dawn when the cries began. Eragon and Saphira noticed them first because of their heightened senses, but the agonized screams were soon loud enough for the others to hear. Rising to his feet, Orik looked out toward the Empire, where the cacophony originated. "What manner of creatures are they torturing to extract such fearsome howls? The sound chills the marrow in my bones, it does."

"I told you that you wouldn't have to wait very long," said Angela. Her former cheer had deserted her; she looked pale, drawn, and gray in the face, as if she were ill.

From his post by Saphira, Eragon asked, "*You* did this?"

"Aye. I poisoned their stew, their bread, their drink—anything I could get my hands on. Some will die now, others will die later as the various toxins take their toll. I slipped the officers nightshade and other such poisons so they will hallucinate in battle." She tried to smile, but without much success. "Not a very honorable way to fight, I suppose, but I'd rather do this than be killed. Confusion to our enemies and all that."

"Only a coward or a thief uses poison!" exclaimed Orik. "What glory is there in defeating a sick opponent?" The screams intensified even as he spoke.

Angela gave an unpleasant laugh. "Glory? If you want glory, there are thousands more troops I didn't poison. I'm sure you will have your fill of *glory* by the end of today."

"Is this why you needed the equipment in Orrin's tent?" asked Eragon. He found her deed repugnant but did not pretend to know whether it was good or evil. It was necessary. Angela had poisoned the soldiers for the same reason Nasuada had accepted the Urgals' offer of friendship—because it might be their only hope of survival.

"That's right."

The soldiers' wails increased in number until Eragon longed to plug his ears and block out the sound. It made him wince and fidget, and it put his teeth on edge. He forced himself to listen, though. This was the cost of resisting the Empire. It would be wrong to ignore it. So he sat with his hands clenched into fists and his jaw forming painful knots while the Burning Plains echoed with the disembodied voices of dying men.

THE STORM BREAKS

The first horizontal rays of dawn already streaked across the land when Trianna said to Eragon, *It is time*. A surge of energy erased Eragon's sleepiness. Jumping to his feet, he shouted the word to everyone around him, even as he clambered into Saphira's saddle, pulling his new bow from its quiver. The Kull and dwarves surrounded Saphira, and together they hurried down the breastwork until they reached the opening that had been cleared during the night.

The Varden poured through the gap, quiet as they could be. Rank upon rank of warriors marched past, their armor and weapons padded with rags so no sound would alert the Empire of their approach. Saphira joined the procession when Nasuada appeared on a roan charger in the midst of the men, Arya and Trianna by her side. The five of them acknowledged each other with quick glances, nothing more.

During the night, the mephitic vapors had accumulated low to the ground, and now the dim morning light gilded the turgid clouds, turning them opaque. Thus, the Varden managed to cross three-quarters of the no-man's-land before they were seen by the Empire's sentries. As the alarm horns rang out before them, Nasuada shouted, "Now, Eragon! Tell Orrin to strike. To me, men of the Varden! Fight to win back your homes. Fight to guard your wives and children! Fight to overthrow Galbatorix! Attack and bathe your blades in the blood of our enemies! Charge!" She spurred her horse forward, and with a great bellow, the men followed, shaking their weapons above their heads.

Eragon conveyed Nasuada's order to Barden, the spellcaster who rode with King Orrin. A moment later, he heard the drumming of hooves as Orrin and his cavalry—accompanied by the rest of the Kull, who could run as fast as horses—galloped out of the east. They charged into the Empire's flank, pinning the soldiers against the Jiet River and distracting them long enough for the Varden to cross the remainder of the distance between them without opposition.

The two armies collided with a deafening roar. Pikes clashed against spears, hammers against shields, swords against helms, and above it all whirled the hungry gore-crows uttering their harsh croaks, driven into a frenzy by the smell of fresh meat below.

Eragon's heart leaped within his chest. *I must now kill or be killed.*

Almost immediately he felt his wards drawing upon his strength as they deflected attacks from Arya, Orik, Nasuada, and Saphira.

Saphira held back from the leading edge of the battle, for they would be too exposed to Galbatorix's magicians at the front. Taking a deep breath, Eragon began to search for those magicians with his mind, firing arrows all the while.

Du Vrangr Gata found the first enemy spellcaster. The instant he was alerted, Eragon reached out to the woman who made the discovery, and from there to the foe she grappled with. Bringing the full power of his will to bear, Eragon demolished the magician's resistance, took control of his consciousness—doing his best to ignore the man's terror—determined which troops the man was guarding, and slew the man with one of the twelve words of death. Without pause, Eragon located the minds of each of the now-unprotected soldiers and killed them as well. The Varden cheered as the knot of men went limp.

The ease with which he slew them amazed Eragon. The soldiers had had no chance to escape or fight back. *How different from Farthen Dûr*, he thought. Though he marveled at the perfection of his skills, the deaths sickened him. But there was no time to dwell on it.

Recovering from the Varden's initial assault, the Empire began to man their engines of war: catapults that cast round missiles of hard-baked ceramic, trebuchets armed with barrels of liquid fire, and ballistae that bombarded the attackers with a hail of arrows six feet long. The ceramic balls and the liquid fire caused terrific damage when they landed. One ball exploded against the ground not ten yards from Saphira. As Eragon ducked behind his shield, a jagged fragment spun toward his head, only to be stopped dead in the air by one of his wards. He blinked at the sudden loss of energy.

The engines soon stalled the Varden's advance, sowing mayhem wherever they aimed. *They have to be destroyed if we're going to last long enough to wear down the Empire*, realized Eragon. It would be easy for Saphira to dismantle the machines, but she dared not fly among the soldiers for fear of an attack by magic.

Breaking through the Varden lines, eight soldiers stormed toward Saphira, jabbing at her with pikes. Before Eragon could draw Zar'roc, the dwarves and Kull eliminated the entire group.

"A good fight!" roared Garzhvog.

"A good fight!" agreed Orik with a bloody grin.

Eragon did not use spells against the engines; they would be protected against any conceivable enchantment. *Unless* … Extending himself, he found the mind of a soldier who tended one of the catapults. Though he was sure the soldier was defended by some magician, Eragon was able to gain dominance over him and direct his

actions from afar. He guided the man up to the weapon, which was being loaded, then had him use his sword to hack at the skein of twisted rope that powered the machine. The rope was too thick to sever before the soldier was dragged away by his comrades, but the damage was already done. With a mighty *crack*, the partially wound skein broke, sending the arm of the catapult flying backward and injuring several men. His lips curled in a grim smile, Eragon proceeded to the next catapult and, in short order, disabled the remainder of the engines.

Returning to himself, Eragon became aware of dozens of the Varden collapsing around Saphira; one of Du Vrangr Gata had been overwhelmed. He uttered a dreadful curse and flung himself back along the trail of magic as he searched for the man who cast the fatal spell, entrusting the welfare of his body to Saphira and his guards.

For over an hour, Eragon hunted Galbatorix's magicians, but to little avail, for they were wily and cunning and did not directly attack him. Their reticence puzzled Eragon until he tore from the mind of one spellcaster—moments before he committed suicide—the thought, *… ordered not to kill you or the dragon … not to kill you or the dragon*.

That answers my question, he said to Saphira, *but* why *does Galbatorix still want us alive? We've made it clear we support the Varden*.

Before she could respond, Nasuada appeared before them, her face streaked with filth and gore, her shield covered with dents, blood sheeting down her left leg from a wound on her thigh. "Eragon," she gasped. "I need you, both of you, to fight, to show yourselves and embolden the men … to frighten the soldiers."

Her condition shocked Eragon. "Let me heal you first," he cried, afraid she might faint. *I should have put more wards around her*.

"No! I can wait, but we are lost unless you stem the tide of soldiers." Her eyes were glazed and empty, blank holes in her face. "We need … a Rider." She swayed in her saddle.

Eragon saluted her with Zar'roc. "You have one, my Lady."

"Go," she said, "and may what gods there are watch over you."

Eragon was too high on Saphira's back to strike his enemies below, so he dismounted and positioned himself by her right paw. To Orik and Garzhvog, he said, "Protect Saphira's left side. And whatever you do, don't get in our way."

"You will be overrun, Firesword."

"No," said Eragon, "I won't. Now take your places!" As they did, he put his hand on Saphira's leg and looked her in one clear-cut sapphire eye. *Shall we dance, friend of my heart?*

We shall, little one.

Then he and she merged their identities to a greater degree than ever before, vanquishing all differences between them to become a

single entity. They bellowed, leaped forward, and forged a path to the front line. Once there, Eragon could not tell from whose mouth emanated the ravenous jet of flame that consumed a dozen soldiers, cooking them in their mail, nor whose arm it was that brought Zar'roc down in an arc, cleaving a soldier's helm in half.

The metallic scent of blood clogged the air, and curtains of smoke wafted over the Burning Plains, alternately concealing and revealing the knots, clumps, ranks, and battalions of thrashing bodies. Overhead, the carrion birds waited for their meal and the sun climbed in the firmament toward noon.

From the minds of those around them, Eragon and Saphira caught glimpses of how they appeared. Saphira was always noticed first: a great ravening creature with claws and fangs dyed red, who slew all in her path with swipes of her paws and lashes of her tail and with billowing waves of flame that engulfed entire platoons of soldiers. Her brilliant scales glittered like stars and nearly blinded her foes with their reflected light. Next they saw Eragon running alongside Saphira. He moved faster than the soldiers could react and, with strength beyond men, splintered shields with a single blow, rent armor, and clove the swords of those who opposed him. Shot and dart cast at him fell to the pestilent ground ten feet away, stopped by his wards.

It was harder for Eragon—and, by extension, Saphira—to fight his own race than it had been to fight the Urgals in Farthen Dûr. Every time he saw a frightened face or looked into a soldier's mind, he thought, *This could be me*. But he and Saphira could afford no mercy; if a soldier stood before them, he died.

Three times they sallied forth and three times Eragon and Saphira slew every man in the Empire's first few ranks before retreating to the main body of the Varden to avoid being surrounded. By the end of their last attack, Eragon had to reduce or eliminate certain wards around Arya, Orik, Nasuada, Saphira, and himself in order to keep the spells from exhausting him too quickly. For though his strength was great, so too were the demands of battle.

Ready? he asked Saphira after a brief respite. She growled an affirmative.

A cloud of arrows whistled toward Eragon the instant he dove back into combat. Fast as an elf, he dodged the bulk of them—since his magic no longer protected him from such missiles—caught twelve on his shield, and stumbled as one struck his belly and one his side. Neither shaft pierced his armor, but they knocked the wind out of him and left bruises the size of apples. *Don't stop! You've dealt with worse pain than this before*, he told himself.

Rushing a cluster of eight soldiers, Eragon darted from one to the next, knocking aside their pikes and jabbing Zar'roc like a deadly bolt

of lightning. The fighting had dulled his reflexes, though, and one soldier managed to drive his pike through Eragon's hauberk, slicing his left triceps.

The soldiers cringed as Saphira roared.

Eragon took advantage of the distraction to fortify himself with energy stored within the ruby in Zar'roc's pommel and then to kill the three remaining soldiers.

Sweeping her tail over him, Saphira knocked a score of men out of his way. In the lull that followed, Eragon looked over at his throbbing arm and said, "Waíse heill." He also healed his bruises, relying upon Zar'roc's ruby, as well as the diamonds in the belt of Beloth the Wise.

Then the two of them pressed onward.

Eragon and Saphira choked the Burning Plains with mountains of their enemies, and yet the Empire never faltered or fell back. For every man they killed, another stepped forth to take his place. A sense of hopelessness engulfed Eragon as the mass of soldiers gradually forced the Varden to retreat toward their own camp. He saw his despair mirrored in the faces of Nasuada, Arya, King Orrin, and even Angela when he passed them in battle.

All our training and we still can't stop the Empire, raged Eragon. *There are just too many soldiers! We can't keep this up forever. And Zar'roc and the belt are almost depleted.*

You can draw energy from your surroundings if you have to.

I won't, not unless I kill another of Galbatorix's magicians and can take it from the soldiers. Otherwise, I'll just be hurting the rest of the Varden, since there are no plants or animals here I can use to support us.

As the long hours dragged by, Eragon grew sore and weary and—stripped of many of his arcane defenses—accumulated dozens of minor injuries. His left arm went numb from the countless blows that hammered his mangled shield. A scratch on his forehead kept blinding him with rivulets of hot, sweat-mixed blood. He thought one of his fingers might be broken.

Saphira fared no better. The soldiers' armor tore the inside of her mouth, dozens of swords and arrows cut her unprotected wings, and a javelin punctured one of her own plates of armor, wounding her in the shoulder. Eragon saw the spear coming and tried to deflect it with a spell but was too slow. Whenever Saphira moved, she splattered the ground with hundreds of drops of blood.

Beside them, three of Orik's warriors fell, and two of the Kull.

And the sun began its descent toward evening.

As Eragon and Saphira prepared for their seventh and final assault, a trumpet sounded in the east, loud and clear, and King Orrin shouted, "The dwarves are here! The dwarves are here!"

Dwarves? Eragon blinked and glanced around, confused. He saw

nothing but soldiers. Then a jolt of excitement raced through him as he understood. *The dwarves!* He climbed onto Saphira and she jumped into the air, hanging for a moment on her tattered wings as they surveyed the battlefield.

It was true—a great host marched out of the east toward the Burning Plains. At its head strode King Hrothgar, clad in gold mail, his jeweled helm upon his brow, and Volund, his ancient war hammer, gripped in his iron fist. The dwarf king raised Volund in greeting when he saw Eragon and Saphira.

Eragon howled at the top of his lungs and returned the gesture, brandishing Zar'roc in the air. A surge of renewed vigor made him forget his wounds and feel fierce and determined again. Saphira added her voice to his, and the Varden looked to her with hope, while the Empire's soldiers hesitated with fear.

"What did you see?" cried Orik as Saphira dropped back to earth. "Is it Hrothgar? How many warriors did he bring?"

Ecstatic with relief, Eragon stood in his stirrups and shouted, "Take heart, King Hrothgar is here! And it looks like every single dwarf is behind him! We'll crush the Empire!" After the men stopped cheering, he added, "Now take your swords and remind these flea-bitten cowards why they should fear us. Charge!"

Just as Saphira leaped toward the soldiers, Eragon heard a second cry, this one from the west: "A ship! A ship is coming up the Jiet River!"

"Blast it," he snarled. *We can't let a ship land if it's bringing reinforcements for the Empire*. Contacting Trianna, he said, *Tell Nasuada that Saphira and I will take care of this. We'll sink the ship if it's from Galbatorix*.

As you wish, Argetlam, replied the sorceress.

Without hesitation, Saphira took flight, circling high over the trampled, smoking plain. As the relentless clamor of combat faded from his ears, Eragon took a deep breath, feeling his mind clear. Below, he was surprised by how scattered both armies had become. The Empire and the Varden had disintegrated into a series of smaller groups contending against one another over the entire breadth and width of the Burning Plains. It was into this confused tumult that the dwarves inserted themselves, catching the Empire from the side—as Orrin had done earlier with his cavalry.

Eragon lost sight of the battle when Saphira turned to her left and soared through the clouds in the direction of the Jiet River. A gust of wind blew the peat smoke out of their way and unveiled a large three-masted ship riding upon the orange water, rowing against the current with two banks of oars. The ship was scarred and damaged and flew no colors to declare its allegiance. Nevertheless, Eragon readied

himself to destroy the vessel. As Saphira dove toward it, he lifted Zar’roc overhead and loosed his savage war cry.

CONVERGENCE

Roran stood at the prow of the *Dragon Wing* and listened to the oars swish through the water. He had just finished a stint rowing and a cold, jagged ache permeated his right shoulder. *Will I always have to deal with this reminder of the Ra'zac?* He wiped the sweat from his face and ignored the discomfort, concentrating instead on the river ahead, which was obscured by a bank of sooty clouds.

Elain joined him at the railing. She rested a hand on her swollen belly. "The water looks evil," she said. "Perhaps we should have stayed in Dauth, rather than drag ourselves in search of more trouble."

He feared she spoke the truth. After the Boar's Eye, they had sailed east from the Southern Isles back to the coast and then up the mouth of the Jiet River to Surda's port city of Dauth. By the time they made landfall, their stores were exhausted and the villagers sickly.

Roran had every intention of staying in Dauth, especially after they received an enthusiastic welcome from its governor, Lady Alarice. But that was before he was told about Galbatorix's army. If the Varden were defeated, he would never see Katrina again. So, with the help of Jeod, he convinced Horst and many of the other villagers that if they wanted to live in Surda, safe from the Empire, they had to row up the Jiet River and assist the Varden. It was a difficult task, but in the end Roran prevailed. And once they told Lady Alarice about their quest, she gave them all the supplies they wanted.

Since then, Roran often wondered if he made the right choice. By now everyone hated living on the *Dragon Wing*. People were tense and short-tempered, a situation only aggravated by the knowledge that they were sailing toward a battle. *Was it all selfishness on my part?* wondered Roran. *Did I really do this for the benefit of the villagers, or only because it will bring me one step closer to finding Katrina?*

"Perhaps we should have," he said to Elain.

Together they watched as a thick layer of smoke gathered overhead, darkening the sky, obscuring the sun, and filtering the remaining light so that everything below was colored a nauseating hue of orange. It produced an eerie twilight the likes of which Roran had never imagined. The sailors on deck looked about fearfully and muttered charms of protection, pulling out stone amulets to ward off the evil eye.

"Listen," said Elain. She tilted her head. "What is that?"

Roran strained his ears and caught the faint ring of metal striking metal. “That,” he said, “is the sound of our destiny.” Twisting, he shouted back over his shoulder, “Captain, there’s fighting just ahead!”

“Man the ballistae!” roared Uthar. “Double-time on those oars, Bonden. An’ every able-bodied man jack among you better be ready or you’ll be using your guts for pillows!”

Roran remained where he was as the *Dragon Wing* exploded with activity. Despite the increase in noise, he could still hear swords and shields clanging together in the distance. The screams of men were audible now, as were the roars of some giant beast.

He glanced over as Jeod joined them at the prow. The merchant’s face was pale. “Have you ever been in battle before?” asked Roran.

The knob in Jeod’s throat bobbed as he swallowed and shook his head. “I got into plenty of fights along with Brom, but never anything of this scale.”

“A first for both of us, then.”

The bank of smoke thinned on the right, providing them with a glimpse of a dark land that belched forth fire and putrid orange vapor and was covered with masses of struggling men. It was impossible to tell who was the Empire and who was the Varden, but it was apparent to Roran that the battle could tip in either direction given the right nudge. *We can provide that nudge.*

Then a voice echoed over the water as a man shouted, “A ship! A ship is coming up the Jiet River!”

“You should go belowdecks,” said Roran to Elain. “It won’t be safe for you here.” She nodded and hurried to the fore hatchway, where she climbed down the ladder, closing the opening behind her. A moment later, Horst bounded up to the prow and handed Roran one of Fisk’s shields.

“Thought you might need that,” said Horst.

“Thanks. I—”

Roran stopped as the air around them vibrated, as if from a mighty concussion. *Thud.* His teeth jarred together. *Thud.* His ears hurt from the pressure. Close upon the heels of the second impact came a third —*thud*—and with it a raw-throated yell that Roran recognized, for he had heard it many times in his childhood. He looked up and beheld a gigantic sapphire dragon diving out of the shifting clouds. And on the dragon’s back, at the juncture between its neck and shoulders, sat his cousin, Eragon.

It was not the Eragon he remembered, but rather as if an artist had taken his cousin’s base features and enhanced them, streamlined them, making them both more noble and more feline. This Eragon was garbed like a prince, in fine cloth and armor—though tarnished by the grime of war—and in his right hand he wielded a blade of iridescent

red. This Eragon, Roran knew, could kill without hesitation. This Eragon was powerful and implacable.… This Eragon could slay the Ra'zac and their mounts and help him to rescue Katrina.

Flaring its translucent wings, the dragon pulled up sharply and hung before the ship. Then Eragon met Roran's eyes.

Until that moment, Roran had not completely believed Jeod's story about Eragon and Brom. Now, as he stared at his cousin, a wave of confused emotions washed over him. *Eragon is a Rider!* It seemed inconceivable that the slight, moody, overeager boy he grew up with had turned into this fearsome warrior. Seeing him alive again filled Roran with unexpected joy. Yet, at the same time, a terrible, familiar anger welled up inside him over Eragon's role in Garrow's death and the siege of Carvahall. In those few seconds, Roran knew not whether he loved or hated Eragon.

He stiffened with alarm as a vast and alien being touched his mind. From that consciousness emanated Eragon's voice: *Roran?*

"Aye."

Think your answers and I'll hear them. Is everyone from Carvahall with you?

Just about.

How did you … No, we can't go into it; there's no time. Stay where you are until the battle is decided. Better yet, go back farther down the river, where the Empire can't attack you.

We have to talk, Eragon. You have much to answer for.

Eragon hesitated with a troubled expression, then said, *I know. But not now, later*. With no visible prompting, the dragon veered away from the ship and flew off to the east, vanishing in the haze over the Burning Plains.

In an awed voice, Horst said, "A Rider! A real Rider! I never thought I'd see the day, much less that it would be Eragon." He shook his head. "I guess you told us the truth, eh, Longshanks?" Jeod grinned in response, looking like a delighted child.

Their words sounded muted to Roran as he stared at the deck, feeling like he was about to explode with tension. A host of unanswerable questions assailed him. He forced himself to ignore them. *I can't think about Eragon now. We have to fight. The Varden* must *defeat the Empire*.

A rising tide of fury consumed him. He had experienced this before, a berserk frenzy that allowed him to overcome nearly any obstacle, to move objects he could not shift ordinarily, to face an enemy in combat and feel no fear. It gripped him now, a fever in his veins, quickening his breath and setting his heart a-pounding.

He pushed himself off the railing, ran the length of the ship to the quarterdeck, where Uthar stood by the wheel, and said, "Ground the

ship.”

“What?”

“Ground the ship, I say! Stay here with the rest of the soldiers and use the ballistae to wreak what havoc you can, keep the *Dragon Wing* from being boarded, and guard our families with your lives. Understand?”

Uthar stared at him with flat eyes, and Roran feared he would not accept the orders. Then the scarred sailor grunted and said, “Aye, aye, Stronghammer.”

Horst’s heavy tread preceded his arrival at the quarterdeck. “What do you intend to do, Roran?”

“Do?” Roran laughed and spun widdershins to stand toe to toe with the smith. “Do? Why, I intend to alter the fate of Alagaësia!”

ELDEST

Eragon barely noticed as Saphira carried him back into the swirling confusion of the battle. He had known that Roran was at sea, but it never occurred to him that Roran might be heading for Surda, nor that they would reunite in this manner. And Roran's eyes! His eyes seemed to bore into Eragon, questioning, relieved, enraged … *accusing*. In them, Eragon saw that his cousin had learned of Eragon's role in Garrow's death and had not yet forgiven him.

It was only when a sword bounced off his greaves that Eragon returned his attention to his surroundings. He unleashed a hoarse shout and slashed downward, cutting away the soldier who struck him. Cursing himself for being so careless, Eragon reached out to Trianna and said, *No one on that ship is an enemy. Spread the word that they're not to be attacked. Ask Nasuada if, as a favor to us, she can send a herald to explain the situation to them and see that they stay away from the fighting.*

As you wish, Argetlam.

From the western flank of the battle, where she alighted, Saphira traversed the Burning Plains in a few giant leaps, stopping before Hrothgar and his dwarves. Dismounting, Eragon went to the king, who said, "Hail, Argetlam! Hail, Saphira! The elves seem to have done more for you than they promised." Beside him stood Orik.

"No, sir, it was the dragons."

"Really? I must hear your adventures once our bloody work here is done. I'm glad you accepted my offer to become Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. It is an honor to have you as mine kin."

"And you mine."

Hrothgar laughed, then turned to Saphira and said, "I still haven't forgotten your vow to mend Isidar Mithrim, dragon. Even now, our artisans are assembling the star sapphire in the center of Tronjheim. I look forward to seeing it whole once again."

She bowed her head. *As I promised, so it shall be.*

After Eragon repeated her words, Hrothgar reached out with a gnarled finger and tapped one of the metal plates on her side. "I see you wear our armor. I hope it has served you well."

Very well, King Hrothgar, said Saphira through Eragon. *It has saved me many an injury.*

Hrothgar straightened and lifted Volund, a twinkle in his deep-set

eyes. “Well then, shall we march out and test it once again in the forge of war?” He looked back at his warriors and shouted, “Akh sartos oen dûrgrimst!”

“Vor Hrothgarz korda! Vor Hrothgarz korda!”

Eragon looked at Orik, who translated with a mighty yell, “By Hrothgar’s hammer!” Joining the chant, Eragon ran with the dwarf king toward the crimson ranks of soldiers, Saphira by his side.

Now at last, with the help of the dwarves, the battle turned in favor of the Varden. Together they pushed back the Empire, dividing them, crushing them, forcing Galbatorix’s vast army to abandon positions they had held since morn. Their efforts were helped by the fact that more of Angela’s poisons had taken effect. Many of the Empire’s officers behaved irrationally, giving orders that made it easier for the Varden to penetrate deeper into the army, sowing chaos as they went. The soldiers seemed to realize that fortune no longer smiled upon them, for hundreds surrendered, or defected outright and turned on their former comrades, or threw down their weapons and fled.

And the day passed into the late afternoon.

Eragon was in the midst of fighting two soldiers when a flaming javelin roared past overhead and buried itself in one of the Empire’s command tents twenty yards away, igniting the fabric. Dispatching his opponents, Eragon glanced back and saw dozens of fiery missiles arcing out from the ship on the Jiet River. *What are you playing at, Roran?* wondered Eragon before charging the next batch of soldiers.

Soon afterward, a horn echoed from the rear of the Empire’s army, then another and another. Someone began to pound a sonorous drum, the peals of which stilled the field as everyone looked about for the source of the beat. Even as Eragon watched, an ominous figure detached itself from the horizon in the north and rose up in the lurid sky over the Burning Plains. The gore-crows scattered before the barbed black shadow, which balanced motionless upon the thermals. At first Eragon thought it a Lethrblaka, one of the Ra’zac’s mounts. Then a ray of light escaped the clouds and struck the figure crossways from the west.

A red dragon floated above them, glowing and sparkling in the sunbeam like a bed of blood-red coals. His wing membranes were the color of wine held before a lantern. His claws and teeth and the spikes along his spine were white as snow. In his vermilion eyes there gleamed a terrible glee. On his back was fixed a saddle, and in that saddle sat a man garbed in polished steel armor and armed with a hand-and-a-half sword.

Dread clutched at Eragon. *Galbatorix managed to get another dragon to hatch!*

Then the man in steel raised his left hand and a shaft of crackling

ruby energy sprang from his palm and smote Hrothgar on the breast. The dwarf spellcasters cried out with agony as the energy from their bodies was consumed trying to block the attack. They collapsed, dead, then Hrothgar clutched his heart and toppled to the ground. The dwarves gave a great groan of despair as they saw their king fall.

"No!" cried Eragon, and Saphira roared in protest. He glared with hate at the enemy Rider. *I'll kill you for that.*

Eragon knew that, as they were, he and Saphira were too tired to confront such a mighty opponent. Glancing around, Eragon spotted a horse lying in the mud, a spear through its side. The stallion was still alive. Eragon put his hand on its neck and murmured, *Sleep, brother.* Then he transferred the horse's remaining vitality into himself and Saphira. It was not enough energy to restore all their strength, but it soothed their aching muscles and stopped their limbs from shaking.

Rejuvenated, Eragon leaped onto Saphira, shouting, "Orik, take command of your kinsmen!" Across the field, he saw Arya gaze at him with concern. He put her out of his mind as he tightened the saddle straps around his legs. Then Saphira launched herself toward the red dragon, pumping her wings at a furious rate to gain the necessary speed.

I hope you remember your lessons with Glaedr, he said. He tightened his grip on his shield.

Saphira did not answer him but roared out with her thoughts at the other dragon, *Traitor! Egg breaker, oath breaker, murderer!* Then as one, she and Eragon assaulted the minds of the pair, seeking to overwhelm their defenses. The consciousness of the Rider felt strange to Eragon, as if it contained multitudes; scores of distinct voices whispered in the caverns of his mind, like imprisoned spirits begging for release.

The instant they made contact, the Rider retaliated with a blast of pure force greater than any even Oromis was capable of summoning. Eragon retreated deep behind his own barriers, frantically reciting a scrap of doggerel Oromis taught him to use in such predicaments:

Under a cold and empty winter sky
Stood a wee, small man with a silver sword.
He jumped and stabbed in a fevered frenzy,
Fighting the shadows massed before him.…

The siege on Eragon's mind abated as Saphira and the red dragon crashed together, two incandescent meteors colliding head-on. They grappled, kicking each other's bellies with their hind legs. Their talons produced hideous screeches as they grated against Saphira's armor and the red dragon's flat scales. The red dragon was smaller than

Saphira, but thicker in his legs and shoulders. He managed to kick her off for a moment, then they closed again, each struggling to get their jaws around the other's neck.

It was all Eragon could do to keep hold of Zar'roc as the dragons tumbled toward the ground, battering one another with terrible blows from their feet and tails. No more than fifty yards above the Burning Plains, Saphira and the red dragon disengaged, struggling to regain altitude. Once she halted her descent, Saphira reared her head, like a snake about to strike, and loosed a thick torrent of fire.

It never reached its destination; twelve feet from the red dragon, the fire bifurcated and passed harmlessly on either side. *Blast it*, thought Eragon. Even as the red dragon opened its maw to retaliate, Eragon cried, "Skölir nosu fra brisingr!" He was just in time. The conflagration swirled around them but did not even scorch Saphira's scales.

Now Saphira and the red dragon raced up through the striated smoke into the clear, chill sky beyond, darting back and forth as they tried to climb above their opponent. The red dragon nipped Saphira's tail, and she and Eragon yelped with shared pain. Panting from the effort, Saphira executed a tight backward loop, ending up behind the dragon, who then pivoted to the left and tried to spiral up and over Saphira.

While the dragons dueled with increasingly complex acrobatics, Eragon became aware of a disturbance on the Burning Plains: the spellcasters of Du Vrangr Gata were beset by two new magicians from the Empire. These magicians were far more powerful than those who had preceded them. They had already killed one of Du Vrangr Gata and were battering past the barriers of a second. Eragon heard Trianna scream with her mind, *Shadeslayer! You have to help us! We can't stop them. They'll kill all the Varden. Help us, it's the—*

Her voice was lost to him as the Rider stabbed at his consciousness. "This must end," spat Eragon between clenched teeth as he strove to withstand the onslaught. Over Saphira's neck, he saw the red dragon dive toward them, angling beneath Saphira. Eragon dared not open his mind enough to talk with Saphira, so he said out loud, "Catch me!" With two strokes of Zar'roc, he severed the straps around his legs and jumped off Saphira's back.

This is insane, thought Eragon. He laughed with giddy exhilaration as the feeling of weightlessness took hold of him. The rush of air tore off his helm and made his eyes water and sting. Releasing his shield, Eragon spread out his arms and legs, as Oromis had taught him, in order to stabilize his flight. Below, the steel-clad Rider noticed Eragon's action. The red dragon shied to Eragon's left but could not evade him. Eragon lashed out with Zar'roc as the dragon's flank

flashed by, and he felt the blade sink into the creature's hamstring before his momentum carried him past.

The dragon roared in agony.

The impact of the blow sent Eragon spinning up, down, and around. By the time he managed to stop his rotation, he had plummeted through the cloud cover and was heading toward a swift and fatal landing on the Burning Plains. He could stop himself with magic if he had to, but it would drain his last reserves of energy. He glanced over both his shoulders. *Come on, Saphira, where are you?*

As if in answer, she dropped out of the foul smoke, her wings pressed tight against her body. She swooped underneath him and opened her wings a bit to slow her fall. Careful not to impale himself on one of her spikes, Eragon maneuvered himself back into the saddle, welcoming the return of gravity as she pulled out of the dive.

Never do that to me again, she snapped.

He surveyed the steaming blood that laced Zar'roc's blade. *It worked, didn't it?*

His satisfaction disappeared as he realized that his stunt had placed Saphira at the mercy of the red dragon. He hurtled at her from above, harrying her this way and that as he forced her toward the ground. Saphira tried to maneuver out from under him, but every time she did, he dove at her, biting and buffeting her with his wings in order to make her change course.

The dragons twisted and lunged until their tongues lolled out of their mouths, their tails drooped, and they gave up flapping and merely glided.

His mind once again closed to all contact, friendly or not, Eragon said out loud, "Land, Saphira; it's no good. I'll fight him on the ground."

With a grunt of weary resignation, Saphira descended to the nearest flat open area, a small stone plateau set along the western edge of the Jiet River. The water had turned red from the blood pouring into it from the battle. Eragon jumped off Saphira once she alighted on the plateau and tested his footing. It was smooth and hard, with nothing to trip on. He nodded, pleased.

A few seconds later, the red dragon rushed by overhead and settled on the opposite side of the plateau. He held his left hind leg off the ground to avoid aggravating his wound: a long gash that nearly severed the muscle. The dragon trembled his entire length, like an injured dog. He tried to hop forward, then stopped and snarled at Eragon.

The enemy Rider unbuckled his legs and slid down the uninjured side of his dragon. Then he walked around the dragon and examined his leg. Eragon let him; he knew how much pain it would cause the

man to see the damage inflicted on his bonded partner. He waited too long, though, for the Rider muttered a few indecipherable words, and within the span of three seconds the dragon's injury was healed.

Eragon shivered with fear. *How could he do that so quickly, and with such a short spell?* Still, whoever he might be, the new Rider certainly was not Galbatorix, whose dragon was black.

Eragon clung to that knowledge as he stepped forward to confront the Rider. As they met in the center of the plateau, Saphira and the red dragon circled in the background.

The Rider grasped his sword with both hands and swung it over his head toward Eragon, who lifted Zar'roc to defend himself. Their blades collided with a burst of crimson sparks. Then Eragon shoved back his opponent and started a complex series of blows. He stabbed and parried, dancing on light feet as he forced the steel-clad Rider to retreat toward the edge of the plateau.

When they reached the edge, the Rider held his ground, fending off Eragon's attacks, no matter how clever. *It's as if he can anticipate my every move*, thought Eragon, frustrated. If he were rested, it would have been easy for him to defeat the Rider, but as it was, he could make no headway. The Rider did not have the speed and strength of an elf, but his technical skill was better than Vanir's and as good as Eragon's.

Eragon felt a touch of panic when his initial surge of energy began to subside and he had accomplished nothing more than a slight scratch across the Rider's gleaming breastplate. The last reserves of power stored in Zar'roc's ruby and the belt of Beloth the Wise were only enough to maintain his exertions for another minute. Then the Rider took a step forward. Then another. And before Eragon knew it, they had returned to the center of the plateau, where they stood facing each other, exchanging blows.

Zar'roc grew so heavy in his hand, Eragon could barely lift it. His shoulder burned, he gasped for breath, and sweat poured off his face. Not even his desire to avenge Hrothgar could help him to overcome his exhaustion.

At last Eragon slipped and fell. Determined not to be killed lying down, he rolled back onto his feet and stabbed at the Rider, who knocked aside Zar'roc with a lazy flick of his wrist.

The way the Rider flourished his sword afterward—spinning it in a quick circle by his side—suddenly seemed familiar to Eragon, as did all his preceding swordsmanship. He stared with growing horror at his enemy's hand-and-a-half sword, then back up at the eye slits of his mirrored helm, and shouted, "I know you!"

He threw himself at the Rider, trapping both swords between their bodies, hooked his fingers underneath the helm, and ripped it off. And

there in the center of the plateau, on the edge of the Burning Plains of Alagaësia, stood Murtagh.

Murtagh grinned. Then he said, “Thrysta vindr,” and a hard ball of air coalesced between them and struck Eragon in the middle of his chest, tossing him twenty feet across the plateau.

Eragon heard Saphira growl as he landed on his back. His vision flashed red and white, then he curled into a ball and waited for the pain to recede. Any delight he felt in Murtagh’s reappearance was overwhelmed by the macabre circumstances of their meeting. A unstable mixture of shock, confusion, and anger boiled within him.

Lowering his sword, Murtagh pointed at Eragon with his steel-encased hand, curling every finger but his index into a spiny fist. “You never would give up.”

A chill crept along Eragon’s spine, for he recognized the scene from his premonition while rafting the Az Ragni to Hedarth: *A man sprawled in the clotted mud with a dented helm and bloody mail—his face concealed behind an upthrown arm. An armored hand entered Eragon’s view and pointed at the downed man with all the authority of fate itself*. Past and future had converged. Now Eragon’s doom would be decided.

Pushing himself to his feet, he coughed and said, “Murtagh … how can you be alive? I watched the Urgals drag you underground. I tried to scry you but saw only darkness.”

Murtagh uttered a mirthless laugh. “You saw nothing, just as I saw nothing the times I tried to scry you during my days in Urû’baen.”

“You *died*, though!” shouted Eragon, almost incoherent. “You died under Farthen Dûr. Arya found your bloody clothes in the tunnels.”

A shadow darkened Murtagh’s face. “No, I did not die. It was the Twins’ doing, Eragon. They took control of a group of Urgals and arranged the ambush in order to kill Ajihad and capture me. Then they ensorcelled me so I could not escape and spirited me off to Urû’baen.”

Eragon shook his head, unable to comprehend what had happened. “But why did you agree to serve Galbatorix? You told me you hated him. You told me—”

“Agree!” Murtagh laughed again, and this time his outburst contained an edge of madness. “I did not *agree*. First Galbatorix punished me for spiting his years of protection during my upbringing in Urû’baen, for defying his will and running away. Then he extracted everything I knew about you, Saphira, and the Varden.”

“You betrayed us! I was mourning you, and you betrayed us!”

“I had no choice.”

“Ajihad was right to lock you up. He should have let you rot in your cell, then none of this—”

“I had no choice!” snarled Murtagh. “And after Thorn hatched for me, Galbatorix forced both of us to swear loyalty to him in the ancient language. We cannot disobey him now.”

Pity and disgust welled inside of Eragon. “You have become your father.”

A strange gleam leaped into Murtagh’s eyes. “No, not my father. I’m stronger than Morzan ever was. Galbatorix taught me things about magic you’ve never even dreamed of.… Spells so powerful, the elves dare not utter them, cowards that they are. Words in the ancient language that were lost until Galbatorix discovered them. Ways to manipulate energy … Secrets, terrible secrets, that can destroy your enemies and fulfill all your desires.”

Eragon thought back to some of Oromis’s lessons and retorted, “Things that should remain secrets.”

“If you knew, you would not say that. Brom was a dabbler, nothing more. And the elves, bah! All they can do is hide in their forest and wait to be conquered.” Murtagh ran his eyes over Eragon. “You look like an elf now. Did Islanzadí do that to you?” When Eragon remained silent, Murtagh smiled and shrugged. “No matter. I’ll learn the truth soon enough.” He stopped, frowned, then looked to the east.

Following his gaze, Eragon saw the Twins standing at the front of the Empire, casting balls of energy into the midst of the Varden and the dwarves. The curtains of smoke made it difficult to tell, but Eragon was sure the hairless magicians were grinning and laughing as they slaughtered the men with whom they once pledged solemn friendship. What the Twins failed to notice—and what was clearly visible to Eragon and Murtagh from their vantage point—was that Roran was crawling toward them from the side.

Eragon’s heart skipped a beat as he recognized his cousin. *You fool! Get away from them! You’ll be killed.*

Just as he opened his mouth to cast a spell that would transport Roran out of danger—no matter the cost—Murtagh said, “Wait. I want to see what he’ll do.”

“Why?”

A bleak smile crossed Murtagh’s face. “The Twins enjoyed tormenting me when I was their captive.”

Eragon glanced at him, suspicious. “You won’t hurt him? You won’t warn the Twins?”

“Vel eïnradhin iet ai Shur’tugal.” Upon my word as a Rider.

Together they watched as Roran hid behind a mound of bodies.

Eragon stiffened as the Twins looked toward the pile. For a moment, it seemed they had spotted him, then they turned away and Roran jumped up. He swung his hammer and bashed one of the Twins in the head, cracking open his skull. The remaining Twin fell to the ground, convulsing, and emitted a wordless scream until he too met his end under Roran's hammer. Then Roran planted his foot upon the corpses of his foes, lifted his hammer over his head, and bellowed his victory.

"What now?" demanded Eragon, turning away from the battlefield. "Are you here to kill me?"

"Of course not. Galbatorix wants you alive."

"What for?"

Murtagh's lips quirked. "You don't know? Ha! There's a fine jest. It's not because of you; it's because of *her*." He jabbed a finger at Saphira. "The dragon inside Galbatorix's last egg, the last dragon egg in the world, is male. Saphira is the only female dragon in existence. If she breeds, she will be the mother of her entire race. Do you see now? Galbatorix doesn't want to eradicate the dragons. He wants to use Saphira to rebuild the Riders. He can't kill you, either of you, if his vision is to become reality.… And what a vision it is, Eragon. You should hear him describe it, then you might not think so badly of him. Is it evil that he wants to unite Alagaësia under a single banner, eliminate the need for war, and restore the Riders?"

"He's the one who destroyed the Riders in the first place!"

"And for good reason," asserted Murtagh. "They were old, fat, and corrupt. The elves controlled them and used them to subjugate humans. They had to be removed so that we could start anew."

A furious scowl contorted Eragon's features. He paced back and forth across the plateau, his breathing heavy, then gestured at the battle and said, "How can you justify causing so much suffering on the basis of a madman's ravings? Galbatorix has done nothing but burn and slaughter and amass power for himself. He lies. He murders. He manipulates. You *know* this! It's why you refused to work for him in the first place." Eragon paused, then adopted a gentler tone: "I can understand that you were compelled to act against your will and that you aren't responsible for killing Hrothgar. You can try to escape, though. I'm sure that Arya and I could devise a way to neutralize the bonds Galbatorix has laid upon you.… Join me, Murtagh. You could do so much for the Varden. With us, you would be praised and admired, instead of cursed, feared, and hated."

For a moment, as Murtagh gazed down at his notched sword, Eragon hoped he would accept. Then Murtagh said in a low voice, "You cannot help me, Eragon. No one but Galbatorix can release us from our oaths, and he will never do that.… He knows our true names, Eragon.… We are his slaves forever."

Though he wanted to, Eragon could not deny the sympathy he felt for Murtagh's plight. With the utmost gravity, he said, "Then let us kill the two of you."

"Kill us! Why should we allow that?"

Eragon chose his words with care: "It would free you from Galbatorix's control. And it would save the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of people. Isn't that a noble enough cause to sacrifice yourself for?"

Murtagh shook his head. "Maybe for you, but life is still too sweet for me to part with it so easily. No stranger's life is more important than Thorn's or my own."

As much as he hated it—hated the entire situation, in fact—Eragon knew then what had to be done. Renewing his attack on Murtagh's mind, he leaped forward, both feet leaving the ground as he lunged toward Murtagh, intending to stab him through the heart.

"Letta!" barked Murtagh.

Eragon dropped back to the ground as invisible bands clamped around his arms and legs, immobilizing him. To his right, Saphira discharged a jet of rippling fire and sprang at Murtagh like a cat pouncing on a mouse.

"Rïsa!" commanded Murtagh, extending a clawlike hand as if to catch her.

Saphira yelped with surprise as Murtagh's incantation stopped her in midair and held her in place, floating several feet above the plateau. No matter how much she wriggled, she could not touch the ground, nor could she fly any higher.

How can he still be human and have the strength to do that? wondered Eragon. *Even with my new abilities, such a task would leave me gasping for air and unable to walk*. Relying upon his experience counteracting Oromis's spells, Eragon said, "Brakka du vanyalí sem huildar Saphira un eka!"

Murtagh made no attempt to stop him, only gave him a flat stare, as if he found Eragon's resistance a pointless inconvenience. Baring his teeth, Eragon redoubled his efforts. His hands went cold, his bones ached, and his pulse slowed as the magic sapped his energy. Without being asked, Saphira joined forces with him, granting him access to the formidable resources of her body.

Five seconds passed.…

Twenty seconds … A thick vein pulsed on Murtagh's neck.

A minute …

A minute and a half … Involuntary tremors racked Eragon. His quadriceps and hamstrings fluttered, and his legs would have given way if he were free to move.

Two minutes passed.…

At last Eragon was forced to release the magic, else he risked falling unconscious and passing into the void. He sagged, utterly spent.

He had been afraid before, but only because he thought he might fail. Now he was afraid because he did not know what Murtagh was capable of.

"You cannot hope to compete with me," said Murtagh. "No one can, except for Galbatorix." Walking up to Eragon, he pointed his sword at Eragon's neck, pricking his skin. Eragon resisted the impulse to flinch. "It would be so easy to take you back to Urû'baen."

Eragon gazed deep into his eyes. "Don't. Let me go."

"You just tried to kill me."

"And you would have done the same in my position." When Murtagh remained silent and expressionless, Eragon said, "We were friends once. We fought together. Galbatorix can't have twisted you so much that you've forgotten.… If you do this, Murtagh, you'll be lost forever."

A long minute passed where the only sound was the hue and cry of the clashing armies. Blood trickled down Eragon's neck from where the sword point cut him. Saphira lashed her tail with helpless rage.

Finally, Murtagh said, "I was ordered to try and capture you and Saphira." He paused. "I have tried.… Make sure we don't cross paths again. Galbatorix will have me swear additional oaths in the ancient language that will prevent me from showing you such mercy when next we meet." He lowered his sword.

"You're doing the right thing," said Eragon. He tried to step back but was still held in place.

"Perhaps. But before I let you go …" Reaching out, Murtagh pried Zar'roc from Eragon's fist and unbuckled Zar'roc's red sheath from the belt of Beloth the Wise. "If I have become my father, then I will have my father's blade. Thorn is my dragon, and a thorn he shall be to all our enemies. It is only right, then, that I should also wield the sword *Misery*. Misery and Thorn, a fit match. Besides, Zar'roc should have gone to Morzan's eldest son, not his youngest. It is mine by right of birth."

A cold pit formed in Eragon's stomach. *It can't be.*

A cruel smile appeared on Murtagh's face. "I never told you my mother's name, did I? And you never told me yours. I'll say it now: Selena. Selena was my mother and your mother. Morzan was our father. The Twins figured out the connection while they were digging around in your head. Galbatorix was quite interested to learn that particular piece of information."

"You're lying!" cried Eragon. He could not bear the thought of being Morzan's son. *Did Brom know? Does Oromis know? … Why didn't they tell me?* He remembered, then, Angela predicting that someone in his

family would betray him. *She was right.*

Murtagh merely shook his head and repeated his words in the ancient language, then put his lips to Eragon's ear and whispered, "You and I, we are the same, Eragon. Mirror images of one another. You can't deny it."

"You're wrong," growled Eragon, struggling against the spell. "We're nothing alike. I don't have a scar on my back anymore."

Murtagh recoiled as if he had been stung, his face going hard and cold. He lifted Zar'roc and held it upright before his chest. "So be it. I take my inheritance from you, brother. Farewell."

Then he retrieved his helm from the ground and pulled himself onto Thorn. Not once did he look at Eragon as the dragon crouched, raised its wings, and flew off the plateau and into the north. Only after Thorn vanished below the horizon did the web of magic release Eragon and Saphira.

Saphira's talons clicked on the stone as she landed. She crawled over to Eragon and touched him on the arm with her snout. *Are you all right, little one?*

I'm fine. But he was not, and she knew it.

Walking to the edge of the plateau, Eragon surveyed the Burning Plains and the aftermath of the battle, for the battle *was* over. With the death of the Twins, the Varden and dwarves regained lost ground and were able to rout the formations of confused soldiers, herding them into the river or chasing them back from whence they came.

Though the bulk of their forces remained intact, the Empire had sounded the retreat, no doubt to regroup and prepare for a second attempt to invade Surda. In their wake, they left piles of tangled corpses from both sides of the conflict, enough men and dwarves to populate an entire city. Thick black smoke roiled off the bodies that had fallen into the peat fires.

Now that the fighting had subsided, the hawks and eagles, the crows and ravens, descended like a shroud over the field.

Eragon closed his eyes, tears leaking from under the lids.

They had won, but he had lost.

REUNION

Eragon and Saphira picked their way between the corpses that littered the Burning Plains, moving slowly on account of their wounds and their exhaustion. They encountered other survivors staggering through the scorched battlefield, hollow-eyed men who looked without truly seeing, their gazes focused somewhere in the distance.

Now that his bloodlust had subsided, Eragon felt nothing but sorrow. The fighting seemed so pointless to him. *What a tragedy that so many must die to thwart a single madman*. He paused to sidestep a thicket of arrows planted in the mud and noticed the gash on Saphira's tail where Thorn had bitten her, as well as her other injuries. *Here, lend me your strength; I'll heal you*.

Tend to those in mortal danger first.

Are you sure?

Quite sure, little one.

Acquiescing, he bent down and mended a soldier's torn neck before moving on to one of the Varden. He made no distinction between friend and foe, treating both to the limit of his abilities.

Eragon was so preoccupied with his thoughts, he paid little attention to his work. He wished he could repudiate Murtagh's claim, but everything Murtagh had said about his mother—*their* mother—coincided with the few things Eragon knew about her: Selena left Carvahall twenty-some years ago, returned once to give birth to Eragon, and was never seen again. His mind darted back to when he and Murtagh first arrived in Farthen Dûr. Murtagh had discussed how his mother had vanished from Morzan's castle while Morzan was hunting Brom, Jeod, and Saphira's egg. *After Morzan threw Zar'roc at Murtagh and nearly killed him, Mother must have hidden her pregnancy and then gone back to Carvahall in order to protect me from Morzan and Galbatorix*.

It heartened Eragon to know that Selena had cared for him so deeply. It also grieved him to know she was dead and they would never meet, for he had nurtured the hope, faint as it was, that his parents might still be alive. He no longer harbored any desire to be acquainted with his father, but he bitterly resented that he had been deprived of the chance to have a relationship with his mother.

Ever since he was old enough to understand that he was a fosterling, Eragon had wondered who his father was and why his

mother left him to be raised by her brother, Garrow, and his wife, Marian. Those answers had been thrust upon him from such an unexpected source, and in such an unpropitious setting, it was more than he could make sense of at the moment. It would take months, if not years, to come to terms with the revelation.

Eragon always assumed he would be glad to learn the identity of his father. Now that he had, the knowledge revolted him. When he was younger, he often entertained himself by imagining that his father was someone grand and important, though Eragon knew the opposite was far more likely. Still, it never occurred to him, even in his most extravagant daydreams, that he might be the son of a Rider, much less one of the Forsworn.

It turned a daydream into a nightmare.

I was sired by a monster.… My father was the one who betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix. It left Eragon feeling sullied.

But no … As he healed a man's broken spine, a new way of viewing the situation occurred to him, one that restored a measure of his self-confidence: *Morzan may be my parent, but he is not my father. Garrow was my father. He raised me. He taught me how to live well and honorably, with integrity. I am who I am because of him. Even Brom and Oromis are more my father than Morzan. And Roran is my brother, not Murtagh*.

Eragon nodded, determined to maintain that outlook. Until then, he had refused to completely accept Garrow as his father. And even though Garrow was dead, doing so relieved Eragon, gave him a sense of closure, and helped to ameliorate his distress over Morzan.

You have grown wise, observed Saphira.

Wise? He shook his head. *No, I've just learned how to think. That much, at least, Oromis gave me*. Eragon wiped a layer of dirt off the face of a fallen banner boy, making sure he really was dead, then straightened, wincing as his muscles spasmed in protest. *You realize, don't you, that Brom* must *have known about this. Why else would he choose to hide in Carvahall while he waited for you to hatch? … He wanted to keep an eye upon his enemy's son*. It unsettled him to think that Brom might have considered him a threat. *And he was right too. Look what ended up happening to me!*

Saphira ruffled his hair with a gust of her hot breath. *Just remember, whatever Brom's reasons, he always tried to protect us from danger. He died saving you from the Ra'zac*.

I know.… Do you think he didn't tell me about this because he was afraid I might emulate Morzan, like Murtagh has?

Of course not.

He looked at her, curious. *How can you be so certain?* She lifted her head high above him and refused to meet his eyes or to answer. *Have*

it your way, then. Kneeling by one of King Orrin's men, who had an arrow through the gut, Eragon grabbed his arms to stop him from writhing. "Easy now."

"Water," groaned the man. "For pity's sake, water. My throat is as dry as sand. Please, Shadeslayer." Sweat beaded his face.

Eragon smiled, trying to comfort him. "I can give you a drink now, but it'd be better if you wait until after I heal you. Can you wait? If you do, I promise you can have all the water you want."

"You promise, Shadeslayer?"

"I promise."

The man visibly struggled against another wave of agony before saying, "If I must."

With the aid of magic, Eragon drew out the shaft, then he and Saphira worked to repair the man's innards, using some of the warrior's own energy to fuel the spell. It took several minutes. Afterward, the man examined his belly, pressing his hands against the flawless skin, then gazed at Eragon, tears brimming in his eyes. "I … Shadeslayer, you …"

Eragon handed him his waterskin. "Here, keep it. You have greater need of it than I."

A hundred yards beyond, Eragon and Saphira breached an acrid wall of smoke. There they came upon Orik and ten other dwarves—some women—arrayed around the body of Hrothgar, who lay upon four shields, resplendent in his golden mail. The dwarves tore at their hair, beat their breasts, and wailed their lamentations to the sky. Eragon bowed his head and murmured, "Stydja unin mor'ranr, Hrothgar Könungr."

After a time, Orik noticed them and rose, his face red from crying and his beard torn free of its usual braid. He staggered over to Eragon and, without preempt, asked, "Did you kill the coward responsible for this?"

"He escaped." Eragon could not bring himself to explain that the Rider was Murtagh.

Orik stamped his fist into his hand. "Barzûln!"

"But I swear to you upon every stone in Alagaësia that, as one of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, I'll do everything I can to avenge Hrothgar's death."

"Aye, you're the only one besides the elves strong enough to bring this foul murderer to justice. And when you find him … grind his bones to dust, Eragon. Pull his teeth and fill his veins with molten lead; make him suffer for every minute of Hrothgar's life that he stole."

"Wasn't it a good death? Wouldn't Hrothgar have wanted to die in battle, with Volund in his hand?"

“In battle, yes, facing an honest foe who dared stand and fight like a man. Not brought low by a magician’s trickery….” Shaking his head, Orik looked back at Hrothgar, then crossed his arms and tucked his chin against his collarbone. He took several ragged breaths. “When my parents died of the pox, Hrothgar gave me a life again. He took me into his hall. He made me his heir. Losing him …” Orik pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, covering his face. “Losing him is like losing my father again.”

The grief in his voice was so clear, Eragon felt as if he shared the dwarf’s sorrow. “I understand,” he said.

“I know you do, Eragon…. I know you do.” After a moment, Orik wiped his eyes and gestured at the ten dwarves. “Before anything else is done, we have to return Hrothgar to Farthen Dûr so he can be entombed with his predecessors. Dûrgrimst Ingeitum must choose a new grimstborith, and then the thirteen clan chiefs—including the ones you see here—will select our next king from among themselves. What happens next, I know not. This tragedy will embolden some clans and turn others against our cause….” He shook his head again.

Eragon put his hand on Orik’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about that now. You have but to ask, and my arm and my will are at your service…. If you want, come to my tent and we can share a cask of mead and toast Hrothgar’s memory.”

“I’d like that. But not yet. Not until we finish pleading with the gods to grant Hrothgar safe passage to the afterlife.” Leaving Eragon, Orik returned to the circle of dwarves and added his voice to their keening.

Continuing on through the Burning Plains, Saphira said, *Hrothgar was a great king.*

Aye, and a good person. Eragon sighed. *We should find Arya and Nasuada. I couldn’t even heal a scratch right now, and they need to know about Murtagh.*

Agreed.

They angled south toward the Varden’s encampment, but before they traveled more than a few yards, Eragon saw Roran approaching from the Jiet River. Trepidation filled him. Roran stopped directly in front of them, planted his feet wide apart, and stared at Eragon, working his jaw up and down as if he wanted to talk but was unable to get the words past his teeth.

Then he punched Eragon on the chin.

It would have been easy for Eragon to avoid the blow, but he allowed it to land, rolling away from it a bit so Roran did not break his knuckles.

It still hurt.

Wincing, Eragon faced his cousin. “I guess I deserved that.”

“That you did. We have to talk.”

"Now?"

"It can't wait. The Ra'zac captured Katrina, and I need your help to rescue her. They've had her ever since we left Carvahall."

So that's it. In an instant, Eragon realized why Roran appeared so grim and haunted, and why he had brought the entire village to Surda. *Brom was right, Galbatorix sent the Ra'zac back to Palancar Valley*. Eragon frowned, torn between his responsibility to Roran and his duty to report to Nasuada. "There's something I need to do first, and then we can talk. All right? You can accompany me if you want. …"

"I'll come."

As they traversed the pockmarked land, Eragon kept glancing at Roran out of the corner of his eye. Finally, he said in a low voice, "I missed you."

Roran faltered, then responded with a curt nod. A few steps later, he asked, "This is Saphira, right? Jeod said that was her name."

"Aye."

Saphira peered at Roran with one of her glittering eyes. He bore her scrutiny without turning away, which was more than most people could do. *I have always wanted to meet Eragon's nest-mate*.

"She speaks!" exclaimed Roran when Eragon repeated her words.

This time Saphira addressed him directly: *What? Did you think I was as mute as a rock lizard?*

Roran blinked. "I beg your pardon. I didn't know that dragons were so intelligent." A grim smile twisted his lips. "First Ra'zac and magicians, now dwarves, Riders, and talking dragons. It seems the whole world has gone mad."

"It does seem that way."

"I saw you fight that other Rider. Did you wound him? Is that why he fled?"

"Wait. You'll hear."

When they reached the pavilion Eragon was searching for, he swept back the flap and ducked inside, followed by Roran and Saphira, who pushed her head and neck in after them. In the center of the tent, Nasuada sat on the edge of the table, letting a maid remove her twisted armor while she carried on a heated discussion with Arya. The cut on her thigh had been healed.

Nasuada stopped in the middle of her sentence as she spotted the new arrivals. Running toward them, she threw her arms around Eragon and cried, "Where were you? We thought you were dead, or worse."

"Not quite."

"The candle still burns," murmured Arya.

Stepping back, Nasuada said, "We couldn't see what happened to

you and Saphira after you landed on the plateau. When the red dragon left and you didn't appear, Arya tried to contact you but felt nothing, so we assumed …" She trailed off. "We were just debating the best way to transport Du Vrangr Gata and an entire company of warriors across the river."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I was just so tired after the fight, I forgot to lower my barriers." Then Eragon brought Roran forward. "Nasuada, I would like to introduce my cousin, Roran. Ajihad may have mentioned him to you before. Roran, Lady Nasuada, leader of the Varden and my liegelord. And this is Arya Svit-kona, the elves' ambassador." Roran bowed to each of them in turn.

"It is an honor to meet Eragon's cousin," said Nasuada.

"Indeed," added Arya.

After they finished exchanging greetings, Eragon explained that the entire village of Carvahall had arrived on the *Dragon Wing*, and that Roran was the one responsible for killing the Twins.

Nasuada lifted a dark eyebrow. "The Varden are in your debt, Roran, for stopping their rampage. Who knows how much damage the Twins would have caused before Eragon or Arya could have confronted them? You helped us to win this battle. I won't forget that. Our supplies are limited, but I will see that everyone on your ship is clothed and fed, and that your sick are treated."

Roran bowed even lower. "Thank you, Lady Nasuada."

"If I weren't so pressed for time, I would insist upon knowing how and why you and your village evaded Galbatorix's men, traveled to Surda, and then found us. Even just the bare facts of your trek make an extraordinary tale. I still intend to learn the specifics—especially since I suspect it concerns Eragon—but I must deal with other, more urgent matters at the moment."

"Of course, Lady Nasuada."

"You may go, then."

"Please," said Eragon, "let him stay. He should be here for this."

Nasuada gave him a quizzical look. "Very well. If you want. But enough of this dawdling. Jump to the meat of the matter and tell us about the Rider!"

Eragon began with a quick history of the three remaining dragon eggs—two of which had now hatched—as well as Morzan and Murtagh, so that Roran would understand the significance of his news. Then he proceeded to describe his and Saphira's fight with Thorn and the mysterious Rider, paying special attention to his extraordinary powers. "As soon as he spun his sword around, I realized we *had* dueled before, so I threw myself at him and tore off his helm." Eragon paused.

"It was Murtagh, wasn't it?" asked Nasuada quietly.

"How …?"

She sighed. "If the Twins survived, it only made sense that Murtagh had as well. Did he tell you what really happened that day in Farthen Dûr?" So Eragon recounted how the Twins betrayed the Varden, recruited the Urgals, and kidnapped Murtagh. A tear rolled down Nasuada's cheek. "It's a pity that this befell Murtagh when he has already endured so much hardship. I enjoyed his company in Tronjheim and believed he was our ally, despite his upbringing. I find it hard to think of him as our enemy." Turning to Roran, she said, "It seems I am also personally in your debt for slaying the traitors who murdered my father."

Fathers, mothers, brothers, cousins, thought Eragon. *It all comes down to family*. Summoning his courage, he completed his report with Murtagh's theft of Zar'roc and then his final, terrible secret.

"It can't be," whispered Nasuada.

Eragon saw shock and revulsion cross Roran's face before he managed to conceal his reactions. That, more than anything else, hurt Eragon.

"Could Murtagh have been lying?" asked Arya.

"I don't see how. When I questioned him, he told me the same thing in the ancient language."

A long, uncomfortable silence filled the pavilion.

Then Arya said, "No one else can know about this. The Varden are demoralized enough by the presence of a new Rider. And they'll be even more upset when they learn it's Murtagh, whom they fought alongside and came to trust in Farthen Dûr. If word spreads that Eragon Shadeslayer is Morzan's son, the men will grow disillusioned and few people will want to join us. Not even King Orrin should be told."

Nasuada rubbed her temples. "I fear you're right. A new Rider …" She shook her head. "I knew it was possible for this to occur, but I didn't really believe it would, since Galbatorix's remaining eggs had gone so long without hatching."

"It has a certain symmetry," said Eragon.

"Our task is doubly hard now. We may have held our own today, but the Empire still far outnumbers us, and now we face not one but two Riders, both of whom are stronger than you, Eragon. Do you think you could defeat Murtagh with the help of the elves' spellcasters?"

"Maybe. But I doubt he'd be foolish enough to fight them and me together."

For several minutes, they discussed the effect Murtagh could have on their campaign and strategies to minimize or eliminate it. At last Nasuada said, "Enough. We cannot decide this when we are bloody and tired and our minds are clouded from fighting. Go, rest, and we

shall take this up again tomorrow."

As Eragon turned to leave, Arya approached and looked him straight in the eye. "Do not allow this to trouble you overmuch, Eragon-elda. You are not your father, nor your brother. Their shame is not yours."

"Aye," agreed Nasuada. "Nor imagine that it has lowered our opinion of you." She reached out and cupped his face. "I know you, Eragon. You have a good heart. The name of your father cannot change that."

Warmth blossomed inside Eragon. He looked from one woman to the next, then twisted his hand over his chest, overwhelmed by their friendship. "Thank you."

Once they were back out in the open, Eragon put his hands on his hips and took a deep breath of the smoky air. It was late in the day, and the garish orange of noon had subsided into a dusky gold light that suffused the camp and battlefield, giving it a strange beauty. "So now you know," he said.

Roran shrugged. "Blood always tells."

"Don't say that," growled Eragon. "Don't ever say that."

Roran studied him for several seconds. "You're right; it was an ugly thought. I didn't mean it." He scratched his beard and squinted at the bloated sun resting upon the horizon. "Nasuada wasn't what I expected."

That forced a tired chuckle out of Eragon. "The one you were expecting was her father, Ajihad. Still, she's as good a leader as he was, if not better."

"Her skin, is it dyed?"

"No, that's the way she is."

Just then, Eragon felt Jeod, Horst, and a score of other men from Carvahall hurrying toward them. The villagers slowed as they rounded a tent and glimpsed Saphira. "Horst!" exclaimed Eragon. Stepping forward, he grasped the smith in a bear hug. "It's good to see you again!"

Horst gaped at Eragon, then a delighted grin spread across his face. "Blast if it isn't good to see you as well, Eragon. You've filled out since you left."

"You mean since I ran away."

Meeting the villagers was a strange experience for Eragon. Hardship had altered some of the men so much, he barely recognized them. And they treated him differently than before, with a mixture of awe and reverence. It reminded him of a dream, where everything familiar is rendered alien. He was disconcerted by how out of place he felt among them.

When Eragon came to Jeod, he paused. "You know about Brom?"

“Ajihad sent me a message, but I’d like to hear what happened directly from you.”

Eragon nodded, grave. “As soon as I have the chance, we’ll sit down together and have a long talk.”

Then Jeod moved on to Saphira and bowed to her. “My entire life, I cherished the hope that, one day, I might see the rise of a new generation of dragons. I am indeed fortunate that my wish has come true. However, *you* are the dragon I wanted to meet.”

Bending her neck, Saphira touched Jeod on the brow. He shivered at the contact. *Give him my thanks for helping to rescue me from Galbatorix. Otherwise, I would still be languishing in the king’s treasury. He was Brom’s friend, and so he is our friend.*

After Eragon repeated her words, Jeod said, “Atra esterní ono thelduin, Saphira Bjartskular,” surprising them with his knowledge of the ancient language.

“Where did you go?” Horst asked Roran. “We looked high and low for you after you took off in pursuit of those two magicians.”

“Never mind that now. Return to the ship and have everyone disembark; the Varden are sending us food and shelter. We can sleep on solid ground tonight!” The men cheered.

Eragon watched with interest as Roran issued his commands. When at last Jeod and the villagers departed, Eragon said, “They trust you. Even Horst obeys you without question. Do you speak for all of Carvahall now?”

“I do.”

Heavy darkness was advancing upon the Burning Plains by the time they found the small two-man tent the Varden had assigned Eragon. Since Saphira could not fit her head through the opening, she curled up on the ground beside and prepared to keep watch.

As soon as I get my strength back, I’ll see to your wounds, promised Eragon.

I know. Don’t stay up too late talking.

Inside the tent, Eragon found an oil lantern that he lit with steel and flint. He could see perfectly well without it, but Roran needed the light.

They sat opposite each other: Eragon on the bedding laid out along one side of the tent, Roran on a folding stool he found leaning in a corner. Eragon was uncertain how to begin, so he remained silent and stared at the lamp’s dancing flame.

Neither of them moved.

After uncounted minutes, Roran said, “Tell me how my father died.”

“Our father.” Eragon remained calm as Roran’s expression hardened. In a gentle voice, he said, “I have as much right to call him that as you. Look within yourself; you know it to be true.”

"Fine. Our father, how did he die?"

Eragon had recounted the story upon several occasions. But this time he hid nothing. Instead of just listing the events, he described what he had thought and felt ever since he had found Saphira's egg, trying to make Roran understand *why* he did what he did. He had never been so anxious before.

"I was wrong to hide Saphira from the rest of the family," Eragon concluded, "but I was afraid you might insist on killing her, and I didn't realize how much danger she put us in. If I had … After Garrow died, I decided to leave in order to track down the Ra'zac, as well as to avoid putting Carvahall in any more danger." A humorless laugh escaped him. "It didn't work, but if I had remained, the soldiers would have come far sooner. And then who knows? Galbatorix might have even visited Palancar Valley himself. I may be the reason Garrow—Father—died, but that was never my intention, nor that you and everyone else in Carvahall should suffer because of my choices.…" He gestured helplessly. "I did the best I could, Roran."

"And the rest of it—Brom being a Rider, rescuing Arya at Gil'ead, and killing a Shade at the dwarves' capital—all that happened?"

"Aye." As quickly as he could, Eragon summarized what had taken place since he and Saphira set forth with Brom, including their sojourn to Ellesméra and his own transformation during the Agaetí Blödhren.

Leaning forward, Roran rested his elbows on his knees, clasped his hands, and gazed at the dirt between them. It was impossible for Eragon to read his emotions without reaching into his consciousness, which he refused to do, knowing it would be a terrible mistake to invade Roran's privacy.

Roran was silent for so long, Eragon began to wonder if he would ever respond. Then: "You have made mistakes, but they are no greater than my own. Garrow died because you kept Saphira secret. Many more have died because I refused to give myself up to the Empire.… We are equally guilty." He looked up, then slowly extended his right hand. "Brother?"

"Brother," said Eragon.

He gripped Roran's forearm, and they pulled each other into a rough embrace, wrestling to and fro as they used to do at home. When they separated, Eragon had to wipe his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Galbatorix should surrender now that we're together again," he joked. "Who can stand against the two of us?" He lowered himself back onto the bedding. "Now you tell me, how did the Ra'zac capture Katrina?"

All happiness vanished from Roran's face. He began to speak in a low monotone, and Eragon listened with growing amazement as he

wove an epic of attacks, sieges, and betrayal, of leaving Carvahall, crossing the Spine, and razing the docks of Teirm, of sailing through a monstrous whirlpool.

When at last he finished, Eragon said, "You are a greater man than I. I couldn't have done half those things. Fight, yes, but not convince everyone to follow me."

"I had no choice. When they took Katrina—" Roran's voice broke. "I could either give up and die, or I could try to escape Galbatorix's trap, no matter the cost." He fixed his burning eyes on Eragon. "I have lied and burned and slaughtered to get here. I no longer have to worry about protecting everyone from Carvahall; the Varden will see to that. Now I have only one goal in life, to find and rescue Katrina, if she's not already dead. Will you help me, Eragon?"

Reaching over, Eragon grabbed his saddlebags from the corner of the tent—where the Varden had deposited them—and removed a wooden bowl and the silver flask of enchanted faelnirv Oromis had given him. He took a small sip of the liqueur to revitalize himself and gasped as it raced down his throat, making his nerves tingle with cold fire. Then he poured faelnirv into the bowl until it formed a shallow pool the width of his hand.

"Watch." Gathering up his burst of new energy, Eragon said, "Draumr kópa."

The liqueur shimmered and turned black. After a few seconds, a thin key of light appeared in the center of the bowl, revealing Katrina. She lay slumped against an invisible wall, her hands suspended above her with invisible manacles and her copper hair splayed like a fan across her back.

"She's alive!" Roran hunched over the bowl, grasping at it as if he thought he could dive through the faelnirv and join Katrina. His hope and determination melded with a look of such tender affection, Eragon knew that only death could stop Roran from trying to free her.

Unable to sustain the spell any longer, Eragon let the image fade away. He leaned against the wall of the tent for support. "Aye," he said wearily, "she's alive. And chances are, she's imprisoned in Helgrind, in the Ra'zac's lair." Eragon grasped Roran by the shoulders. "The answer to your question, brother, is yes. I will travel to Dras-Leona with you. I will help you rescue Katrina. And then, together, you and I shall kill the Ra'zac and avenge our father."

END OF BOOK TWO

THE STORY WILL CONTINUE IN

BOOK THREE OF INHERITANCE

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

AND

GLOSSARY

ON THE ORIGIN OF NAMES:

To the casual observer, the various names an intrepid traveler will encounter throughout Alagaësia might seem but a random collection of labels with no inherent integrity, culture, or history. However, as with any land that different cultures—and in this case, different species—have repeatedly colonized, Alagaësia acquired names from a wide array of unique sources, among them the languages of the dwarves, elves, humans, and even Urgals. Thus, we can have Palancar Valley (a human name), the Anora River and Ristvak'baen (elven names), and Utgard Mountain (a dwarf name) all within a few square miles of each other.

While this is of great historical interest, practically it often leads to confusion as to the correct pronunciation. Unfortunately, there are no set rules for the neophyte. Each name must be learned upon its own terms, unless you can immediately place its language of origin. The matter grows even more confusing when you realize that in many places the spelling and pronunciation of foreign words were altered by the resident population to conform to their own language. The Anora River is a prime example. Originally *anora* was spelled *äenora*, which means *broad* in the ancient language. In their writings, the humans simplified the word to *anora*, and this, combined with a vowel shift wherein *äe* (ay-eh) was said as the easier *a* (uh), created the name as it appears in Eragon's time.

To spare readers as much difficulty as possible, the following list is provided, with the understanding that these are only rough guidelines to the actual pronunciation. The enthusiast is encouraged to study the source languages in order to master their true intricacies.

PRONUNCIATION:

Aiedail—AY-uh-dale

Ajihad—AH-zhi-hod

Alagaësia—al-uh-GAY-zee-uh

Arya—AR-ee-uh

Carvahall—CAR-vuh-hall

Dras-Leona—DRAHS lee-OH-nuh

Du Weldenvarden—doo WELL-den-VAR-den

Ellesméra—el-uhs-MEER-uh

Eragon—EHR-uh-gahn

Farthen Dûr—FAR-then DURE (*dure* rhymes with *lure*)

Galbatorix—gal-buh-TOR-icks

Gil'ead—GILL-ee-id

Glaedr—GLAY-dur

Hrothgar—HROTH-gar

Islanzadí—iss-lan-ZAH-dee

Jeod—JODE (rhymes with *code*)

Murtagh—MUR-tag (*mur* rhymes with *purr*)

Nasuada—nah-soo-AH-duh

Nolfavrell—NOLL-fah-vrel (*noll* rhymes with *toll*)

Oromis—OR-uh-miss

Ra'zac—RAA-zack

Saphira—suh-FEAR-uh

Shruikan—SHREW-kin

Sílthrim—SEAL-thrim (síl is a hard sound to transcribe; it's made by flicking the tip of the tongue off the roof of the mouth.)

Teirm—TEERM

Trianna—TREE-ah-nuh

Tronjheim—TRONJ-heem

Urû'baen—OO-roo-bane

Vrael—VRAIL

Yazuac—YAA-zoo-ack

Zar'roc—ZAR-rock

THE ANCIENT LANGUAGE:

adurna—water

Agaetí Blödhren—Blood-oath Celebration

Aiedail—The Morning Star

Argetlam—Silver Hand

Atra esterní ono thelduin/Mor'ranr lífa unin hjarta onr/Un du evarínya ono varda.—May good fortune rule over you/Peace live in your heart/And the stars watch over you.

Atra guliä un ilian tauthr ono un atra ono waíse skölir fra rauthr.—May luck and happiness follow you and may you be a shield from misfortune.

Atra nosu waíse vardo fra eld hórnya.—Let us be warded from listeners.

Bjartskular—Brightscales

blöthr—halt; stop

Brakka du vanyalí sem huildar Saphira un eka!—Reduce the magic that holds Saphira and me!

brisingr—fire

Dagshelgr—Hallowed Day

draumr kópa—dream stare

Du Fells Nángoröth—The Blasted Mountains

Du Fyrn Skulblaka—The Dragon War

Du Völlar Eldrvarya—The Burning Plains

Du Vrangr Gata—The Wandering Path

Du Weldenvarden—The Guarding Forest

dvergar—dwarves

ebrithil—master

edur—a tor or prominence

Eka fricai un Shur'tugal.—I am a Rider and friend.

elda—a gender-neutral honorific of great praise

Eyddr eyreya onr!—Empty your ears!

fairth—a picture taken by magical means

finiarel—an honorific for a young man of great promise

Fricai Andlát—death friend (a poisonous mushroom)

Gala O Wyrda brunhvitr/Abr Berundal vandr-fódhr/Burthro laufsblädar ekar undir/Eom kona dauthleikr …—Sing O white-browed Fate/Of ill-marked Berundal/Born under oaken leaves/To mortal woman …

gánga aptr—to go backward

gánga fram—to go forward

Gath sem oro un lam iet.—Unite that arrow with my hand.

gedwëy ignasia—shining palm

Gëuloth du knífr.—Dull the knife.

haldthin—thornapple

Helgrind—The Gates of Death

hlaupa—run

hljödhr—silent

jierda—break; hit

kodthr—catch

Kvetha Fricai.—Greetings, Friend.

lethrblaka—a bat; the Ra'zac's mounts (literally, leather-flapper)

letta—stop

Letta orya thorna!—Stop those arrows!

Liduen Kvaedhí—Poetic Script

Losna kalfya iet.—Release my calves.

malthinae—to bind or hold in place; confine

nalgask—a mixture of beeswax and hazelnut oil used to moisten the skin

Osthato Chetowä—the Mourning Sage

Reisa du adurna.—Raise/Lift the water.

rïsa—rise

Sé mor'ranr ono finna.—May you find peace.

Sé onr sverdar sitja hvass!—May your swords stay sharp!

Sé orúm thornessa hávr sharjalví lífs.—May this serpent have life's movement.

skölir—shield

Skölir nosu fra brisingr!—Shield us from fire!

sköliro—shielded

skulblaka—dragon (literally, scale-flapper)

Stydja unin mor'ranr, Hrothgar Könungr.—Rest in peace, King Hrothgar.

svit-kona—a formal honorific for an elf woman of great wisdom

thrysta—thrust; compress

Thrysta vindr.—Compress the air.

Togira Ikonoka—the Cripple Who Is Whole

the Varden—the Warders

Vel eïnradhin iet ai Shur'tugal.—Upon my word as a Rider.

Vinr Älfakyn—Elf Friend

vodhr—a male honorific of middling praise

vor—a male honorific for a close friend

Waíse heill.—Be healed.

Wiol ono.—For you.

wyrda—fate

Wyrdfell—elven name for the Forsworn

yawë—a bond of trust

zar'roc—misery

THE DWARF LANGUAGE:

Akh sartos oen dûrgrimst!—For family and clan!

Ascûdgamln—fists of steel

Astim Hefthyn—Sight Guard (inscription on a necklace given to Eragon)

Az Ragni—The River

Az Sweldn rak Anhûin—The Tears of Anhûin

Azt jok jordn rast.—Then you may pass.

barzûl—to curse someone with ill fate

Barzûl knurlar!—Curse them!

barzûln—to curse someone with multiple misfortunes

Beor—cave bear (elf word)

dûrgrimst—clan (literally, our hall/home)

eta—no

Etzil nithgech!—Stop there!

Farthen Dûr—Our Father

Feldûnost—frostbeard (a species of goat native to the Beor Mountains)

Formv Hrethcarach … formv Jurgencarmeitder nos eta goroth bahst Tarnag, dûr ensesti rak kythn! Jok is warrev az barzûlegûr dûr dûrgrimst, Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, môgh tor rak Jurgenvren? Né ûdim etal os rast knurlag. Knurlag ana …—This Shadeslayer … this Dragon Rider has no place in Tarnag, our holiest of cities! Do you forget the curse our clan, The Tears of Anhûin, bears from the Dragon War? We will not let him pass. He is …

grimstborith—clan chief

grimstcarvlorss—arranger of the house

Gûntera Arûna—Gûntera Bless

Hert dûrgrimst? Fild rastn?—What clan? Who passes?

hírna—likeness; statue

hûthvír—double-bladed staff weapon used by Dûrgrimst Quan

Ignh az voth!—Bring the food!

Ilf gauhnith.—A peculiar dwarf expression that means “It is safe and good.” Commonly uttered by the host of a meal, it is a holdover from days when poisoning of guests was prevalent among the clans.

Ingeitum—fire workers; smiths

Isidar Mithrim—Star Rose

Jok is frekk dûrgrimstvren?—Do you want a clan war?

knurl—stone; rock

knurla—dwarf (literally, one of stone)

Knurlag qana qirânû Dûrgrimst Ingeitum! Qarzûl ana Hrothgar oen volfild—He was made a member of Clan Ingeitum! Cursed is Hrothgar and all who—

knurlagn—men

Knurlhiem—Stonehead

Knurlnien—Heart of Stone

Nagra—giant boar, native to the Beor Mountains

oeí—yes; affirmative

Orik Thrifkz menthiv oen Hrethcarach Eragon rak Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. Wharn, az vanyali-carharûg Arya. Né oc Ûndinz grimstbelardn.—Orik, Thrifk’s son, and Shadeslayer Eragon of Clan Ingeitum. Also, the elf-courier Arya. We are Ûndin’s hall-guests.

Os il dom qirânû carn dûr thargen, zeitmen, oen grimst vor formv edaris rak skilfz. Narho is belgond …—Let our flesh, honor, and hall be made as one by this blood of mine. I do pledge …

otho—faith

Ragni Hefthyn—River Guard

Shrrg—giant wolf, native to the Beor Mountains

Smer voth.—Serve the food.

Tronjheim—Helm of Giants

Urzhad—cave bear

vanyali—elf (The dwarves borrowed this word from the ancient language, wherein it means *magic*.)

Vor Hrothgarz korda!—By Hrothgar’s hammer!

vrron—enough

werg—an exclamation of disgust (the dwarves’ equivalent of *ugh*)

THE URGAL LANGUAGE:

Ahgrat ukmar.—It is done.

drajl—spawn of maggots

nar—a gender-neutral title of great respect

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kvetha Fricaya.

As with many authors who undertake an epic the length of the Inheritance cycle, I have found that the creation of *Eragon*, and now *Eldest*, has become my own personal quest, one that has proven every bit as transforming as Eragon's.

When first I conceived *Eragon*, I was fifteen—not quite a boy and not yet a man—just out of high school, unsure of what path to take in life, and addicted to the potent magic of the fantasy literature that adorned my shelves. The process of writing *Eragon*, marketing it across the world, and now finally completing *Eldest* has swept me into adulthood. I am twenty-one now and, to my continual astonishment, have already published two novels. Stranger things have occurred, I'm sure, but never to me.

Eragon's journey has been my own: plucked from a sheltered rural upbringing and forced to rove the land in a desperate race against time; enduring intense and arduous training; achieving success against all expectations; dealing with the consequences of fame; and eventually finding a measure of peace.

Just as in fiction when the determined and well-meaning protagonist—who really isn't all that bright, now is he?—is helped along his way by a host of wiser characters, so too have I been guided by a number of stupendously talented people. They are:

At home: Mom, for listening whenever I need to talk about a problem with the story or characters and for giving me the courage to throw out twelve pages and rewrite Eragon's entrance into Ellesméra (painful); Dad, as always, for his incisive editing; and my dear sister, Angela, for deigning to reprise her role as a witch and for her contributions to her doppelgänger's dialogue.

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Thank you all.

One more volume to go and we shall reach the end of this tale. One more manuscript of heartache, ecstasy, and perseverance.… One more codex of dreams.

Stay with me, if it please you, and let us see where this winding path will carry us, both in this world and in Alagaësia.

Sé onr sverdar sitja hvass!

Christopher Paolini

August 23, 2005

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ENJOY AN EXCLUSIVE LOOK
AT A DELETED SCENE FROM

ELDEST

THIS EPISODE FROM ERAGON AND SAPHIRA'S VISIT TO THE DWARF CITY OF TARNAG OFFERS A UNIQUE GLIMPSE AT DWARF THEATER.

Saphira looked at him with solemn eyes and said, *They are afraid, Eragon. Afraid and resentful because once more they have been forced to accept a Rider's assistance.*

Aye. They may fight with us, but they don't fight for us.

"Good." Ûndin wiped his hands, stood, and clapped loudly. "Estver az grimstcardweirvn!" As he reseated himself, twenty-six costumed dwarves marched out of the hall into the courtyard and positioned themselves before the tables, where all could see. "Explain," grunted Ûndin, waving his hand at Orik.

Eragon looked down at Orik, who said, "These are the clan bards. It is their job to remember all songs, sagas, poems, and other lore that describe the clan's history."

"They also," added Arya, "perform plays."

At Ûndin's word, a roll of drums echoed from the side and a dwarf announced, *"Az Sartosvrenht rak Balmung, Grimstnzborith rak Kvisagûr."*

Orik translated: "*The Saga of King Balmung of Kvisagûr*—Kvisagûr being a mountain south of Dalgon."

Then a wizened bard stepped forward, clutching a staff. He cried:

> *Né dom alfrell wharn hert? Né rak az knurl menwanû, fild ganaht vrem oen nzdorrim volhort. Né oc strâddsigt hûttn rak garz menwarrev isû warrevn ienmîf dar fûthmérn.*

"What be such as we?" whispered Orik, so Eragon could understand. "We of the immortal stone, who bestride sorrow and ecstasy every moment. We are flickering—specks? motes?—of time's memory, which forgets even as it creates."

> *Skilfz grimsthadn rak Kvisagûr ana carn alfrell hûtt, qmarrv vor menotho mensaghn fild …*

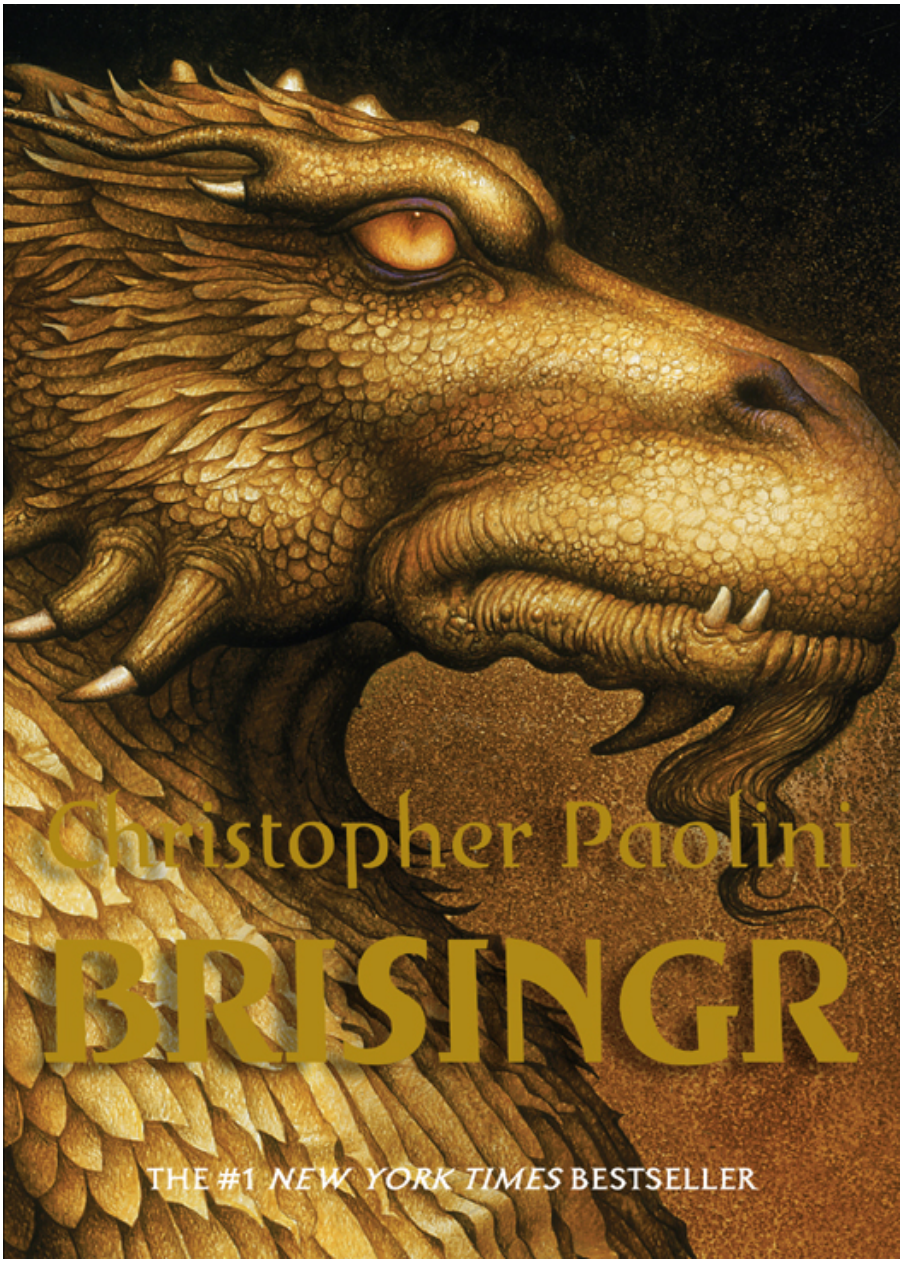
“Mine country of Kvisagûr is one such mote, assailed by feckless enemies who …”

As Eragon listened, he found himself captured by the story of Balmung—saddened and wise with experience—and his mad, wild queen, Dragica, who, throughout the play, relentlessly pursued vengeance for the death of her youngest son, Hval, after he fell off a Feldûnost while in the care of Balmung’s closest allies.

Eragon did not understand all of the references—such as when it was gibed that Balmung’s nose was as long as his beard, and the dwarves roared with uncontrollable laughter—but the underlying themes were moving and tragic.

It ended with Balmung standing alone before them: sons murdered or exiled, his kingdom lost in war, and Dragica dead by her own hand. The wrinkled old player leaned on his staff, staring with eyes black, glazed, desolate.

He said, “No more shall the sun shake in its infirmity, nor gray lichen molder across granite, for mine sorrow steals the breath betwixt mine teeth. Hearth and hall have I lost, flesh of my flesh, and all the glittering aches of this life … leaving what? Oh, mere existence falters underneath this load without mitigation of heart’s affection.”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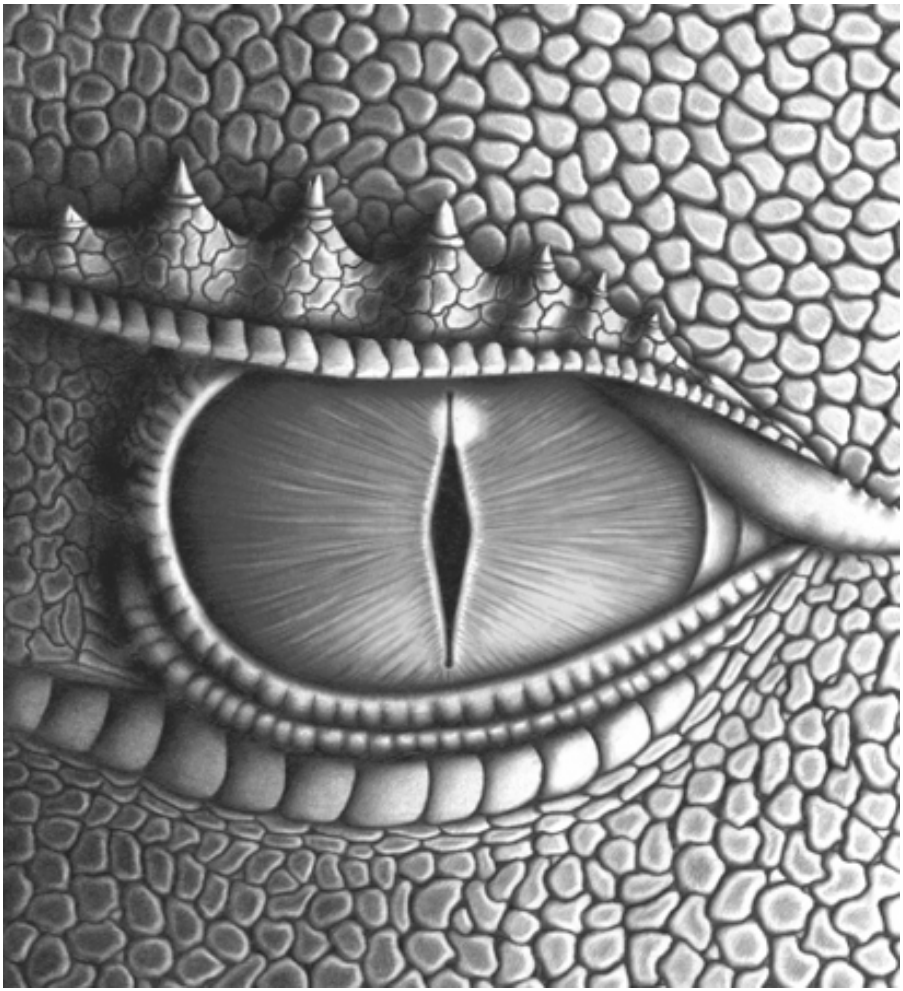

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BOOK III IN THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

Christopher Paolini

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As always, this book is for my family.
And also for Jordan, Nina, and Sylvie,
the bright lights of a new generation.
Atra esterní ono thelduin.

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Acknowledgments

Synopsis of *Eragon* and *Eldest*

Eragon—a fifteen-year-old farm boy—is shocked when a polished blue stone appears before him in the range of mountains known as the Spine. Eragon takes the stone to the farm where he lives with his uncle, Garrow, and his cousin, Roran, outside the small village of Carvahall. Garrow and his late wife, Marian, have raised Eragon. Nothing is known of Eragon's father; his mother, Selena, was Garrow's sister and has not been seen since Eragon's birth.

Later, the stone cracks open and a baby dragon emerges. When Eragon touches her, a silvery mark appears on his palm, and an irrevocable bond is forged between their minds, making Eragon one of the legendary Dragon Riders. He names the dragon Saphira, after a dragon mentioned by the village storyteller, Brom.

The Dragon Riders were created thousands of years earlier in the aftermath of the devastating war between the elves and the dragons, in order to prevent their two races from ever again fighting each other. The Riders became peacekeepers, educators, healers, natural philosophers, and the greatest of all magicians—since being joined with a dragon makes one a spellcaster. Under their guidance and protection, the land enjoyed a golden age.

When humans arrived in Alagaësia, they too were added to this elite order. After many years of peace, the warlike Urgals killed the dragon of a young human Rider named Galbatorix. The loss drove him mad, and when his elders refused to provide him with another dragon, Galbatorix set out to topple the Riders.

He stole another dragon—whom he named Shruikan and forced to serve him through certain black spells—and gathered around himself a group of thirteen traitors: the Forsworn. With the help of those cruel disciples, Galbatorix threw down the Riders; killed their leader, Vrael; and declared himself king over Alagaësia. His actions forced the elves to retreat deep within their pinewood forest and the dwarves to hide in their tunnels and caves, and neither race now ventures forth from its secret places. The stalemate between Galbatorix and the other races has endured for over a hundred years, during which all of the Forsworn have died from various causes. It is into this tense political situation that Eragon finds himself thrust.

Several months after Saphira hatches, two menacing, beetle-like strangers called the Ra'zac arrive in Carvahall, searching for the stone that was Saphira's egg. Eragon and Saphira manage to evade them, but they destroy Eragon's home and murder Garrow.

Eragon vows to track down and kill the Ra'zac. As he leaves

Carvahall, the storyteller Brom, who knows of Saphira's existence, accosts Eragon and asks to accompany him. Brom gives Eragon a red Dragon Rider's sword, Zar'roc, though he refuses to say how he acquired it.

Eragon learns much from Brom during their travels, including how to fight with swords and use magic. When they lose the Ra'zac's trail, they go to the port town of Teirm and visit Brom's old friend Jeod, who Brom thinks may be able to help them locate the Ra'zac's lair. In Teirm, they learn that the Ra'zac live somewhere close to the city of Dras-Leona. Eragon also has his fortune told by the herbalist Angela and receives two strange pieces of advice from her companion, the werecat Solembum.

On the way to Dras-Leona, Brom reveals that he is an agent of the Varden—a rebel group dedicated to overthrowing Galbatorix—and that he had been hiding in Carvahall, waiting for a new Dragon Rider to appear. Twenty years ago, Brom was involved in stealing Saphira's egg from Galbatorix and, in the process, killed Morzan, first and last of the Forsworn. Only two other dragon eggs still exist, both of which remain in Galbatorix's possession.

In and near Dras-Leona, they encounter the Ra'zac, who mortally wound Brom while he is protecting Eragon. A mysterious young man named Murtagh drives the Ra'zac away. With his dying breath, Brom confesses that he too was once a Rider and that his slain dragon was also named Saphira.

Eragon and Saphira then decide to join the Varden, but Eragon is captured at the city of Gil'ead and brought before Durza, an evil and powerful Shade who serves Galbatorix. With Murtagh's help, Eragon escapes from prison, bringing along with him the elf Arya, another captive of Durza's and an ambassador to the Varden. Arya has been poisoned and requires the Varden's medical help.

Pursued by a contingent of Urgals, the four of them flee across the land to the Varden's headquarters in the giant Beor Mountains, which stand over ten miles high. Circumstances force Murtagh—who does not want to go to the Varden—to reveal that he is the son of Morzan. Murtagh, however, has denounced his dead father's villainy and fled Galbatorix's court to seek his own destiny. And he tells Eragon that the sword Zar'roc once belonged to Murtagh's father.

Just before they are overwhelmed by the Urgals, Eragon and his friends are rescued by the Varden, who live in Farthen Dûr, a hollow mountain that is also home to the dwarves' capital, Tronjheim. Once inside, Eragon is taken to Ajihad, leader of the Varden, while Murtagh is imprisoned because of his relation to Morzan.

Eragon meets with the dwarf king, Hrothgar, and Ajihad's daughter, Nasuada, and is tested by the Twins, two rather nasty magicians who

serve Ajihad. Eragon and Saphira also bless one of the Varden's orphan babies while the Varden heal Arya of her poisoning.

Eragon's stay is disrupted by news of an Urgal army approaching underground, through the dwarves' tunnels. In the battle that follows, Eragon is separated from Saphira and forced to fight Durza alone. Far stronger than any human, Durza easily defeats Eragon, slashing open his back from shoulder to hip. At that moment, Saphira and Arya break the roof of a chamber—a sixty-foot-wide star sapphire—distracting Durza long enough for Eragon to stab him through the heart. Freed from Durza's spells, which were controlling them, the Urgals are driven back.

While Eragon lies unconscious after the battle, he is telepathically contacted by a being who identifies himself as Togira Ikonoka—the Cripple Who Is Whole. He urges Eragon to seek him for instruction in Ellesméra, the elves' capital.

When Eragon wakes, he has a huge scar across his back. Dismayed, he also realizes he only slew Durza through sheer luck and that he desperately needs more training. And at the end of Book One, he decides that, yes, he will find this Togira Ikonoka and learn from him.

Eldest begins three days after Eragon slays Durza. The Varden are recovering from the Battle of Farthen Dûr, and Ajihad, Murtagh, and the Twins have been hunting down the Urgals who escaped into the tunnels underneath Farthen Dûr after the battle. When a group of Urgals takes them by surprise, Ajihad is killed and Murtagh and the Twins disappear in the fray. The Varden's Council of Elders appoints Nasuada to succeed her father as new leader of the Varden, and Eragon swears fealty to her as her vassal.

Eragon and Saphira decide they must leave for Ellesméra to begin their training with the Cripple Who Is Whole. Before they go, the dwarf king, Hrothgar, offers to adopt Eragon into his clan, the Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, and Eragon accepts, which gives him full legal rights as a dwarf and entitles him to participate in dwarvish councils.

Both Arya and Orik, Hrothgar's foster son, accompany Eragon and Saphira on their journey to the land of the elves. En route, they stop in Tarnag, a dwarf city. Some of the dwarves are friendly, but Eragon learns that one clan in particular does not welcome him and Saphira—the Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, who hate Riders and dragons because the Forsworn slaughtered so many of their clan.

The party finally arrives in Du Weldenvarden, the forest of the elves. At Ellesméra, Eragon and Saphira meet Islanzadí, queen of the elves, who, they learn, is Arya's mother. They also meet with the Cripple Who Is Whole: an ancient elf named Oromis. He too is a Rider. Oromis and his dragon, Glaedr, have kept their existence hidden from

Galbatorix for the past hundred years while they searched for a way to overthrow the king.

Both Oromis and Glaedr are afflicted with old wounds that prevent them from fighting—Glaedr is missing a leg and Oromis, who was captured and broken by the Forsworn, is unable to control large amounts of magic and is prone to debilitating seizures.

Eragon and Saphira begin their training, both together and separately. Eragon learns more about the history of Alagaësia's races, swordsmanship, and the ancient language, which all magicians use. In his studies of the ancient language, he discovers he made a terrible mistake when he and Saphira blessed the orphaned baby in Farthen Dûr: he intended to say "May you be shielded from misfortune," but what he actually said was "May you be *a shield* from misfortune." He has cursed the baby to shield others from any and all pain and misfortune.

Saphira makes quick progress learning from Glaedr, but the scar Eragon bears as a result of his battle with Durza slows his training. Not only is the mark on his back disfiguring, but at unexpected times it incapacitates him with painful spasms. He does not know how he will improve as a magician and swordsman if his convulsions continue.

Eragon begins to realize he has feelings for Arya. He confesses them to her, but she rebuffs him and soon leaves to return to the Varden.

Then the elves hold a ritual known as the Agaetí Blödhren, or the Blood-oath Celebration, during which Eragon goes through a magical transformation: he is turned into an elf-human hybrid—not quite one, not quite the other. As a result, his scar is healed and he now has the same superhuman strength the elves have. His features are also altered, so he appears slightly elvish.

At this point, Eragon learns that the Varden are on the brink of battle with the Empire and are in dire need of him and Saphira. While Eragon has been away, Nasuada has moved the Varden from Farthen Dûr to Surda, a country south of the Empire that still maintains its independence from Galbatorix.

Eragon and Saphira leave Ellesméra, along with Orik, after promising Oromis and Glaedr that they will return to complete their training as soon as they can.

Meanwhile, Eragon's cousin, Roran, has been having his own adventures. Galbatorix has sent the Ra'zac and a legion of imperial soldiers to Carvahall, looking to capture Roran, so as to use him against Eragon. Roran manages to escape into the nearby mountains. He and the other villagers attempt to drive the soldiers away. Numerous villagers die in the process. When Sloan, the village butcher —who hates Roran and opposes Roran's engagement to his daughter,

Katrina—betrays Roran to the Ra'zac, the beetle-like creatures find and attack Roran in the middle of the night in his bedroom. Roran fights his way free, but the Ra'zac capture Katrina.

Roran convinces the people of Carvahall to leave their village and seek refuge with the Varden in Surda. They set out westward for the coast, in the hope that they can sail from there to Surda. Roran proves himself as a leader, bringing them safely through the Spine to the coast. In the port town of Teirm, they meet Jeod, who tells Roran that Eragon is a Rider and explains what the Ra'zac were looking for in Carvahall in the first place—Saphira. Jeod offers to help Roran and the villagers reach Surda, pointing out that once Roran and the villagers are safely with the Varden, Roran can enlist Eragon's help in rescuing Katrina. Jeod and the villagers pirate a ship and sail toward Surda.

Eragon and Saphira reach the Varden, who are readying for battle. Eragon learns what has become of the baby upon whom he bestowed the ill-phrased blessing: her name is Elva, and though, chronologically, she is still a baby, she has the appearance of a four-year-old child and the voice and demeanor of a world-weary adult. Eragon's spell forces her to sense the pain of all the people she sees, and compels her to protect them; if she resists this urge, she herself suffers.

Eragon, Saphira, and the Varden ride out to meet the Empire's troops on the Burning Plains, a large swath of land that smokes and smolders from underground peat fires. They are astonished when another Rider appears astride a red dragon. The new Rider slays Hrothgar, the dwarf king, and then begins to fight with Eragon and Saphira. When Eragon manages to wrench the Rider's helm off, he is shocked to see Murtagh.

Murtagh did not die in the Urgal ambush under Farthen Dûr. The Twins arranged it all; they are traitors who planned the ambush so Ajihad would be killed and they could capture Murtagh and take him to Galbatorix. The king forced Murtagh to swear loyalty to him in the ancient language. Now Murtagh and his newly hatched dragon, Thorn, are Galbatorix's slaves, and Murtagh asserts that his oaths will never allow him to disobey the king, though Eragon pleads with him to abandon Galbatorix and join the Varden.

Murtagh is able to overwhelm Eragon and Saphira with an inexplicable display of strength. However, he decides to free them because of their previous friendship. Before Murtagh leaves, he takes Zar'roc from Eragon, claiming it is his inheritance as Morzan's elder son. Then he reveals that he is not Morzan's only son—Eragon and Murtagh are brothers, both sons of Selena, Morzan's consort. The Twins discovered the truth when they examined Eragon's memories

the day he arrived at Farthen Dûr.

Still reeling from Murtagh's revelation about their parentage, Eragon retreats with Saphira, and he is finally reunited with Roran and the villagers of Carvahall, who have arrived at the Burning Plains just in time to aid the Varden in the battle. Roran fought heroically and succeeded in killing the Twins.

Eragon and Roran make peace over Eragon's role in Garrow's death, and Eragon vows to help Roran rescue Katrina from the Ra'zac.

THE GATES OF DEATH

Eragon stared at the dark tower of stone wherein hid the monsters who had murdered his uncle, Garrow.

He was lying on his belly behind the edge of a sandy hill dotted with sparse blades of grass, thornbushes, and small, rosebud-like cactuses. The brittle stems of last year's foliage pricked his palms as he inched forward to gain a better view of Helgrind, which loomed over the surrounding land like a black dagger thrust out from the bowels of the earth.

The evening sun streaked the low hills with shadows long and narrow and—far in the west—illuminated the surface of Leona Lake so that the horizon became a rippling bar of gold.

To his left, Eragon heard the steady breathing of his cousin, Roran, who was stretched out beside him. The normally inaudible flow of air seemed preternaturally loud to Eragon with his heightened sense of hearing, one of many such changes wrought by his experience during the Agaetí Blödhren, the elves' Blood-oath Celebration.

He paid little attention to that now as he watched a column of people inch toward the base of Helgrind, apparently having walked from the city of Dras-Leona, some miles away. A contingent of twenty-four men and women, garbed in thick leather robes, occupied the head of the column. This group moved with many strange and varied gaits—they limped and shuffled and humped and wriggled; they swung on crutches or used arms to propel themselves forward on curiously short legs—contortions that were necessary because, as Eragon realized, every one of the twenty-four lacked an arm or a leg or some combination thereof. Their leader sat upright upon a litter borne by six oiled slaves, a pose Eragon regarded as a rather amazing accomplishment, considering that the man or woman—he could not tell which—consisted of nothing more than a torso and head, upon whose brow balanced an ornate leather crest three feet high.

"The priests of Helgrind," he murmured to Roran.

"Can they use magic?"

"Possibly. I dare not explore Helgrind with my mind until they leave, for if any *are* magicians, they will sense my touch, however light, and our presence will be revealed."

Behind the priests trudged a double line of young men swathed in gold cloth. Each carried a rectangular metal frame subdivided by twelve horizontal crossbars from which hung iron bells the size of winter rutabagas. Half of the young men gave their frames a vigorous

shake when they stepped forward with their right foot, producing a dolorous cacophony of notes, while the other half shook their frames when they advanced upon the left foot, causing iron tongues to crash against iron throats and emit a mournful clamor that echoed over the hills. The acolytes accompanied the throbbing of the bells with their own cries, groaning and shouting in an ecstasy of passion.

At the rear of the grotesque procession trudged a comet's tail of inhabitants from Dras-Leona: nobles, merchants, tradesmen, several high-ranking military commanders, and a motley collection of those less fortunate, such as laborers, beggars, and common foot soldiers.

Eragon wondered if Dras-Leona's governor, Marcus Tábor, was somewhere in their midst.

Drawing to a stop at the edge of the precipitous mound of scree that ringed Helgrind, the priests gathered on either side of a rust-colored boulder with a polished top. When the entire column stood motionless before the crude altar, the creature upon the litter stirred and began to chant in a voice as discordant as the moaning of the bells. The shaman's declamations were repeatedly truncated by gusts of wind, but Eragon caught snatches of the ancient language—strangely twisted and mispronounced—interspersed with dwarf and Urgal words, all of which were united by an archaic dialect of Eragon's own tongue. What he understood caused him to shudder, for the sermon spoke of things best left unknown, of a malevolent hate that had festered for centuries in the dark caverns of people's hearts before being allowed to flourish in the Riders' absence, of blood and madness, and of foul rituals performed underneath a black moon.

At the end of that depraved oration, two of the lesser priests rushed forward and lifted their master—or mistress, as the case might be—off the litter and onto the face of the altar. Then the High Priest issued a brief order. Twin blades of steel winked like stars as they rose and fell. A rivulet of blood sprang from each of the High Priest's shoulders, flowed down the leather-encased torso, and then pooled across the boulder until it overflowed onto the gravel below.

Two more priests jumped forward to catch the crimson flow in goblets that, when filled to the rim, were distributed among the members of the congregation, who eagerly drank.

"Gar!" said Roran in an undertone. "You failed to mention that those errant flesh-mongers, those gore-bellied, boggle-minded idiot-worshipers were *cannibals.*"

"Not quite. They do not partake of the meat."

When all the attendees had wet their throats, the servile novitiates returned the High Priest to the litter and bound the creature's shoulders with strips of white linen. Wet blotches quickly sullied the virgin cloth.

The wounds seemed to have no effect upon the High Priest, for the limbless figure rotated back toward the devotees with their lips of cranberry red and pronounced, “Now are you truly my Brothers and Sisters, having tasted the sap of my veins here in the shadow of almighty Helgrind. Blood calls to blood, and if ever your Family should need help, do then what you can for the Church and for others who acknowledge the power of our Dread Lord.… To affirm and reaffirm our fealty to the Triumvirate, recite with me the Nine Oaths. … By Gorm, Ilda, and Fell Angvara, we vow to perform homage at least thrice a month, in the hour before dusk, and then to make an offering of ourselves to appease the eternal hunger of our Great and Terrible Lord.… We vow to observe the strictures as they are presented in the book of Tosk.… We vow to always carry our Bregnir on our bodies and to forever abstain from the twelve of twelves and the touch of a many-knotted rope, lest it corrupt …”

A sudden rise in the wind obscured the rest of the High Priest’s list. Then Eragon saw those who listened take out a small, curved knife and, one by one, cut themselves in the crook of their elbows and anoint the altar with a stream of their blood.

Some minutes later, the angry breeze subsided and Eragon again heard the priest: “… and such things as you long and lust for will be granted to you as a reward for your obedience.… Our worship is complete. However, if any now stand among you who are brave enough to demonstrate the true depth of their faith, let them show themselves!”

The audience stiffened and leaned forward, their faces rapt; this, apparently, was what they had been waiting for.

For a long, silent pause, it seemed as if they would be disappointed, but then one of the acolytes broke ranks and shouted, “I will!” With a roar of delight, his brethren began to brandish their bells in a quick and savage beat, whipping the congregation into such a frenzy, they jumped and yelled as if they had taken leave of their senses. The rough music kindled a spark of excitement in Eragon’s heart—despite his revulsion at the proceedings—waking some primal and brutish part of him.

Shedding his gold robes so that he wore nothing but a leather breechcloth, the dark-haired youth sprang on top of the altar. Gouts of ruby spray erupted on either side of his feet. He faced Helgrind and began to shiver and quake as if stricken with palsy, keeping time with the tolling of the cruel iron bells. His head rolled loosely upon his neck, foam gathered at the corners of his mouth, his arms thrashed like snakes. Sweat oiled his muscles until he gleamed like a bronze statue in the dying light.

The bells soon reached a manic tempo where one note clashed

against another, at which point the young man thrust a hand out behind himself. Into it, a priest deposited the hilt of a bizarre implement: a single-edged weapon, two and a half feet long, with a full tang, scale grips, a vestigial crossguard, and a broad, flat blade that widened and was scalloped near the end, a shape reminiscent of a dragon wing. It was a tool designed for but one purpose: to hack through armor and bones and sinew as easily as through a bulging waterskin.

The young man lifted the weapon so that it slanted toward the highest peak of Helgrind. Then he dropped to one knee and, with an incoherent cry, brought the blade down across his right wrist.

Blood sprayed the rocks behind the altar.

Eragon winced and averted his eyes, although he could not escape the youth's piercing screams. It was nothing Eragon had not seen in battle, but it seemed wrong to deliberately mutilate yourself when it was so easy to become disfigured in everyday life.

Blades of grass rasped against one another as Roran shifted his weight. He muttered some curse, which was lost in his beard, and then fell silent again.

While a priest tended to the young man's wound—stanching the bleeding with a spell—an acolyte let loose two slaves from the High Priest's litter, only to chain them by the ankles to an iron loop embedded in the altar. Then the acolytes divested themselves of numerous packages from underneath their robes and piled them on the ground, out of reach of the slaves.

Their ceremonies at an end, the priests and their retinue departed Helgrind for Dras-Leona, wailing and ringing the entire way. The now one-handed zealot stumbled along just behind the High Priest.

A beatific smile graced his face.

"Well," said Eragon, and released his pent-up breath as the column vanished behind a distant hill.

"Well what?"

"I've traveled among both dwarves and elves, and nothing they did was ever as strange as what those people, those *humans*, do."

"They're as monstrous as the Ra'zac." Roran jerked his chin toward Helgrind. "Can you find out now if Katrina is in there?"

"I'll try. But be ready to run."

Closing his eyes, Eragon slowly extended his consciousness outward, moving from the mind of one living thing to another, like tendrils of water seeping through sand. He touched teeming cities of insects frantically scurrying about their business, lizards and snakes hidden among warm rocks, diverse species of songbirds, and numerous small mammals. Insects and animals alike bustled with activity as they

prepared for the fast-approaching night, whether by retreating to their various dens or, in the case of those of a nocturnal bent, by yawning, stretching, and otherwise readying themselves to hunt and forage.

Just as with his other senses, Eragon's ability to touch another being's thoughts diminished with distance. By the time his psychic probe arrived at the base of Helgrind, he could perceive only the largest of animals, and even those but faintly.

He proceeded with caution, ready to withdraw at a second's notice if he happened to brush against the minds of their prey: the Ra'zac and the Ra'zac's parents and steeds, the gigantic Lethrblaka. Eragon was willing to expose himself in this manner only because none of the Ra'zac's breed could use magic, and he did not believe that they were mindbreakers—nonmagicians trained to fight with telepathy. The Ra'zac and Lethrblaka had no need for such tricks when their breath alone could induce a stupor in the largest of men.

And though Eragon risked discovery by his ghostly investigation, he, Roran, and Saphira *had* to know if the Ra'zac had imprisoned Katrina—Roran's betrothed—in Helgrind, for the answer would determine whether their mission was one of rescue or one of capture and interrogation.

Eragon searched long and hard. When he returned to himself, Roran was watching him with the expression of a starving wolf. His gray eyes burned with a mixture of anger, hope, and despair that was so great, it seemed as if his emotions might burst forth and incinerate everything in sight in a blaze of unimaginable intensity, melting the very rocks themselves.

This Eragon understood.

Katrina's father, the butcher Sloan, had betrayed Roran to the Ra'zac. When they failed to capture him, the Ra'zac had instead seized Katrina from Roran's bedroom and spirited her away from Palancar Valley, leaving the inhabitants of Carvahall to be killed and enslaved by King Galbatorix's soldiers. Unable to pursue Katrina, Roran had—just in time—convinced the villagers to abandon their homes and to follow him across the Spine and then south along the coast of Alagaësia, where they joined forces with the rebel Varden. The hardships they endured as a result had been many and terrible. But circuitous as it was, that course had reunited Roran with Eragon, who knew the location of the Ra'zac's den and had promised to help save Katrina.

Roran had only succeeded, as he later explained, because the strength of his passion drove him to extremes that others feared and avoided, and thus allowed him to confound his enemies.

A similar fervor now gripped Eragon.

He would leap into harm's way without the slightest regard for his

own safety if someone he cared for was in danger. He loved Roran as a brother, and since Roran was to marry Katrina, Eragon had extended his definition of family to include her as well. This concept seemed even more important because Eragon and Roran were the last heirs of their line. Eragon had renounced all affiliation with his birth brother, Murtagh, and the only relatives he and Roran had left were each other, and now Katrina.

Noble sentiments of kinship were not the only force that drove the pair. Another goal obsessed them as well: *revenge!* Even as they plotted to snatch Katrina from the grasp of the Ra'zac, so the two warriors—mortal man and Dragon Rider alike—sought to slay King Galbatorix's unnatural servants for torturing and murdering Garrow, who was Roran's father and had been as a father to Eragon.

The intelligence, then, that Eragon had gleaned was as important to him as to Roran.

"I think I felt her," he said. "It's hard to be certain, because we're so far from Helgrind and I've never touched her mind before, but I *think* she's in that forsaken peak, concealed somewhere near the very top."

"Is she sick? Is she injured? Blast it, Eragon, don't hide it from me: have they hurt her?"

"She's in no pain at the moment. More than that, I cannot say, for it required all my strength just to make out the glow of her consciousness; I could not communicate with her." Eragon refrained from mentioning, however, that he had detected a second person as well, one whose identity he suspected and the presence of whom, if confirmed, troubled him greatly. "What I *didn't* find were the Ra'zac or the Lethrblaka. Even if I somehow overlooked the Ra'zac, their parents are so large, their life force should blaze like a thousand lanterns, even as Saphira's does. Aside from Katrina and a few other dim specks of light, Helgrind is black, black, black."

Roran scowled, clenched his left fist, and glared at the mountain of rock, which was fading into the dusk as purple shadows enveloped it. In a low, flat voice, as if talking with himself, he said, "It doesn't matter whether you are right or wrong."

"How so?"

"We dare not attack tonight; night is when the Ra'zac are strongest, and if they *are* nearby, it would be stupid to fight them when we're at a disadvantage. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"So, we wait for the dawn." Roran gestured toward the slaves chained to the gory altar. "If those poor wretches are gone by then, we know the Ra'zac are here, and we proceed as planned. If not, we curse our bad luck that they escaped us, free the slaves, rescue Katrina, and fly back to the Varden with her before Murtagh hunts us down. Either

way, I doubt the Ra'zac will leave Katrina unattended for long, not if Galbatorix wants her to survive so he can use her as a tool against me."

Eragon nodded. He wanted to release the slaves now, but doing so could warn their foes that something was amiss. Nor, if the Ra'zac came to collect their dinner, could he and Saphira intercede before the slaves were ferried away. A battle in the open between a dragon and creatures such as the Lethrblaka would attract the attention of every man, woman, and child for leagues around. And Eragon did not think he, Saphira, or Roran could survive if Galbatorix learned they were alone in his empire.

He looked away from the shackled men. *For their sake, I hope the Ra'zac are on the other side of Alagaësia or, at least, that the Ra'zac aren't hungry tonight.*

By unspoken consent, Eragon and Roran crawled backward down from the crest of the low hill they were hiding behind. At the bottom, they rose into a half crouch, then turned and, still doubled over, ran between two rows of hills. The shallow depression gradually deepened into a narrow, flood-carved gully lined with crumbling slabs of shale.

Dodging the gnarled juniper trees that dotted the gully, Eragon glanced up and, through clumps of needles, saw the first constellations to adorn the velvet sky. They seemed cold and sharp, like bright shards of ice. Then he concentrated on maintaining his footing as he and Roran trotted south toward their camp.

AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

The low mound of coals throbbed like the heart of some giant beast. Occasionally, a patch of gold sparks flared into existence and raced across the surface of the wood before vanishing into a white-hot crevice.

The dying remnants of the fire Eragon and Roran had built cast a dim red light over the surrounding area, revealing a patch of rocky soil, a few pewter-gray bushes, the indistinct mass of a juniper tree farther off, then nothing.

Eragon sat with his bare feet extended toward the nest of ruby embers—enjoying the warmth—and with his back propped against the knobby scales of Saphira's thick right foreleg. Opposite him, Roran was perched on the iron-hard, sun-bleached, wind-worn shell of an ancient tree trunk. Every time he moved, the trunk produced a bitter shriek that made Eragon want to claw at his ears.

For the moment, quiet reigned within the hollow. Even the coals smoldered in silence; Roran had collected only long-dead branches devoid of moisture to eliminate any smoke that unfriendly eyes might spot.

Eragon had just finished recounting the day's activities to Saphira. Normally, he never had to tell her what he had been doing, as thoughts, feelings, and other sensations flowed between them as easily as water from one side of a lake to another. But in this instance it was necessary because Eragon had kept his mind carefully shielded during the scouting expedition, aside from his disembodied foray into the Ra'zac's lair.

After a considerable gap in the conversation, Saphira yawned, exposing her rows of many fearsome teeth. *Cruel and evil they may be, but I am impressed that the Ra'zac can bewitch their prey into* wanting *to be eaten. They are great hunters to do that.… Perhaps I shall attempt it someday.*

But not, Eragon felt compelled to add, *with people. Try it with sheep instead.*

People, sheep: what difference is there to a dragon? Then she laughed deep in her long throat—a rolling rumble that reminded him of thunder.

Leaning forward to take his weight off Saphira's sharp-edged scales, Eragon picked up the hawthorn staff that lay by his side. He rolled it between his palms, admiring the play of light over the polished tangle of roots at the top and the much-scratched metal ferrule and spike at

the base.

Roran had thrust the staff into his arms before they left the Varden on the Burning Plains, saying, “Here. Fisk made this for me after the Ra’zac bit my shoulder. I know you lost your sword, and I thought you might have need of it.… If you want to get another blade, that’s fine too, but I’ve found there are very few fights you can’t win with a few whacks from a good, strong stick.” Remembering the staff Brom had always carried, Eragon had decided to forgo a new sword in favor of the length of knotted hawthorn. After losing Zar’roc, he felt no desire to take up another, lesser sword. That night, he had fortified both the knotted hawthorn and the handle to Roran’s hammer with several spells that would prevent either piece from breaking, except under the most extreme stress.

Unbidden, a series of memories overwhelmed Eragon: *A sullen orange and crimson sky swirled around him as Saphira dove in pursuit of the red dragon and his Rider. Wind howled past his ears.… His fingers went numb from the jolt of sword striking sword as he dueled that same Rider on the ground.… Tearing off his foe’s helm in the midst of combat to reveal his once friend and traveling companion, Murtagh, whom he had thought dead.… The sneer upon Murtagh’s face as he took Zar’roc from Eragon, claiming the red sword by right of inheritance as Eragon’s elder brother.…*

Eragon blinked, disoriented as the noise and fury of battle faded and the pleasant aroma of juniper wood replaced the stench of blood. He ran his tongue over his upper teeth, trying to eradicate the taste of bile that filled his mouth.

Murtagh.

The name alone generated a welter of confused emotions in Eragon. On one hand, he *liked* Murtagh. Murtagh had saved Eragon and Saphira from the Ra’zac after their first, ill-fated visit to Dras-Leona; risked his life to help extricate Eragon from Gil’ead; acquitted himself honorably in the Battle of Farthen Dûr; and, despite the torments he no doubt endured as a result, had chosen to interpret his orders from Galbatorix in a way that allowed him to release Eragon and Saphira after the Battle of the Burning Plains instead of taking them captive. It was not Murtagh’s fault that the Twins had abducted him; that the red dragon, Thorn, had hatched for him; or that Galbatorix had discovered their true names, with which he extracted oaths of fealty in the ancient language from both Murtagh and Thorn.

None of that could be blamed on Murtagh. He was a victim of fate, and had been since the day he was born.

And yet … Murtagh might serve Galbatorix against his will, and he might abhor the atrocities the king forced him to commit, but some part of him seemed to revel in wielding his newfound power. During

the recent engagement between the Varden and the Empire on the Burning Plains, Murtagh had singled out the dwarf king, Hrothgar, and slain him, although Galbatorix had not ordered Murtagh to do so. He had let Eragon and Saphira go, yes, but only after defeating them in a brutal contest of strength and then listening to Eragon plead for their freedom.

And Murtagh had derived entirely too much pleasure from the anguish he inflicted upon Eragon by revealing they were both sons of Morzan—first and last of the thirteen Dragon Riders, the Forsworn, who had betrayed their compatriots to Galbatorix.

Now, four days after the battle, another explanation presented itself to Eragon: *Perhaps what Murtagh enjoyed was watching another person shoulder the same terrible burden he had carried his whole life*.

Whether or not that was true, Eragon suspected Murtagh had embraced his new role for the same reason that a dog who has been whipped without cause will someday turn and attack his master. Murtagh had been whipped and whipped, and now he had his chance to strike back at a world that had shown him little enough kindness.

Yet no matter what good might still flicker in Murtagh's breast, he and Eragon were doomed to be mortal enemies, for Murtagh's promises in the ancient language bound him to Galbatorix with unbreakable fetters and would forevermore.

If only he hadn't gone with Ajihad to hunt Urgals underneath Farthen Dûr. Or if I had just been a little faster, the Twins—

Eragon, said Saphira.

He caught himself and nodded, grateful for her intervention. Eragon did his best to avoid brooding upon Murtagh or their shared parents, but such thoughts often waylaid him when he least expected it.

Drawing and releasing a slow breath to clear his head, Eragon tried to force his mind back to the present but could not.

The morning after the massive battle on the Burning Plains—when the Varden were busy regrouping and preparing to march after the Empire's army, which had retreated several leagues up the Jiet River—Eragon had gone to Nasuada and Arya, explained Roran's predicament, and sought their permission to help his cousin. He did not succeed. Both women vehemently opposed what Nasuada described as "a harebrained scheme that will have catastrophic consequences for everyone in Alagaësia if it goes awry!"

The debate raged on for so long, at last Saphira had interrupted with a roar that shook the walls of the command tent. Then she said, *I am sore and tired, and Eragon is doing a poor job of explaining himself. We have better things to do than stand around yammering like jackdaws, no? … Good, now listen to me*.

It was, reflected Eragon, difficult to argue with a dragon.

The details of Saphira's remarks were complex, but the underlying structure of her presentation was straightforward. Saphira supported Eragon because she understood how much the proposed mission meant to him, while Eragon supported Roran because of love and family, and because he knew Roran would pursue Katrina with or without him, and his cousin would never be able to defeat the Ra'zac by himself. Also, so long as the Empire held Katrina captive, Roran—and through him, Eragon—was vulnerable to manipulation by Galbatorix. If the usurper threatened to kill Katrina, Roran would have no choice but to submit to his demands.

It would be best, then, to patch this breach in their defenses before their enemies took advantage of it.

As for the timing, it was perfect. Neither Galbatorix nor the Ra'zac would expect a raid in the center of the Empire when the Varden were busy fighting Galbatorix's troops near the border of Surda. Murtagh and Thorn had been seen flying toward Urû'baen—no doubt to be chastised in person—and Nasuada and Arya agreed with Eragon that those two would probably then continue northward to confront Queen Islanzadí and the army under her command once the elves made their first strike and revealed their presence. And if possible, it would be good to eliminate the Ra'zac before they started to terrorize and demoralize the Varden's warriors.

Saphira had then pointed out, in the most diplomatic of terms, that if Nasuada asserted her authority as Eragon's liegelord and forbade him from participating in the sortie, it would poison their relationship with the sort of rancor and dissent that could undermine the Varden's cause. *But*, said Saphira, *the choice is yours. Keep Eragon here if you want. However, his commitments are not mine, and I, for one, have decided to accompany Roran. It seems like a fine adventure*.

A faint smile touched Eragon's lips as he recalled the scene.

The combined weight of Saphira's declaration and her impregnable logic had convinced Nasuada and Arya to grant their approval, albeit grudgingly.

Afterward, Nasuada had said, "We are trusting your judgment in this, Eragon, Saphira. For your sake and ours, I hope this expedition goes well." Her tone left Eragon uncertain whether her words represented a heartfelt wish or a subtle threat.

Eragon had spent the rest of that day gathering supplies, studying maps of the Empire with Saphira, and casting what spells he felt were necessary, such as one to thwart attempts by Galbatorix or his minions to scry Roran.

The following morning, Eragon and Roran had climbed onto Saphira's back, and she had taken flight, rising above the orange clouds that stifled the Burning Plains and angling northeast. She flew

nonstop until the sun had traversed the dome of the sky and extinguished itself behind the horizon and then burst forth again with a glorious conflagration of reds and yellows.

The first leg of their journey carried them toward the edge of the Empire, which few people inhabited. There they turned west toward Dras-Leona and Helgrind. From then on, they traveled at night to avoid notice by anyone in the many small villages scattered across the grasslands that lay between them and their destination.

Eragon and Roran had to swathe themselves in cloaks and furs and wool mittens and felted hats, for Saphira chose to fly higher than the icebound peaks of most mountains—where the air was thin and dry and stabbed at their lungs—so that if a farmer tending a sick calf in the field or a sharp-eyed watchman making his rounds should happen to look up as she passed overhead, Saphira would appear no larger than an eagle.

Everywhere they went, Eragon saw evidence of the war that was now afoot: camps of soldiers, wagons full of supplies gathered into a bunch for the night, and lines of men with iron collars being led from their homes to fight on Galbatorix's behalf. The amount of resources deployed against them was daunting indeed.

Near the end of the second night, Helgrind had appeared in the distance: a mass of splintered columns, vague and ominous in the ashen light that precedes dawn. Saphira had landed in the hollow where they were now, and they had slept through most of the past day before beginning their reconnaissance.

A fountain of amber motes billowed and swirled as Roran tossed a branch onto the disintegrating coals. He caught Eragon's look and shrugged. "Cold," he said.

Before Eragon could respond, he heard a slithering scraping sound akin to someone drawing a sword.

He did not think; he flung himself in the opposite direction, rolled once, and came up into a crouch, lifting the hawthorn staff to deflect an oncoming blow. Roran was nearly as fast. He grabbed his shield from the ground, scrambled back from the log he had been sitting on, and drew his hammer from his belt, all in the span of a few seconds.

They froze, waiting for the attack.

Eragon's heart pounded and his muscles trembled as he searched the darkness for the slightest hint of motion.

I smell nothing, said Saphira.

When several minutes elapsed without incident, Eragon pushed his mind out over the surrounding landscape. "No one," he said. Reaching deep within himself to the place where he could touch the flow of magic, he uttered the words "Brisingr raudhr!" A pale red werelight popped into existence several feet in front of him and remained there,

floating at eye level and painting the hollow with a watery radiance. He moved slightly, and the werelight mimicked his motion, as if connected to him by an invisible pole.

Together, he and Roran advanced toward where they'd heard the sound, down the gulch that wound eastward. They held their weapons high and paused between each step, ready to defend themselves at any moment. About ten yards from their camp, Roran held up a hand, stopping Eragon, then pointed at a plate of shale that lay on top of the grass. It appeared conspicuously out of place. Kneeling, Roran rubbed a smaller fragment of shale across the plate and created the same steely scrape they had heard before.

"It must have fallen," said Eragon, examining the sides of the gulch. He allowed the werelight to fade into oblivion.

Roran nodded and stood, brushing dirt from his pants.

As he walked back to Saphira, Eragon considered the speed with which they had reacted. His heart still contracted into a hard, painful knot with each beat, his hands shook, and he felt like dashing into the wilderness and running several miles without stopping. *We wouldn't have jumped like that before*, he thought. The reason for their vigilance was no mystery: every one of their fights had chipped away at their complacency, leaving behind nothing but raw nerves that twitched at the slightest touch.

Roran must have been entertaining similar thoughts, for he said, "Do you see them?"

"Who?"

"The men you've killed. Do you see them in your dreams?"

"Sometimes."

The pulsing glow from the coals lit Roran's face from below, forming thick shadows above his mouth and across his forehead and giving his heavy, half-lidded eyes a baleful aspect. He spoke slowly, as if he found the words difficult. "I never wanted to be a warrior. I dreamed of blood and glory when I was younger, as every boy does, but the land was what was important to me. That and our family.… And now I have killed.… I have killed and killed, and you have killed even more." His gaze focused on some distant place only he could see. "There were these two men in Narda.… Did I tell you this before?"

He had, but Eragon shook his head and remained silent.

"They were guards at the main gate.… Two of them, you know, and the man on the right, he had pure white hair. I remember because he couldn't have been more than twenty-four, twenty-five. They wore Galbatorix's sigil but spoke as if they were from Narda. They weren't professional soldiers. They were probably just men who had decided to help protect their homes from Urgals, pirates, brigands.… We weren't going to lift a finger against them. I swear to you, Eragon, that

was never part of our plan. I had no choice, though. They recognized me. I stabbed the white-haired man underneath his chin.… It was like when Father cut the throat of a pig. And then the other, I smashed open his skull. I can still feel his bones giving way.… I remember every blow I've landed, from the soldiers in Carvahall to the ones on the Burning Plains.… You know, when I close my eyes, sometimes I can't sleep because the light from the fire we set in the docks of Teirm is so bright in my mind. I think I'm going mad then."

Eragon found his hands gripping the staff with such force, his knuckles were white and tendons ridged the insides of his wrists. "Aye," he said. "At first it was just Urgals, then it was men and Urgals, and now this last battle.… I know what we do is right, but *right* doesn't mean *easy*. Because of who we are, the Varden expect Saphira and me to stand at the front of their army and to slaughter entire battalions of soldiers. We do. We have." His voice caught, and he fell silent.

Turmoil accompanies every great change, said Saphira to both of them. *And we have experienced more than our share, for we are agents of that very change. I am a dragon, and I do not regret the deaths of those who endanger us. Killing the guards in Narda may not be a deed worthy of celebration, but neither is it one to feel guilty about. You had to do it. When you must fight, Roran, does not the fierce joy of combat lend wings to your feet? Do you not know the pleasure of pitting yourself against a worthy opponent and the satisfaction of seeing the bodies of your enemies piled before you? Eragon, you have experienced this. Help me explain it to your cousin.*

Eragon stared at the coals. She had stated a truth that he was reluctant to acknowledge, lest by agreeing that one could enjoy violence, he would become a man he would despise. So he was mute. Across from him, Roran appeared similarly affected.

In a softer voice, Saphira said, *Do not be angry. I did not intend to upset you.… I forget sometimes that you are still unaccustomed to these emotions, while I have fought tooth and nail for survival since the day I hatched.*

Rising to his feet, Eragon walked to their saddlebags and retrieved the small earthenware jar Orik had given him before they parted, then poured two large mouthfuls of raspberry mead down his gullet. Warmth bloomed in his stomach. Grimacing, Eragon passed the jar to Roran, who also partook of the concoction.

Several drinks later, when the mead had succeeded in tempering his black mood, Eragon said, "We may have a problem tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

Eragon directed his words toward Saphira as well. "Remember how I said that we—Saphira and I—could easily handle the Ra'zac?"

"Aye."

And so we can, said Saphira.

"Well, I was thinking about it while we spied on Helgrind, and I'm not so sure anymore. There are almost an infinite number of ways to do something with magic. For example, if I want to light a fire, I could light it with heat gathered from the air or the ground; I could create a flame out of pure energy; I could summon a bolt of lightning; I could concentrate a raft of sunbeams into a single point; I could use friction; and so forth."

"So?"

"The problem is, even though I can devise numerous spells to perform this one action, *blocking* those spells might require but a single counterspell. If you prevent the action itself from taking place, then you don't have to tailor your counterspell to address the unique properties of each individual spell."

"I still don't understand what this has to do with tomorrow."

I do, said Saphira to both of them. She had immediately grasped the implications. *It means that, over the past century, Galbatorix—*

"—may have placed wards around the Ra'zac—"

—that will protect them against—

"—a whole range of spells. I probably won't—"

—be able to kill them with any—

"—of the words of death I was taught, nor any—"

—attacks that we can invent now or then. We may—

"—have to rely—"

"Stop!" exclaimed Roran. He gave a pained smile. "Stop, please. My head hurts when you do that."

Eragon paused with his mouth open; until that moment, he had been unaware that he and Saphira were speaking in turn. The knowledge pleased him: it signified that they had achieved new heights of cooperation and were acting together as a single entity—which made them far more powerful than either would be on their own. It also troubled him when he contemplated how such a partnership must, by its very nature, reduce the individuality of those involved.

He closed his mouth and chuckled. "Sorry. What I'm worried about is this: if Galbatorix has had the foresight to take certain precautions, then force of arms may be the only means by which we can slay the Ra'zac. If that's true—"

"I'll just be in your way tomorrow."

"Nonsense. You may be slower than the Ra'zac, but I have no doubt you'll give them cause to fear your weapon, Roran Stronghammer." The compliment seemed to please Roran. "The greatest danger for you is that the Ra'zac or the Lethrblaka will manage to separate you from

Saphira and me. The closer we stay together, the safer we'll all be. Saphira and I will try to keep the Ra'zac and Lethrblaka occupied, but some of them may slip past us. Four against two are only good odds if you're among the four."

To Saphira, Eragon said, *If I had a sword, I'm sure I could slay the Ra'zac by myself, but I don't know if I can beat two creatures who are quick as elves, using nothing but this staff.*

You were the one who insisted on carrying that dry twig instead of a proper weapon, she said. *Remember, I told you it might not suffice against enemies as dangerous as the Ra'zac.*

Eragon reluctantly conceded the point. *If my spells fail us, we will be far more vulnerable than I expected.... Tomorrow could end very badly indeed.*

Continuing the strand of conversation he had been privy to, Roran said, "This magic is a tricky business." The log he sat on gave a drawn-out groan as he rested his elbows on his knees.

"It is," Eragon agreed. "The hardest part is trying to anticipate every possible spell; I spend most of my time asking how can I protect myself if I'm attacked like *this* and would another magician expect me to do *that*."

"Could you make me as strong and fast as you are?"

Eragon considered the suggestion for several minutes before saying, "I don't see how. The energy needed to do that would have to come from somewhere. Saphira and I could give it to you, but then we would lose as much speed or strength as you gained." What he did not mention was that one could also extract energy from nearby plants and animals, albeit at a terrible price: namely, the deaths of the smaller beings whose life force you drew upon. The technique was a great secret, and Eragon felt that he should not reveal it lightly, if at all. Moreover, it would be of no use to Roran, as too little grew or lived on Helgrind to fuel a man's body.

"Then can you teach me to use magic?" When Eragon hesitated, Roran added, "Not now, of course. We don't have the time, and I don't expect one can become a magician overnight anyway. But in general, why not? You and I are cousins. We share much the same blood. And it would be a valuable skill to have."

"I don't know how someone who's not a Rider learns to use magic," confessed Eragon. "It's not something I studied." Glancing around, he plucked a flat, round stone from the ground and tossed it to Roran, who caught it backhand. "Here, try this: concentrate on lifting the rock a foot or so into the air and say, 'Stenr rïsa.' "

"Stenr rïsa?"

"Exactly."

Roran frowned at the stone resting on his palm in a pose so

reminiscent of Eragon's own training that Eragon could not help feeling a flash of nostalgia for the days he spent being drilled by Brom. Roran's eyebrows met, his lips tightened into a snarl, and he growled, "Stenr rïsa!" with enough intensity, Eragon half expected the stone to fly out of sight.

Nothing happened.

Scowling even harder, Roran repeated his command: "Stenr rïsa!"

The stone exhibited a profound lack of movement.

"Well," said Eragon, "keep trying. That's the only advice I can give you. But"—and here he raised a finger—"if you *should* happen to succeed, make sure you immediately come to me or, if I'm not around, another magician. You could kill yourself and others if you start experimenting with magic without understanding the rules. If nothing else, remember this: if you cast a spell that requires too much energy, you *will* die. Don't take on projects that are beyond your abilities, don't try to bring back the dead, and don't try to unmake anything."

Roran nodded, still looking at the stone.

"Magic aside, I just realized there's something far more important that you need to learn."

"Oh?"

"Yes, you need to be able to hide your thoughts from the Black Hand, Du Vrangr Gata, and others like them. You know a lot of things now that could harm the Varden. It's crucial, then, that you master this skill as soon as we return. Until you can defend yourself from spies, neither Nasuada nor I nor anyone else can trust you with information that might help our enemies."

"I understand. But why did you include Du Vrangr Gata in that list? They serve you and Nasuada."

"They do, but even among our allies there are more than a few people who would give their right arm"—he grimaced at the appropriateness of the phrase—"to ferret out our plans and secrets. And yours too, no less. You have become a *somebody*, Roran. Partly because of your deeds, and partly because we are related."

"I know. It is strange to be recognized by those you have not met."

"That it is." Several other, related observations leaped to the tip of Eragon's tongue, but he resisted the urge to pursue the topic; it was a subject to explore another time. "Now that you know what it feels like when one mind touches another, you might be able to learn to reach out and touch other minds in turn."

"I'm not sure that is an ability I want to have."

"No matter; you also might *not* be able to do it. Either way, before you spend time finding out, you should first devote yourself to the art of defense."

His cousin cocked an eyebrow. "How?"

“Choose something—a sound, an image, an emotion, anything—and let it swell within your mind until it blots out any other thoughts.”

“That’s all?”

“It’s not as easy as you think. Go on; take a stab at it. When you’re ready, let me know, and I’ll see how well you’ve done.”

Several moments passed. Then, at a flick of Roran’s fingers, Eragon launched his consciousness toward his cousin, eager to discover what he had accomplished.

The full strength of Eragon’s mental ray rammed into a wall composed of Roran’s memories of Katrina and was stopped. He could take no ground, find no entrance or purchase, nor undermine the impenetrable barrier that stood before him. At that instant, Roran’s entire identity was based upon his feelings for Katrina; his defenses exceeded any Eragon had previously encountered, for Roran’s mind was devoid of anything else Eragon could grasp hold of and use to gain control over his cousin.

Then Roran shifted his left leg and the wood underneath released a harsh squeal.

With that, the wall Eragon had hurled himself against fractured into dozens of pieces as a host of competing thoughts distracted Roran: *What was … Blast! Don’t pay attention to it; he’ll break through. Katrina, remember Katrina. Ignore Eragon. The night she agreed to marry me, the smell of the grass and her hair … Is that him? No! Focus! Don’t—*

Taking advantage of Roran’s confusion, Eragon rushed forward and, by the force of his will, immobilized Roran before he could shield himself again.

You understand the basic concept, said Eragon, then withdrew from Roran’s mind and said out loud, “but you have to learn to maintain your concentration even when you’re in the middle of a battle. You must learn to think without thinking … to empty yourself of all hopes and worries, save that one idea that is your armor. Something the elves taught me, which I have found helpful, is to recite a riddle or a piece of a poem or song. Having an action that you can repeat over and over again makes it much easier to keep your mind from straying.”

“I’ll work on it,” promised Roran.

In a quiet voice, Eragon said, “You really love her, don’t you?” It was more a statement of truth and wonder than a question—the answer being self-evident—and one he felt uncertain making. Romance was not a topic Eragon had broached with his cousin before, notwithstanding the many hours they had devoted in years past to debating the relative merits of the young women in and around Carvahall. “How did it happen?”

“I liked her. She liked me. What importance are the details?”

“Come now,” said Eragon. “I was too angry to ask before you left for Therinsford, and we have not seen each other again until just four days ago. I’m curious.”

The skin around Roran’s eyes pulled and wrinkled as he rubbed his temples. “There’s not much to tell. I’ve always been partial to her. It meant little before I was a man, but after my rites of passage, I began to wonder whom I would marry and whom I wanted to become the mother of my children. During one of our visits to Carvahall, I saw Katrina stop by the side of Loring’s house to pick a moss rose growing in the shade of the eaves. She smiled as she looked at the flower.… It was such a tender smile, and so happy, I decided right then that I wanted to make her smile like that again and again and that I wanted to look at that smile until the day I died.” Tears gleamed in Roran’s eyes, but they did not fall, and a second later, he blinked and they vanished. “I fear I have failed in that regard.”

After a respectful pause, Eragon said, “You courted her, then? Aside from using me to ferry compliments to Katrina, how else did you proceed?”

“You ask like one who seeks instruction.”

“I did not. You’re imagining—”

“Come now, yourself,” said Roran. “I know when you’re lying. You get that big foolish grin, and your ears turn red. The elves may have given you a new face, but that part of you hasn’t changed. What is it that exists between you and Arya?”

The strength of Roran’s perception disturbed Eragon. “Nothing! The moon has addled your brain.”

“Be honest. You dote upon her words as if each one were a diamond, and your gaze lingers upon her as if you were starving and she a grand feast arrayed an inch beyond your reach.”

A plume of dark gray smoke erupted from Saphira’s nostrils as she made a choking-like noise.

Eragon ignored her suppressed merriment and said, “Arya is an elf.”

“And very beautiful. Pointed ears and slanted eyes are small flaws when compared with her charms. You look like a cat yourself now.”

“Arya is over a hundred years old.”

That particular piece of information caught Roran by surprise; his eyebrows went up, and he said, “I find that hard to believe! She’s in the prime of her youth.”

“It’s true.”

“Well, be that as it may, these are reasons you give me, Eragon, and the heart rarely listens to reason. Do you fancy her or not?”

If he fancied her any more, Saphira said to both Eragon and Roran, *I’d be trying to kiss Arya myself*.

Saphira! Mortified, Eragon swatted her on the leg.

Roran was prudent enough not to rib Eragon further. “Then answer my original question and tell me how things stand between you and Arya. Have you spoken to her or her family about this? I have found it’s unwise to let such matters fester.”

“Aye,” said Eragon, and stared at the length of polished hawthorn. “I spoke with her.”

“To what end?” When Eragon did not immediately reply, Roran uttered a frustrated exclamation. “Getting answers out of you is harder than dragging Birka through the mud.” Eragon chuckled at the mention of Birka, one of their draft horses. “Saphira, will you solve this puzzle for me? Otherwise, I fear I’ll never get a full explanation.”

“To no end. No end at all. She’ll not have me.” Eragon spoke dispassionately, as if commenting on a stranger’s misfortune, but within him raged a torrent of hurt so deep and wild, he felt Saphira withdraw somewhat from him.

“I’m sorry,” said Roran.

Eragon forced a swallow past the lump in his throat, past the bruise that was his heart, and down to the knotted skein of his stomach. “It happens.”

“I know it may seem unlikely at the moment,” said Roran, “but I’m sure you will meet another woman who will make you forget this Arya. There are countless maids—and more than a few married women, I’d wager—who would be delighted to catch the eye of a Rider. You’ll have no trouble finding a wife among all the lovelies in Alagaësia.”

“And what would you have done if Katrina rejected your suit?”

The question struck Roran dumb; it was obvious he could not imagine how he might have reacted.

Eragon continued. “Contrary to what you, Arya, and everyone else seem to believe, I *am* aware that other eligible women exist in Alagaësia and that people have been known to fall in love more than once. No doubt, if I spent my days in the company of ladies from King Orrin’s court, I might indeed decide that I fancy one. However, my path is not so easy as that. Regardless of whether I can shift my affections to another—and the heart, as you observed, is a notoriously fickle beast—the question remains: should I?”

“Your tongue has grown as twisted as the roots of a fir tree,” said Roran. “Speak not in riddles.”

“Very well: what human woman can begin to understand who and what I am, or the extent of my powers? Who could share in my life? Few enough, and all of them magicians. And of that select group, or even of women in general, how many are immortal?”

Roran laughed, a rough, hearty bellow that rang loud in the gulch. “You might as well ask for the sun in your pocket or—” He stopped

and tensed as if he were about to spring forward and then became unnaturally still. “You cannot be.”

“I am.”

Roran struggled to find words. “Is it a result of your change in Ellesméra, or is it part of being a Rider?”

“Part of being a Rider.”

“That explains why Galbatorix hasn’t died.”

“Aye.”

The branch Roran had added to the fire burst asunder with a muted *pop* as the coals underneath heated the gnarled length of wood to the point where a small cache of water or sap that had somehow evaded the rays of the sun for untold decades exploded into steam.

“The idea is so … *vast*, it’s almost inconceivable,” said Roran. “Death is part of who we are. It guides us. It shapes us. It drives us to madness. Can you still be human if you have no mortal end?”

“I’m not invincible,” Eragon pointed out. “I can still be killed with a sword or an arrow. And I can still catch some incurable disease.”

“But if you avoid those dangers, you will live forever.”

“If I do, then yes. Saphira and I will *endure*.”

“It seems both a blessing and a curse.”

“Aye. I cannot in good conscience marry a woman who will age and die while I remain untouched by time; such an experience would be equally cruel for both of us. On top of that, I find the thought of taking one wife after another throughout the long centuries rather depressing.”

“Can you make someone immortal with magic?” asked Roran.

“You can darken white hair, you can smooth wrinkles and remove cataracts, and if you are willing to go to extraordinary lengths, you can give a sixty-year-old man the body he had at nineteen. However, the elves have never discovered a way to restore a person’s mind without destroying his or her memories. And who wants to erase their identity every so many decades in exchange for immortality? It would be a stranger, then, who lived on. An old brain in a young body isn’t the answer either, for even with the best of health, that which we humans are made of can only last for a century, perhaps a bit more. Nor can you just stop someone from aging. That causes a whole host of other problems.… Oh, elves and men have tried a thousand and one different ways to foil death, but none have proved successful.”

“In other words,” said Roran, “it’s safer for you to love Arya than to leave your heart free for the taking by a human woman.”

“Who else *can* I marry but an elf? Especially considering how I look now.” Eragon quelled the desire to reach up and finger the curved tips of his ears, a habit he had fallen into. “When I lived in Ellesméra, it was easy for me to accept how the dragons had changed my

appearance. After all, they gave me many gifts besides. Also, the elves were friendlier toward me after the Agaetí Blödhren. It was only when I rejoined the Varden that I realized how *different* I've become.… It bothers me too. I'm no longer just human, and I'm not quite an elf. I'm something else in between: a mix, a half-breed."

"Cheer up!" said Roran. "You may not have to worry about living forever. Galbatorix, Murtagh, the Ra'zac, or even one of the Empire's soldiers could put steel through us at any moment. A wise man would ignore the future and drink and carouse while he still has an opportunity to enjoy this world."

"I know what Father would say to that."

"And he'd give us a good hiding to boot."

They shared a laugh, and then the silence that so often intruded on their discussion asserted itself once again, a gap born of equal parts weariness, familiarity, and—conversely—the many differences that fate had created between those who had once gone about lives that were but variations on a single melody.

You should sleep, said Saphira to Eragon and Roran. *It's late, and we must rise early tomorrow*.

Eragon looked at the black vault of the sky, judging the hour by how far the stars had rotated. The night was older than he expected. "Sound advice," he said. "I just wish we had a few more days to rest before we storm Helgrind. The battle on the Burning Plains drained all of Saphira's strength and my own, and we have not fully recovered, what with flying here and the energy I transferred into the belt of Beloth the Wise these past two evenings. My limbs still ache, and I have more bruises than I can count. Look.…" Loosening the ties on the cuff of his left shirtsleeve, he pushed back the soft lámarae—a fabric the elves made by cross-weaving wool and nettle threads—revealing a rancid yellow streak where his shield had mashed against his forearm.

"Ha!" said Roran. "You call that tiny little mark a bruise? I hurt myself worse when I bumped my toe this morning. Here, I'll show you a bruise a man can be proud of." He unlaced his left boot, pulled it off, and rolled up the leg of his trousers to expose a black stripe as wide as Eragon's thumb that slanted across his quadriceps. "I caught the haft of a spear as a soldier was turning about."

"Impressive, but I have even better." Ducking out of his tunic, Eragon yanked his shirt free of his trousers and twisted to the side so that Roran could see the large blotch on his ribs and the similar discoloration on his belly. "Arrows," he explained. Then he uncovered his right forearm, revealing a bruise that matched the one on his other arm, given when he had deflected a sword with his bracer.

Now Roran bared a collection of irregular blue-green spots, each the size of a gold coin, that marched from his left armpit down to the base

of his spine, the result of having fallen upon a jumble of rocks and embossed armor.

Eragon inspected the lesions, then chuckled and said, “Pshaw, those are pinpricks! Did you get lost and run into a rosebush? I have one that puts those to shame.” He removed both his boots, then stood and dropped his trousers, so that his only garb was his shirt and woolen underpants. “Top that if you can,” he said, and pointed to the inside of his thighs. A riotous combination of colors mottled his skin, as if Eragon were an exotic fruit that was ripening in uneven patches from crabapple green to putrefied purple.

“Ouch,” said Roran. “What happened?”

“I jumped off Saphira when we were fighting Murtagh and Thorn in the air. That’s how I wounded Thorn. Saphira managed to dive under me and catch me before I hit the ground, but I landed on her back a bit harder than I wanted to.”

Roran winced and shivered at the same time. “Does it go all the way …” He trailed off, and made a vague gesture upward.

“Unfortunately.”

“I have to admit, that’s a remarkable bruise. You should be proud; it’s quite a feat to get injured in the manner you did and in that … *particular* … place.”

“I’m glad you appreciate it.”

“Well,” said Roran, “you may have the biggest bruise, but the Ra’zac dealt me a wound the likes of which you cannot match, since the dragons, as I understand, removed the scar from your back.” While he spoke, he divested himself of his shirt and moved farther into the pulsing light of the coals.

Eragon’s eyes widened before he caught himself and concealed his shock behind a more neutral expression. He berated himself for overreacting, thinking, *It can’t be that bad*, but the longer he studied Roran, the more dismayed he became.

A long, puckered scar, red and glossy, wrapped around Roran’s right shoulder, starting at his collarbone and ending just past the middle of his arm. It was obvious that the Ra’zac had severed part of the muscle and that the two ends had failed to heal back together, for an unsightly bulge deformed the skin below the scar, where the underlying fibers had recoiled upon themselves. Farther up, the skin had sunk inward, forming a depression half an inch deep.

“Roran! You should have shown this to me days ago. I had no idea the Ra’zac hurt you so badly.… Do you have any difficulty moving your arm?”

“Not to the side or back,” said Roran. He demonstrated. “But in the front, I can only lift my hand about as high as … midchest.” Grimacing, he lowered his arm. “Even that’s a struggle; I have to keep

my thumb level, or else my arm goes dead. The best way I've found is to swing my arm around from behind and let it land on whatever I'm trying to grasp. I skinned my knuckles a few times before I mastered the trick."

Eragon twisted the staff between his hands. *Should I?* he asked Saphira.

I think you must.

We may regret it tomorrow.

You will have more cause for regret if Roran dies because he could not wield his hammer when the occasion demanded. If you draw upon the resources around us, you can avoid tiring yourself further.

You know I hate doing that. Even talking about it sickens me.

Our lives are more important than an ant's, Saphira countered.

Not to an ant.

And are you an ant? Don't be glib, Eragon; it ill becomes you.

With a sigh, Eragon put down the staff and beckoned to Roran. "Here, I'll heal that for you."

"You can do that?"

"Obviously."

A momentary surge of excitement brightened Roran's face, but then he hesitated and looked troubled. "Now? Is that wise?"

"As Saphira said, better I tend to you while I have the chance, lest your injury cost you your life or endanger the rest of us." Roran drew near, and Eragon placed his right hand over the red scar while, at the same time, expanding his consciousness to encompass the trees and the plants and the animals that populated the gulch, save those he feared were too weak to survive his spell.

Then Eragon began to chant in the ancient language. The incantation he recited was long and complex. Repairing such a wound went far beyond growing new skin and was a difficult matter at best. In this, Eragon relied upon the curative formulas that he had studied in Ellesméra and had devoted so many weeks to memorizing.

The silvery mark on Eragon's palm, the gedwëy ignasia, glowed white-hot as he released the magic. A second later, he uttered an involuntary groan as he died three times, once each with two small birds roosting in a nearby juniper and also with a snake hidden among the rocks. Across from him, Roran threw back his head and bared his teeth in a soundless howl as his shoulder muscle jumped and writhed beneath the surface of his shifting skin.

Then it was over.

Eragon inhaled a shuddering breath and rested his head in his hands, taking advantage of the concealment they provided to wipe away his tears before he examined the results of his labor. He saw Roran shrug several times and then stretch and windmill his arms.

Roran's shoulder was large and round, the result of years spent digging holes for fence posts, hauling rocks, and pitching hay. Despite himself, a needle of envy pricked Eragon. He might be stronger, but he had never been as muscular as his cousin.

Roran grinned. "It's as good as ever! Better, maybe. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"It was the strangest thing. I actually felt as if I was going to crawl out of my hide. And it itched something terrible; I could barely keep from ripping—"

"Get me some bread from your saddlebag, would you? I'm hungry."

"We just had dinner."

"I need a bite to eat after using magic like that." Eragon sniffed and then pulled out his kerchief and wiped his nose. He sniffed again. What he had said was not quite true. It was the toll his spell had exacted on the wildlife that disturbed him, not the magic itself, and he feared he might throw up unless he had something to settle his stomach.

"You're not ill, are you?" asked Roran.

"No." With the memory of the deaths he had caused still heavy in his mind, Eragon reached for the jar of mead by his side, hoping to fend off a tide of morbid thoughts.

Something very large, heavy, and sharp struck his hand and pinned it against the ground. He winced and looked over to see the tip of one of Saphira's ivory claws digging into his flesh. Her thick eyelid went *snick* as it flashed across the great big glittering iris she fixed upon him. After a long moment, she lifted the claw, as a person would a finger, and Eragon withdrew his hand. He gulped and gripped the hawthorn staff once more, striving to ignore the mead and to concentrate upon what was immediate and tangible, instead of wallowing in dismal introspection.

Roran removed a ragged half of sourdough bread from his bags, then paused and, with a hint of a smile, said, "Wouldn't you rather have some venison? I didn't finish all of mine." He held out the makeshift spit of seared juniper wood, on which were impaled three clumps of golden brown meat. To Eragon's sensitive nose, the odor that wafted toward him was thick and pungent and reminded him of nights he had spent in the Spine and of long winter dinners where he, Roran, and Garrow had gathered around their stove and enjoyed each other's company while a blizzard howled outside. His mouth watered. "It's still warm," said Roran, and waved the venison in front of Eragon.

With an effort of will, Eragon shook his head. "Just give me the bread."

"Are you sure? It's perfect: not too tough, not too tender, and

cooked with the perfect amount of seasoning. It's so juicy, when you take a bite, it's as if you swallowed a mouthful of Elain's best stew."

"No, I can't."

"You know you'll like it."

"Roran, stop teasing me and hand over that bread!"

"Ah, now see, you look better already. Maybe what you need isn't bread but someone to get your hackles up, eh?"

Eragon glowered at him, then, faster than the eye could see, snatched the bread away from Roran.

That seemed to amuse Roran even more. As Eragon tore at the loaf, he said, "I don't know how you can survive on nothing but fruit, bread, and vegetables. A man has to eat meat if he wants to keep his strength up. Don't you miss it?"

"More than you can imagine."

"Then why do you insist on torturing yourself like this? Every creature in this world has to eat other living beings—even if they are only plants—in order to survive. That is how we are made. Why attempt to defy the natural order of things?"

I said much the same in Ellesméra, observed Saphira, *but he did not listen to me*.

Eragon shrugged. "We already had this discussion. You do what you want. I won't tell you or anyone else how to live. However, I cannot in good conscience eat a beast whose thoughts and feelings I've shared."

The tip of Saphira's tail twitched, and her scales clinked against a worn dome of rock that protruded from the ground. *Oh, he's hopeless*. Lifting and extending her neck, Saphira nipped the venison, spit and all, from Roran's other hand. The wood cracked between her serrated teeth as she bit down, and then it and the meat vanished into the fiery depths of her belly. *Mmm. You did not exaggerate*, she said to Roran. *What a sweet and succulent morsel: so soft, so salty, so deliciously delectable, it makes me want to wiggle with delight. You should cook for me more often, Roran Stronghammer. Only next time, I think you should prepare several deer at once. Otherwise, I won't get a proper meal*.

Roran hesitated, as if unable to decide whether her request was serious and, if so, how he could politely extricate himself from such an unlooked-for and rather onerous obligation. He cast a pleading glance at Eragon, who burst out laughing, both at Roran's expression and at his predicament.

The rise and fall of Saphira's sonorous laugh joined with Eragon's and reverberated throughout the hollow. Her teeth gleamed madder red in the light from the embers.

An hour after the three of them had retired, Eragon was lying on his back alongside Saphira, muffled in layers of blankets against the night

cold. All was still and quiet. It seemed as if a magician had placed an enchantment upon the earth and that everything in the world was bound in an eternal sleep and would remain frozen and unchanging forevermore underneath the watchful gaze of the twinkling stars.

Without moving, Eragon whispered in his mind: *Saphira?*

Yes, little one?

What if I'm right and he's in Helgrind? I don't know what I should do then.… Tell me what I should do.

I cannot, little one. This is a decision you have to make by yourself. The ways of men are not the ways of dragons. I would tear off his head and feast on his body, but that would be wrong for you, I think.

Will you stand by me, whatever I decide?

Always, little one. Now rest. All will be well.

Comforted, Eragon gazed into the void between the stars and slowed his breathing as he drifted into the trance that had replaced sleep for him. He remained conscious of his surroundings, but against the backdrop of the white constellations, the figures of his waking dreams strode forth and performed confused and shadowy plays, as was their wont.

ASSAULT ON HELGRIND

Daybreak was fifteen minutes away when Eragon rolled upright. He snapped his fingers twice to wake Roran and then scooped up his blankets and knotted them into a tight bundle.

Pushing himself off the ground, Roran did likewise with his own bedding.

They looked at each other and shivered with excitement.

"If I die," said Roran, "you will see to Katrina?"

"I shall."

"Tell her then that I went into battle with joy in my heart and her name upon my lips."

"I shall."

Eragon muttered a quick line in the ancient language. The drop in his strength that followed was almost imperceptible. "There. That will filter the air in front of us and protect us from the paralyzing effects of the Ra'zac's breath."

From his bags, Eragon removed his shirt of mail and unwrapped the length of sackcloth he had stored it in. Blood from the fight on the Burning Plains still encrusted the once-shining corselet, and the combination of dried gore, sweat, and neglect had allowed blotches of rust to creep across the rings. The mail was, however, free of tears, as Eragon had repaired them before they had departed for the Empire.

Eragon donned the leather-backed shirt, wrinkling his nose at the stench of death and desperation that clung to it, then attached chased bracers to his forearms and greaves to his shins. Upon his head he placed a padded arming cap, a mail coif, and a plain steel helm. He had lost his own helm—the one he had worn in Farthen Dûr and that the dwarves had engraved with the crest of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum—along with his shield during the aerial duel between Saphira and Thorn. On his hands went mailed gauntlets.

Roran outfitted himself in a similar manner, although he augmented his armor with a wooden shield. A band of soft iron wrapped around the lip of the shield, the better to catch and hold an enemy's sword. No shield encumbered Eragon's left arm; the hawthorn staff required two hands to wield properly.

Across his back, Eragon slung the quiver given to him by Queen Islanzadí. In addition to twenty heavy oak arrows fletched with gray goose feathers, the quiver contained the bow with silver fittings that the queen had sung out of a yew tree for him. The bow was already strung and ready for use.

Saphira kneaded the soil beneath her feet. *Let us be off!*

Leaving their bags and supplies hanging from the branch of a juniper tree, Eragon and Roran clambered onto Saphira's back. They wasted no time saddling her; she had worn her tack through the night. The molded leather was warm, almost hot, underneath Eragon. He clutched the neck spike in front of him—to steady himself during sudden changes in direction—while Roran hooked one thick arm around Eragon's waist and brandished his hammer with the other.

A piece of shale cracked under Saphira's weight as she settled into a low crouch and, in a single giddy bound, leaped up to the rim of the gulch, where she balanced for a moment before unfolding her massive wings. The thin membranes thrummed as Saphira raised them toward the sky. Vertical, they looked like two translucent blue sails.

"Not so tight," grunted Eragon.

"Sorry," said Roran. He loosened his embrace.

Further speech became impossible as Saphira jumped again. When she reached the pinnacle, she brought her wings down with a mighty *whoosh*, driving the three of them even higher. With each subsequent flap, they climbed closer to the flat, narrow clouds.

As Saphira angled toward Helgrind, Eragon glanced to his left and discovered that he could see a broad swath of Leona Lake some miles distant. A thick layer of mist, gray and ghostly in the predawn glow, emanated from the water, as if witchfire burned upon the surface of the liquid. Eragon tried, but even with his hawklike vision, he could not make out the far shore, nor the southern reaches of the Spine beyond, which he regretted. It had been too long since he had laid eyes upon the mountain range of his childhood.

To the north stood Dras-Leona, a huge, rambling mass that appeared as a blocky silhouette against the wall of mist that edged its western flank. The one building Eragon could identify was the cathedral where the Ra'zac had attacked him; its flanged spire loomed above the rest of the city, like a barbed spearhead.

And somewhere in the landscape that rushed past below, Eragon knew, were the remnants of the campsite where the Ra'zac had mortally wounded Brom. He allowed all of his anger and grief over the events of that day—as well as Garrow's murder and the destruction of their farm—to surge forth and give him the courage, nay, the *desire*, to face the Ra'zac in combat.

Eragon, said Saphira. *Today we need not guard our minds and keep our thoughts secret from one another, do we?*

Not unless another magician should appear.

A fan of golden light flared into existence as the top of the sun crested the horizon. In an instant, the full spectrum of colors enlivened the previously drab world: the mist glowed white, the water

became a rich blue, the daubed-mud wall that encircled the center of Dras-Leona revealed its dingy yellow sides, the trees cloaked themselves in every shade of green, and the soil blushed red and orange. Helgrind, however, remained as it always was—black.

The mountain of stone rapidly grew larger as they approached. Even from the air, it was intimidating.

Diving toward the base of Helgrind, Saphira tilted so far to her left, Eragon and Roran would have fallen if they had not already strapped their legs to the saddle. Then she whipped around the apron of scree and over the altar where the priests of Helgrind observed their ceremonies. The lip of Eragon's helm caught the wind from her passage and produced a howl that almost deafened him.

"Well?" shouted Roran. He could not see in front of them.

"The slaves are gone!"

A great weight seemed to press Eragon into his seat as Saphira pulled out of her dive and spiraled up around Helgrind, searching for an entrance to the Ra'zac's hideout.

Not even a hole big enough for a woodrat, she declared. She slowed and hung in place before a ridge that connected the third lowest of the four peaks to the prominence above. The jagged buttress magnified the boom produced by each stroke of her wings until it was as loud as a thunderclap. Eragon's eyes watered as the air pulsed against his skin.

A web of white veins adorned the backside of the crags and pillars, where hoarfrost had collected in the cracks that furrowed the rock. Nothing else disturbed the gloom of Helgrind's inky, windswept ramparts. No trees grew among the slanting stones, nor shrubs, grass, or lichen, nor did eagles dare nest upon the tower's broken ledges. True to its name, Helgrind was a place of death, and stood cloaked in the razor-sharp, sawtooth folds of its scarps and clefts like a bony specter risen to haunt the earth.

Casting his mind outward, Eragon confirmed the presence of the two people whom he had discovered imprisoned within Helgrind the previous day, but he felt nothing of the slaves, and to his concern, he still could not locate the Ra'zac or the Lethrblaka. *If they aren't here, then where?* he wondered. Searching again, he noticed something that had eluded him before: a single flower, a gentian, blooming not fifty feet in front of them, where, by all rights, there ought to be solid rock. *How does it get enough light to live?*

Saphira answered his question by perching on a crumbling spur several feet to the right. As she did, she lost her balance for a moment and flared her wings to steady herself. Instead of brushing against the bulk of Helgrind, the tip of her right wing dipped into the rock and then back out again.

Saphira, did you see that!

I did.

Leaning forward, Saphira pushed the tip of her snout toward the sheer rock, paused an inch or two away—as if waiting for a trap to spring—then continued her advance. Scale by scale, Saphira's head slid into Helgrind, until all that was visible of her to Eragon was a neck, torso, and wings.

It's an illusion! exclaimed Saphira.

With a surge of her mighty thews, she abandoned the spur and flung the rest of her body after her head. It required every bit of Eragon's self-control not to cover his face in a desperate bid to protect himself as the crag rushed toward him.

An instant later, he found himself looking at a broad, vaulted cave suffused with the warm glow of morning. Saphira's scales refracted the light, casting thousands of shifting blue flecks across the rock. Twisting around, Eragon saw no wall behind them, only the mouth of the cave and a sweeping view of the landscape beyond.

Eragon grimaced. It had never occurred to him that Galbatorix might have hidden the Ra'zac's lair with magic. *Idiot! I have to do better*, he thought. Underestimating the king was a sure way to get them all killed.

Roran swore and said, "Warn me before you do something like that again."

Hunching forward, Eragon began to unbuckle his legs from the saddle as he studied their surroundings, alert for danger.

The opening to the cave was an irregular oval, perhaps fifty feet high and sixty feet wide. From there the chamber expanded to twice that size before ending a good bowshot away in a pile of thick stone slabs that leaned against each other in a confusion of uncertain angles. A mat of scratches defaced the floor, evidence of the many times the Lethrblaka had taken off from, landed on, and walked about its surface. Like mysterious keyholes, five low tunnels pierced the sides of the cave, as did a lancet passageway large enough to accommodate Saphira. Eragon examined the tunnels carefully, but they were pitch-black and appeared vacant, a fact he confirmed with quick thrusts of his mind. Strange, disjointed murmurs echoed from within Helgrind's innards, suggesting unknown *things* scurrying about in the dark, and endlessly dripping water. Adding to the chorus of whispers was the steady rise and fall of Saphira's breathing, which was over-loud in the confines of the bare chamber.

The most distinctive feature of the cavern, however, was the mixture of odors that pervaded it. The smell of cold stone dominated, but underneath Eragon discerned whiffs of damp and mold and something far worse: the sickly sweet fetor of rotting meat.

Undoing the last few straps, Eragon swung his right leg over Saphira's spine, so he was sitting sidesaddle, and prepared to jump off her back. Roran did the same on the opposite side.

Before he released his hold, Eragon heard, amid the many rustlings that teased his ear, a score of simultaneous clicks, as if someone had struck the rock with a collection of hammers. The sound repeated itself a half second later.

He looked in the direction of the noise, as did Saphira.

A huge, twisted shape hurtled out of the lancet passageway. Eyes black, bulging, rimless. A beak seven feet long. Batlike wings. The torso naked, hairless, rippling with muscle. Claws like iron spikes.

Saphira lurched as she tried to evade the Lethrblaka, but to no avail. The creature crashed into her right side with what felt to Eragon like the strength and fury of an avalanche.

What exactly happened next, he knew not, for the impact sent him tumbling through space without so much as a half-formed thought in his jumbled brain. His blind flight ended as abruptly as it began when something hard and flat rammed against the back of him, and he dropped to the floor, banging his head a second time.

That last collision drove the remaining air clean out of Eragon's lungs. Stunned, he lay curled on his side, gasping and struggling to regain a semblance of control over his unresponsive limbs.

Eragon! cried Saphira.

The concern in her voice fueled Eragon's efforts as nothing else could. As life returned to his arms and legs, he reached out and grasped his staff from where it had fallen beside him. He planted the spike mounted on the staff's lower end into a nearby crack and pulled himself up the hawthorn rod and onto his feet. He swayed. A swarm of crimson sparks danced before him.

The situation was so confusing, he hardly knew where to look first.

Saphira and the Lethrblaka rolled across the cave, kicking and clawing and snapping at each other with enough force to gouge the rock beneath them. The clamor of their fight must have been unimaginably loud, but to Eragon they grappled in silence; his ears did not work. Still, he felt the vibrations through the soles of his feet as the colossal beasts thrashed from side to side, threatening to crush anyone who came near them.

A torrent of blue fire erupted from between Saphira's jaws and bathed the left side of the Lethrblaka's head in a ravening inferno hot enough to melt steel. The flames curved around the Lethrblaka without harming it. Undeterred, the monster pecked at Saphira's neck, forcing her to stop and defend herself.

Fast as an arrow loosed from a bow, the second Lethrblaka darted out of the lancet passageway, pounced upon Saphira's flank, and,

opening its narrow beak, uttered a horrible, withering shriek that made Eragon's scalp prickle and a cold lump of dread form in his gut. He snarled in discomfort; *that* he could hear.

The smell now, with both Lethrblaka present, resembled the sort of overpowering stench one would get from tossing a half-dozen pounds of rancid meat into a barrel of sewage and allowing the mixture to ferment for a week in summer.

Eragon clamped his mouth shut as his gorge rose and turned his attention elsewhere to keep from retching.

A few paces away, Roran lay crumpled against the side of the cave, where he too had landed. Even as Eragon watched, his cousin lifted an arm and pushed himself onto all fours and then to his feet. His eyes were glazed, and he tottered as if drunk.

Behind Roran, the two Ra'zac emerged from a nearby tunnel. They wielded long, pale blades of an ancient design in their malformed hands. Unlike their parents, the Ra'zac were roughly the same size and shape as humans. An ebony exoskeleton encased them from top to bottom, although little of it showed, for even in Helgrind, the Ra'zac wore dark robes and cloaks.

They advanced with startling swiftness, their movements sharp and jerky like those of an insect.

And yet, Eragon still could not sense them or the Lethrblaka. *Are they an illusion too?* he wondered. But no, that was nonsense; the flesh Saphira tore at with her talons was real enough. Another explanation occurred to him: perhaps it was *impossible* to detect their presence. Perhaps the Ra'zac could conceal themselves from the minds of humans, their prey, just as spiders conceal themselves from flies. If so, then Eragon finally understood why the Ra'zac had been so successful hunting magicians and Riders for Galbatorix when they themselves could not use magic.

Blast! Eragon would have indulged in more colorful oaths, but it was time for action, not cursing their bad luck. Brom had claimed the Ra'zac were no match for him in broad daylight, and while that might have been true—given that Brom had had decades to invent spells to use against the Ra'zac—Eragon knew that, without the advantage of surprise, he, Saphira, and Roran would be hard-pressed to escape with their lives, much less rescue Katrina.

Raising his right hand above his head, Eragon cried, *"Brisingr!"* and threw a roaring fireball toward the Ra'zac. They dodged, and the fireball splashed against the rock floor, guttered for a moment, and then winked out of existence. The spell was silly and childish and could cause no conceivable damage if Galbatorix had protected the Ra'zac like the Lethrblaka. Still, Eragon found the attack immensely satisfying. It also distracted the Ra'zac long enough for Eragon to dash

over to Roran and press his back against his cousin's.

"Hold them off for a minute," he shouted, hoping Roran would hear. Whether he did or not, Roran grasped Eragon's meaning, for he covered himself with his shield and lifted his hammer in preparation to fight.

The amount of force contained within each of the Lethrblaka's terrible blows had already depleted the wards against physical danger that Eragon had placed around Saphira. Without them, the Lethrblaka had inflicted several rows of scratches—long but shallow—along her thighs and had managed to stab her three times with their beaks; those wounds were short but deep and caused her a great deal of pain.

In return, Saphira had laid open the ribs of one Lethrblaka and had bitten off the last three feet of the other's tail. The Lethrblaka's blood, to Eragon's astonishment, was a metallic blue-green, not unlike the verdigris that forms on aged copper.

At the moment, the Lethrblaka had withdrawn from Saphira and were circling her, lunging now and then in order to keep her at bay while they waited for her to tire or until they could kill her with a stab from one of their beaks.

Saphira was better suited than the Lethrblaka to open combat by virtue of her scales—which were harder and tougher than the Lethrblaka's gray hide—and her teeth—which were far more lethal in close quarters than the Lethrblaka's beaks—but despite all that, she had difficulty fending off both creatures at once, especially since the ceiling prevented her from leaping and flying about and otherwise outmaneuvering her foes. Eragon feared that even if she prevailed, the Lethrblaka would maim her before she slew them.

Taking a quick breath, Eragon cast a single spell that contained every one of the twelve techniques of killing that Oromis had taught him. He was careful to phrase the incantation as a series of processes, so that if Galbatorix's wards foiled him, he could sever the flow of magic. Otherwise, the spell might consume his strength until he died.

It was well he took the precaution. Upon release of the spell, Eragon quickly became aware that the magic was having no effect upon the Lethrblaka, and he abandoned the assault. He had not expected to succeed with the traditional death-words, but he had to try, on the slight chance Galbatorix might have been careless or ignorant when he had placed wards upon the Lethrblaka and their spawn.

Behind him, Roran shouted, "Yah!" An instant later, a sword thudded against his shield, followed by the tinkle of rippling mail and the bell-like peal of a second sword bouncing off Roran's helm.

Eragon realized that his hearing must be improving.

The Ra'zac struck again and again, but each time their weapons glanced off Roran's armor or missed his face and limbs by a hairs-

breadth, no matter how fast they swung their blades. Roran was too slow to retaliate, but neither could the Ra'zac harm him. They hissed with frustration and spewed a continuous stream of invectives, which seemed all the more foul because of how the creatures' hard, clacking jaws mangled the language.

Eragon smiled. The cocoon of charms he had spun around Roran had done its job. He hoped the invisible net of energy would hold until he could find a way to halt the Lethrblaka.

Everything shivered and went gray around Eragon as the two Lethrblaka shrieked in unison. For a moment, his resolve deserted him, leaving him unable to move, then he rallied and shook himself as a dog might, casting off their fell influence. The sound reminded him of nothing so much as a pair of children screaming in pain.

Then Eragon began to chant as fast as he could without mispronouncing the ancient language. Each sentence he uttered, and they were legion, contained the potential to deliver instant death, and each death was unique among its fellows. As he recited his improvised soliloquy, Saphira received another cut upon her left flank. In return, she broke the wing of her assailant, slashing the thin flight membrane into ribbons with her claws. A number of heavy impacts transmitted themselves from Roran's back to Eragon's as the Ra'zac hacked and stabbed in a lightning-quick frenzy. The largest of the two Ra'zac began to edge around Roran, in order to attack Eragon directly.

And then, amid the din of steel against steel, and steel against wood, and claws against stone, there came the scrape of a sword sliding through mail, followed by a wet crunch. Roran yelled, and Eragon felt blood splash across the calf of his right leg.

Out of the corner of one eye, Eragon watched as a humpbacked figure leaped toward him, extending its leaf-bladed sword so as to impale him. The world seemed to contract around the thin, narrow point; the tip glittered like a shard of crystal, each scratch a thread of quicksilver in the bright light of dawn.

He only had time for one more spell before he would have to devote himself to stopping the Ra'zac from inserting the sword between his liver and kidneys. In desperation, he gave up trying to directly harm the Lethrblaka and instead cried, "Garjzla, letta!"

It was a crude spell, constructed in haste and poorly worded, yet it worked. The bulbous eyes of the Lethrblaka with the broken wing became a matched set of mirrors, each a perfect hemisphere, as Eragon's magic reflected the light that otherwise would have entered the Lethrblaka's pupils. Blind, the creature stumbled and flailed at the air in a vain attempt to hit Saphira.

Eragon spun the hawthorn staff in his hands and knocked aside the Ra'zac's sword when it was less than an inch from his ribs. The Ra'zac

landed in front of him and jutted out its neck. Eragon recoiled as a short, thick beak appeared from within the depths of its hood. The chitinous appendage snapped shut just short of his right eye. In a rather detached way, Eragon noticed that the Ra'zac's tongue was barbed and purple and writhed like a headless snake.

Bringing his hands together at the center of the staff, Eragon drove his arms forward, striking the Ra'zac across its hollow chest and throwing the monster back several yards. It fell upon its hands and knees. Eragon pivoted around Roran, whose left side was slick with blood, and parried the sword of the other Ra'zac. He feinted, beat the Ra'zac's blade, and, when the Ra'zac stabbed at his throat, whirled the other half of the staff across his body and deflected the thrust. Without pausing, Eragon lunged forward and planted the wooden end of the staff in the Ra'zac's abdomen.

If Eragon had been wielding Zar'roc, he would have killed the Ra'zac then and there. As it was, something cracked inside the Ra'zac, and the creature went rolling across the cave for a dozen or more paces. It immediately popped up again, leaving a smear of blue gore on the uneven rock.

I need a sword, thought Eragon.

He widened his stance as the two Ra'zac converged upon him; he had no choice but to hold his ground and face their combined onslaught, for he was all that stood between those hook-clawed carrion crows and Roran. He began to mouth the same spell that had proved itself against the Lethrblaka, but the Ra'zac executed high and low slashes before he could utter a syllable.

The swords rebounded off the hawthorn with a dull *bonk*. They did not dent or otherwise mar the enchanted wood.

Left, right, up, down. Eragon did not think; he acted and reacted as he exchanged a flurry of blows with the Ra'zac. The staff was ideal for fighting multiple opponents, as he could strike and block with both ends, and often simultaneously. That ability served him well now. He panted, each breath short and quick. Sweat dripped from his brow and gathered at the corners of his eyes, and a layer greased his back and the undersides of his arms. The red haze of battle dimmed his vision and throbbed in response to the convulsions of his heart.

He never felt so alive, or afraid, as he did when fighting.

Eragon's own wards were scant. Since he had lavished the bulk of his attention on Saphira and Roran, Eragon's magical defenses soon failed, and the smaller Ra'zac wounded him on the outside of his left knee. The injury was not life-threatening, but it was still serious, for his left leg would no longer support his full weight.

Gripping the spike at the bottom, Eragon swung the staff like a club and bashed one Ra'zac upside the head. The Ra'zac collapsed, but

whether it was dead or only unconscious, Eragon could not tell. Advancing upon the remaining Ra'zac, he battered the creature's arms and shoulders and, with a sudden twist, knocked the sword out of its hand.

Before Eragon could finish off the Ra'zac, the blinded, broken-winged Lethrblaka flew the width of the cave and slammed against the far wall, knocking loose a shower of stone flakes from the ceiling. The sight and sound were so colossal, they caused Eragon, Roran, and the Ra'zac to flinch and turn, simply out of instinct.

Jumping after the crippled Lethrblaka, which she had just kicked, Saphira sank her teeth into the back of the creature's sinewy neck. The Lethrblaka thrashed in one final effort to free itself, and then Saphira whipped her head from side to side and broke its spine. Rising from her bloody kill, Saphira filled the cave with a savage roar of victory.

The remaining Lethrblaka did not hesitate. Tackling Saphira, it dug its claws underneath the edges of her scales and pulled her into an uncontrolled tumble. Together they rolled to the lip of the cave, teetered for a half second, and then dropped out of sight, battling the whole way. It was a clever tactic, for it carried the Lethrblaka out of the range of Eragon's senses, and that which he could not sense, he had difficulty casting a spell against.

Saphira! cried Eragon.

Tend to yourself. This one won't escape me.

With a start, Eragon whirled around just in time to see the two Ra'zac vanish into the depths of the nearest tunnel, the smaller supporting the larger. Closing his eyes, Eragon located the minds of the prisoners in Helgrind, muttered a burst of the ancient language, then said to Roran, "I sealed off Katrina's cell so the Ra'zac can't use her as a hostage. Only you and I can open the door now."

"Good," said Roran through clenched teeth. "Can you do something about this?" He jerked his chin toward the spot he had clamped his right hand over. Blood welled between his fingers. Eragon probed the wound. As soon as he touched it, Roran flinched and recoiled.

"You're lucky," said Eragon. "The sword hit a rib." Placing one hand on the injury and the other on the twelve diamonds concealed inside the belt of Beloth the Wise strapped around his waist, Eragon drew upon the power he had stored within the gems. "Waíse heill!" A ripple traversed Roran's side as the magic knit his skin and muscle back together again.

Then Eragon healed his own wound: the gash on his left knee.

Finished, he straightened and glanced in the direction that Saphira had gone. His connection with her was fading as she chased the Lethrblaka toward Leona Lake. He yearned to help her but knew that, for the time being, she would have to fend for herself.

"Hurry," said Roran. "They're getting away!"

"Right."

Hefting his staff, Eragon approached the unlit tunnel and flicked his gaze from one stone protrusion to another, expecting the Ra'zac to spring out from behind one of them. He moved slowly in order that his footsteps would not echo in the winding shaft. When he happened to touch a rock to steady himself, he found it coated in slime.

After a score of yards, several folds and twists in the passageway hid the main cavern and plunged them into a gloom so profound, even Eragon found it impossible to see.

"Maybe you're different, but I can't fight in the dark," whispered Roran.

"If I make a light, the Ra'zac won't come near us, not when I now know a spell that works on them. They'll just hide until we leave. We have to kill them while we have the chance."

"What am I supposed to do? I'm more likely to run into a wall and break my nose than I am to find those two beetles.… They could sneak around behind us and stab us in the back."

"Shh.… Hold on to my belt, follow me, and be ready to duck."

Eragon could not see, but he could still hear, smell, touch, and taste, and those faculties were sensitive enough that he had a fair idea of what lay nearby. The greatest danger was that the Ra'zac would attack from a distance, perhaps with a bow, but he trusted that his reflexes were sharp enough to save Roran and himself from an oncoming missile.

A current of air tickled Eragon's skin, then paused and reversed itself as pressure from the outside waxed and waned. The cycle repeated itself at inconsistent intervals, creating invisible eddies that brushed against him like fountains of roiling water.

His breathing, and Roran's, was loud and ragged compared with the odd assortment of sounds that propagated through the tunnel. Above the gusts of their respiration, Eragon caught the *tink, clink, clatter* of a stone falling somewhere in the tangle of branching tubes and the steady *doink … doink … doink* of condensed droplets striking the drumlike surface of a subterranean pool. He also heard the grind of pea-sized gravel crushed underneath the soles of his boots. A long, eerie moan wavered somewhere far ahead of them.

Of smells, none were new: sweat, blood, damp, and mold.

Step by step, Eragon led the way as they burrowed farther into the bowels of Helgrind. The tunnel slanted downward and often split or turned, so that Eragon would have soon been lost if he had not been able to use Katrina's mind as a reference point. The various knobby holes were low and cramped. Once, when Eragon bumped his head against the ceiling, a sudden flare of claustrophobia unnerved him.

I'm back, Saphira announced just as Eragon put his foot on a rugged step hewn out of the rock below him. He paused. She had escaped additional injury, which relieved him.

And the Lethrblaka?

Floating belly-up in Leona Lake. I'm afraid that some fishermen saw our battle. They were rowing toward Dras-Leona when I last saw them.

Well, it can't be helped. See what you can find in the tunnel the Lethrblaka came out of. And keep an eye out for the Ra'zac. They may try to slip past us and escape Helgrind through the entrance we used.

They probably have a bolt-hole at ground level.

Probably, but I don't think they'll run quite yet.

After what seemed like an hour trapped in the darkness—though Eragon knew it could not have been more than ten or fifteen minutes—and after descending more than a hundred feet through Helgrind, Eragon stopped on a level patch of stone. Transmitting his thoughts to Roran, he said, *Katrina's cell is about fifty feet in front of us, on the right.*

We can't risk letting her out until the Ra'zac are dead or gone.

What if they won't reveal themselves until we do let her out? For some reason, I can't sense them. They could hide from me until doomsday in here. So do we wait for who knows how long, or do we free Katrina while we still have the chance? I can place some wards around her that should protect her from most attacks.

Roran was quiet for a second. *Let's free her, then.*

They began to move forward again, feeling their way along the squat corridor with its rough, unfinished floor. Eragon had to devote most of his attention to his footing in order to maintain his balance.

As a result, he almost missed the swish of cloth sliding over cloth and then the faint *twang* that emanated from off to his right.

He recoiled against the wall, shoving Roran back. At the same time, something augered past his face, carving a groove of flesh from his right cheek. The thin trench burned as if cauterized.

"Kveykva!" shouted Eragon.

Red light, bright as the midday sun, flared into existence. It had no source, and thus it illuminated every surface evenly and without shadows, giving things a curious flat appearance. The sudden blaze dazzled Eragon, but it did more than that to the lone Ra'zac in front of him; the creature dropped its bow, covered its hooded face, and screamed high and shrill. A similar screech told Eragon that the second Ra'zac was behind them.

Roran!

Eragon pivoted just in time to see Roran charge the other Ra'zac, hammer held high. The disoriented monster stumbled backward but was too slow. The hammer fell. "For my father!" shouted Roran. He struck again. "For our home!" The Ra'zac was already dead, but Roran

lifted the hammer once more. “For Carvahall!” His final blow shattered the Ra’zac’s carapace like the rind of a dry gourd. In the merciless ruby glare, the spreading pool of blood appeared purple.

Spinning his staff in a circle to knock aside the arrow or sword that he was convinced was driving toward him, Eragon turned to confront the remaining Ra’zac. The tunnel before them was empty. He swore.

Eragon strode over to the twisted figure on the floor. He swung the staff over his head and brought it down across the chest of the dead Ra’zac with a resounding thud.

“I’ve waited a long time to do that,” said Eragon.

“As have I.”

He and Roran looked at each other.

“Ahh!” cried Eragon, and clutched his cheek as the pain intensified.

“It’s bubbling!” exclaimed Roran. “Do something!”

The Ra’zac must have coated the arrowhead with Seithr oil, thought Eragon. Remembering his training, he cleansed the wound and surrounding tissue with an incantation and then repaired the damage to his face. He opened and closed his mouth several times to make sure the muscles were working properly. With a grim smile, he said, “Imagine the state we’d be in without magic.”

“Without magic, we wouldn’t have Galbatorix to worry about.”

Talk later, said Saphira. *As soon as those fishermen reach Dras-Leona, the king may hear of our doings from one of his pet spellcasters in the city, and we do not want Galbatorix scrying Helgrind while we are still here*.

Yes, yes, said Eragon. Extinguishing the omnipresent red glow, he said, “Brisingr raudhr,” and created a red werelight like that from the previous night, except that this one remained anchored six inches from the ceiling instead of accompanying Eragon wherever he went.

Now that he had an opportunity to examine the tunnel in some detail, Eragon saw that the stone hallway was dotted with twenty or so ironbound doors, some on either side. He pointed and said, “Ninth down, on the right. You go get her. I’ll check the other cells. The Ra’zac might have left something interesting in them.”

Roran nodded. Crouching, he searched the corpse at their feet but found no keys. He shrugged. “I’ll do it the hard way, then.” He sprinted to the proper door, abandoned his shield, and set to work on the hinges with his hammer. Each blow created a frightful crash.

Eragon did not offer to help. His cousin would not want or appreciate assistance now, and besides, there was something else Eragon had to do. He went to the first cell, whispered three words, then, after the lock snapped open, pushed aside the door. All that the small room contained was a black chain and a pile of rotting bones. Those sad remains were no more than he had expected; he already knew where the object of his search lay, but he maintained the

charade of ignorance to avoid kindling Roran's suspicion.

Two more doors opened and closed beneath the touch of Eragon's fingers. Then, at the fourth cell, the door swung back to admit the shifting radiance of the werelight and reveal the very man Eragon had hoped he would not find: Sloan.

The butcher sat slumped against the left-hand wall, both arms chained to an iron ring above his head.

His ragged clothes barely covered his pale, emaciated body; the corners of his bones stood out in sharp relief underneath his translucent skin. His blue veins were also prominent. Sores had formed on his wrists where the manacles chafed. The ulcers oozed a mixture of clear fluid and blood. What remained of his hair had turned gray or white and hung in lank, greasy ropes over his pockmarked face.

Roused by the clang of Roran's hammer, Sloan lifted his chin toward the light and, in a quavering voice, asked, "Who is it? Who's there?" His hair parted and slid back, exposing his eye sockets, which had sunk deep into his skull. Where his eyelids should have been, there were now only a few scraps of tattered skin draped over the raw cavities underneath. The area around them was bruised and scabbed.

With a shock, Eragon realized that the Ra'zac had pecked out Sloan's eyes.

What he then should do, Eragon could not decide. The butcher had told the Ra'zac that Eragon had found Saphira's egg. Furthermore, Sloan had murdered the watchman, Byrd, and had betrayed Carvahall to the Empire. If he were brought before his fellow villagers, they would undoubtedly find Sloan guilty and condemn him to death by hanging.

It seemed only right, to Eragon, that the butcher should die for his crimes. That was not the source of his uncertainty. Rather, it arose from the fact that Roran loved Katrina, and Katrina, whatever Sloan had done, must still harbor a certain degree of affection for her father. Watching an arbitrator publicly denounce Sloan's offenses and then hang him would be no easy thing for her or, by extension, Roran. Such hardship might even create enough ill will between them to end their engagement. Either way, Eragon was convinced that taking Sloan back with them would sow discord between him, Roran, Katrina, and the other villagers, and might engender enough anger to distract them from their struggle against the Empire.

The easiest solution, thought Eragon, *would be to kill him and say that I found him dead in the cell.…* His lips trembled, one of the death-words heavy upon his tongue.

"What do you want?" asked Sloan. He turned his head from side to side in an attempt to hear better. "I already told you everything I

know!"

Eragon cursed himself for hesitating. Sloan's guilt was not in dispute; he was a murderer and a traitor. Any lawgiver would sentence him to execution.

Notwithstanding the merit of those arguments, it was Sloan who was curled in front of him, a man Eragon had known his entire life. The butcher might be a despicable person, but the wealth of memories and experiences Eragon shared with him bred a sense of intimacy that troubled Eragon's conscience. To strike down Sloan would be like raising his hand against Horst or Loring or any of the elders of Carvahall.

Again Eragon prepared to utter the fatal word.

An image appeared in his mind's eye: *Torkenbrand, the slaver he and Murtagh had encountered during their flight to the Varden, kneeling on the dusty ground and Murtagh striding up to him and beheading him*. Eragon remembered how he had objected to Murtagh's deed and how it had troubled him for days afterward.

Have I changed so much, he asked himself, *that I can do the same thing now? As Roran said, I have killed, but only in the heat of battle … never like this*.

He glanced over his shoulder as Roran broke the last hinge to Katrina's cell door. Dropping his hammer, Roran prepared to charge the door and knock it inward but then appeared to think better of it and tried to lift it free of its frame. The door rose a fraction of an inch, then halted and wobbled in his grip. "Give me a hand here!" he shouted. "I don't want it to fall on her."

Eragon looked back at the wretched butcher. He had no more time for mindless wanderings. He had to choose. One way or another, he had to choose.…

"Eragon!"

I don't know what's right, realized Eragon. His own uncertainty told him that it would be wrong to kill Sloan or return him to the Varden. He had no idea what he should do instead, except to find a third path, one that was less obvious and less violent.

Lifting his hand, as if in benediction, Eragon whispered, "Slytha." Sloan's manacles rattled as he went limp, falling into a profound sleep. As soon as he was sure the spell had taken hold, Eragon closed and locked the cell door again and replaced his wards around it.

What are you up to, Eragon? asked Saphira.

Wait until we're together again. I'll explain then.

Explain what? You don't have a plan.

Give me a minute and I will.

"What was in there?" asked Roran as Eragon took his place opposite him.

“Sloan.” Eragon adjusted his grip on the door between them.

“He’s dead.”

Roran’s eyes widened. “How?”

“Looks like they broke his neck.”

For an instant, Eragon feared that Roran might not believe him. Then his cousin grunted and said, “It’s better that way, I suppose. Ready? One, two, three—”

Together, they heaved the massive door out of its casing and threw it across the hallway. The stone passageway returned the resulting boom to them again and again. Without pause, Roran rushed into the cell, which was lit by a single wax taper. Eragon followed a step behind.

Katrina cowered at the far end of an iron cot. “Let me alone, you toothless bastards! I—” She stopped, struck dumb as Roran stepped forward. Her face was white from lack of sun and streaked with filth, yet at that moment, a look of such wonder and tender love blossomed upon her features, Eragon thought he had rarely seen anyone so beautiful.

Never taking her eyes off Roran, Katrina stood and, with a shaking hand, touched his cheek.

“You came.”

“I came.”

A laughing sob broke out of Roran, and he folded her in his arms, pulling her against his chest. They remained lost in their embrace for a long moment.

Drawing back, Roran kissed her three times on the lips. Katrina wrinkled her nose and exclaimed, “You grew a beard!” Of all the things she could have said, that was so unexpected—and she sounded so shocked and surprised—that Eragon chuckled in response.

For the first time, Katrina seemed to notice him. She glanced him over, then settled on his face, which she studied with evident puzzlement. “Eragon? Is that you?”

“Aye.”

“He’s a Dragon Rider now,” said Roran.

“A Rider? You mean …” She faltered; the revelation seemed to overwhelm her. Glancing at Roran, as if for protection, she held him even closer and sidled around him, away from Eragon. To Roran, she said, “How … how did you find us? Who else is with you?”

“All that later. We have to get out of Helgrind before the rest of the Empire comes running after us.”

“Wait! What about my father? Did you find him?”

Roran looked at Eragon, then returned his gaze to Katrina and gently said, “We were too late.”

A shiver ran through Katrina. She closed her eyes, and a solitary

tear leaked down the side of her face. “So be it.”

While they spoke, Eragon frantically tried to figure out how to dispose of Sloan, although he concealed his deliberations from Saphira; he knew that she would disapprove of the direction his thoughts were taking. A scheme began to form in his mind. It was an outlandish concept, fraught with danger and uncertainty, but it was the only viable path, given the circumstances.

Abandoning further reflection, Eragon sprang into action. He had much to do in little time. “Jierda!” he cried, pointing. With a burst of blue sparks and flying fragments, the metal bands riveted around Katrina’s ankles broke apart. Katrina jumped in surprise.

“Magic …,” she whispered.

“A simple spell.” She shrank from his touch as he reached toward her. “Katrina, I have to make sure that Galbatorix or one of his magicians hasn’t enchanted you with any traps or forced you to swear things in the ancient language.”

“The ancient—”

Roran interrupted her: “Eragon! Do this when we make camp. We can’t stay here.”

“No.” Eragon slashed his arm through the air. “We do it now.” Scowling, Roran moved aside and allowed Eragon to put his hands on Katrina’s shoulders. “Just look into my eyes,” he told her. She nodded and obeyed.

That was the first time Eragon had a reason to use the spells Oromis had taught him for detecting the work of another spellcaster, and he had difficulty remembering every word from the scrolls in Ellesméra. The gaps in his memory were so serious that on three different instances he had to rely upon a synonym to complete an incantation.

For a long while, Eragon stared into Katrina’s glistening eyes and mouthed phrases in the ancient language, occasionally—and with her permission—examining one of her memories for evidence that someone had tampered with it. He was as gentle as possible, unlike the Twins, who had ravaged his own mind in a similar procedure the day he arrived at Farthen Dûr.

Roran stood guard, pacing back and forth in front of the open doorway. Every second that went by increased his agitation; he twirled his hammer and tapped the head of it against his upper thigh, as if keeping time with a piece of music.

At last Eragon released Katrina. “I’m done.”

“What did you find?” she whispered. She hugged herself, her forehead creased with worry lines as she waited for his verdict. Silence filled the cell as Roran came to a standstill.

“Nothing but your own thoughts. You are free of any spells.”

“Of course she is,” growled Roran, and again wrapped her in his

arms.

Together, the three of them exited the cell. “Brisingr, iet tauthr,” said Eragon, gesturing at the werelight that still floated near the ceiling of the hallway. At his command, the glowing orb darted to a spot directly over his head and remained there, bobbing like a piece of driftwood in the surf.

Eragon took the lead as they hurried back through the jumble of tunnels toward the cavern where they had landed. As he trotted across the slick rock, he watched for the remaining Ra’zac while, at the same time, erecting wards to safeguard Katrina. Behind him, he heard her and Roran exchange a series of brief phrases and lone words: “I love you … Horst and others safe … Always … For you … Yes … Yes … Yes … Yes.” The trust and affection they shared were so obvious, it roused a dull ache of longing inside Eragon.

When they were about ten yards from the main cavern and could just begin to see by the faint glow ahead of them, Eragon extinguished the werelight. A few feet later, Katrina slowed, then pressed herself against the side of the tunnel and covered her face. “I can’t. It’s too bright; my eyes hurt.”

Roran quickly moved in front of her, casting her in his shadow. “When was the last time you were outside?”

“I don’t know….” A hint of panic crept into her voice. “I don’t know! Not since they brought me here. Roran, am I going blind?” She sniffed and began to cry.

Her tears surprised Eragon. He remembered her as someone of great strength and fortitude. But then, she had spent many weeks locked in the dark, fearing for her life. *I might not be myself either, if I were in her place*.

“No, you’re fine. You just need to get used to the sun again.” Roran stroked her hair. “Come on, don’t let this upset you. Everything is going to be all right.… You’re safe now. *Safe*, Katrina. You hear me?”

“I hear you.”

Although he hated to ruin one of the tunics the elves had given him, Eragon tore off a strip of cloth from the bottom edge of his garment. He handed it to Katrina and said, “Tie this over your eyes. You should be able to see through it well enough to keep from falling or running into anything.”

She thanked him and then blindfolded herself.

Once again advancing, the trio emerged into the sunny, blood-splattered main cavern—which stank worse than before, owing to the noxious fumes that drifted from the body of the Lethrblaka—even as Saphira appeared from within the depths of the lancet opening opposite them. Seeing her, Katrina gasped and clung to Roran, digging her fingers into his arms.

Eragon said, “Katrina, allow me to introduce you to Saphira. I am her Rider. She can understand if you speak to her.”

“It is an honor, O dragon,” Katrina managed to say. She dipped her knees in a weak imitation of a curtsy.

Saphira inclined her head in return. Then she faced Eragon. *I searched the Lethrblaka’s nest, but all I found was bones, bones, and more bones, including several that smelled of fresh meat. The Ra’zac must have eaten the slaves last night.*

I wish we could have rescued them.

I know, but we cannot protect everyone in this war.

Gesturing at Saphira, Eragon said, “Go on; climb onto her. I’ll join you in a moment.”

Katrina hesitated, then glanced at Roran, who nodded and murmured, “It’s all right. Saphira brought us here.” Together, the couple skirted the corpse of the Lethrblaka as they went over to Saphira, who crouched flat upon her belly so that they could mount her. Cupping his hands to form a step, Roran lifted Katrina high enough to pull herself over the upper part of Saphira’s left foreleg. From there Katrina clambered the looped leg straps of the saddle, as if a ladder, until she sat perched upon the crest of Saphira’s shoulders. Like a mountain goat leaping from one ledge to another, Roran duplicated her ascent.

Crossing the cave after them, Eragon examined Saphira, assessing the severity of her various scrapes, gashes, tears, bruises, and stab wounds. To do so, he relied upon what she herself felt, in addition to what he could see.

For goodness’ sake, said Saphira, *save your attentions until we are well out of danger. I’m not going to bleed to death.*

That’s not quite true, and you know it. You’re bleeding inside. Unless I stop it now, you may suffer complications I can’t heal, and then we’ll never get back to the Varden. Don’t argue; you can’t change my mind, and I won’t take a minute.

As it turned out, Eragon required several minutes to restore Saphira to her former health. Her injuries were severe enough that in order to complete his spells, he had to empty the belt of Beloth the Wise of energy and, after that, draw upon Saphira’s own vast reserves of strength. Whenever he shifted from a larger wound to a smaller one, she protested that he was being foolish and would he please leave off, but he ignored her complaints, much to her growing displeasure.

Afterward, Eragon slumped, tired from the magic and the fighting. Flicking a finger toward the places where the Lethrblaka had skewered her with their beaks, he said, *You should have Arya or another elf inspect my handiwork on those. I did my best, but I may have missed something.*

I appreciate your concern for my welfare, she replied, *but this is hardly the place for softhearted demonstrations. Once and for all, let us be gone!*

Aye. Time to leave. Stepping back, Eragon edged away from Saphira, in the direction of the tunnel behind him.

"Come on!" called Roran. "Hurry up!"

Eragon! exclaimed Saphira.

Eragon shook his head. "No. I'm staying here."

"You—" Roran started to say, but a ferocious growl from Saphira interrupted him. She lashed her tail against the side of the cave and raked the floor with her talons, so that bone and stone squealed in what sounded like mortal agony.

"Listen!" shouted Eragon. "One of the Ra'zac is still on the loose. And think what else might be in Helgrind: scrolls, potions, information about the Empire's activities—things that can help us! The Ra'zac may even have eggs of theirs stored here. If they do, I have to destroy them before Galbatorix can claim them for his own."

To Saphira, Eragon also said, *I can't kill Sloan, I can't let Roran or Katrina see him, and I can't allow him to starve to death in his cell or Galbatorix's men to recapture him. I'm sorry, but I have to deal with Sloan on my own.*

"How will you get out of the Empire?" demanded Roran.

"I'll run. I'm as fast as an elf now, you know."

The tip of Saphira's tail twitched. That was the only warning Eragon had before she leaped toward him, extending one of her glittering paws. He fled, dashing into the tunnel a fraction of a second before Saphira's foot passed through the space where he had been.

Saphira skidded to a stop in front of the tunnel and roared with frustration that she was unable to follow him into the narrow enclosure. Her bulk blocked most of the light. The stone shook around Eragon as she tore at the entrance with her claws and teeth, breaking off thick chunks. Her feral snarls and the sight of her lunging muzzle, filled with teeth as long as his forearm, sent a jolt of fear through Eragon. He understood then how a rabbit must feel when it cowers in its den while a wolf digs after it.

"Gánga!" he shouted.

No! Saphira placed her head on the ground and uttered a mournful keen, her eyes large and pitiful.

"Gánga! I love you, Saphira, but you have to go."

She retreated several yards from the tunnel and snuffled at him, mewling like a cat. *Little one …*

Eragon hated to make her unhappy, and he hated to send her away; it felt as if he were tearing himself apart. Saphira's misery flowed across their mental link and, coupled with his own anguish, almost paralyzed him. Somehow he mustered the nerve to say, "Gánga! And

don’t come back for me or send anyone else for me. I’ll be fine. Gánga! Gánga!”

Saphira howled with frustration and then reluctantly walked to the mouth of the cave. From his place on her saddle, Roran said, “Eragon, come on! Don’t be daft. You’re too important to risk—”

A combination of noise and motion obscured the rest of his sentence as Saphira launched herself out of the cave. In the clear sky beyond, her scales sparkled like a multitude of brilliant blue diamonds. She was, Eragon thought, magnificent: proud, noble, and more beautiful than any other living creature. No stag or lion could compete with the majesty of a dragon in flight. She said, *A week: that is how long I shall wait. Then I shall return for you, Eragon, even if I must fight my way past Thorn, Shruikan, and a thousand magicians*.

Eragon stood there until she dwindled from sight and he could no longer touch her mind. Then, his heart heavy as lead, he squared his shoulders and turned away from the sun and all things bright and living and once more descended into the tunnels of shadow.

RIDER AND RA'ZAC

Eragon sat bathed in the heatless radiance from his crimson werelight in the hall lined with cells near the center of Helgrind. His staff lay across his lap.

The rock reflected his voice as he repeated a phrase in the ancient language over and over again. It was not magic, but rather a message to the remaining Ra'zac. What he said meant this: "Come, O thou eater of men's flesh, let us end this fight of ours. You are hurt, and I am weary. Your companions are dead, and I am alone. We are a fit match. I promise that I shall not use gramarye against you, nor hurt or trap you with spells I have already cast. Come, O thou eater of men's flesh, let us end this fight of ours.…"

The time during which he spoke seemed endless: a neverwhen in a ghastly tinted chamber that remained unchanged through an eternity of cycling words whose order and significance ceased to matter to him. After a time, his clamoring thoughts fell silent, and a strange calm crept over him.

He paused with his mouth open, then closed it, watchful.

Thirty feet in front of him stood the Ra'zac. Blood dripped from the hem of the creature's ragged robes. "My massster does not want me to kill you," it hissed.

"But that does not matter to you now."

"No. If I fall to your staff, let Galbatorix deal with you as he will. He has more heartsss than you do."

Eragon laughed. "Hearts? I am the champion of the people, not him."

"Foolish boy." The Ra'zac cocked its head slightly, looking past him at the corpse of the other Ra'zac farther up the tunnel. "She was my hatchmate. You have become ssstrong since we firssst met, Shadeslayer."

"It was that or die."

"Will you make a pact with me, Shadeslayer?"

"What kind of a pact?"

"I am the lassst of my race, Shadeslayer. We are ancient, and I would not have us forgotten. Would you, in your songsss and in your hissstories, remind your fellow humans of the terror we inssspired in your kind? … Remember us as *fear*!"

"Why should I do that for you?"

Tucking its beak against its narrow chest, the Ra'zac clucked and chittered to itself for several moments. "Because," it said, "I will tell

you sssomething secret, yesss I will."

"Then tell me."

"Give me your word firssst, lest you trick me."

"No. Tell me, and then I will decide whether or not to agree."

Over a minute passed, and neither of them moved, although Eragon kept his muscles taut and ready in expectation of a surprise attack. After another squall of sharp clicks, the Ra'zac said, "He has almossst found the *name*."

"Who has?"

"Galbatorix."

"The name of what?"

The Ra'zac hissed with frustration. "I cannot tell you! The *name*! The true *name*!"

"You have to give me more information than that."

"I cannot!"

"Then we have no pact."

"Curssse you, Rider! I curssse you! May you find no roossst nor den nor peace of mind in thisss land of yours. May you leave Alagaësia and never return!"

The nape of Eragon's neck prickled with the cold touch of dread. In his mind, he again heard the words of Angela the herbalist when she had cast her dragon bones for him and told his fortune and predicted that selfsame fate.

A mare's tail of blood separated Eragon from his enemy as the Ra'zac swept back its sodden cloak, revealing a bow that it held with an arrow already fit to the string. Lifting and drawing the weapon, the Ra'zac loosed the bolt in the direction of Eragon's chest.

Eragon batted the shaft aside with his staff.

As if this attempt were nothing more than a preliminary gesture that custom dictated they observe before proceeding with their actual confrontation, the Ra'zac stooped, placed the bow on the floor, then straightened its cowl and slowly and deliberately pulled its leaf-bladed sword from underneath its robes. While it did, Eragon rose to his feet and took a shoulder-wide stance, his hands tight on the staff.

They lunged toward each other. The Ra'zac attempted to cleave Eragon from collarbone to hip, but Eragon twisted and stepped past the blow. Jamming the end of the staff upward, he drove its metal spike underneath the Ra'zac's beak and through the plates that protected the creature's throat.

The Ra'zac shuddered once and then collapsed.

Eragon stared at his most hated foe, stared at its lidless black eyes, and suddenly he went weak at the knees and retched against the wall of the corridor. Wiping his mouth, he yanked the staff free and whispered, "For our father. For our home. For Carvahall. For Brom.…

I have had my fill of vengeance. May you rot here forever, Ra'zac."

Going to the appropriate cell, Eragon retrieved Sloan—who was still deep in his enchanted sleep—slung the butcher over his shoulder, and then began to retrace his steps back to the main cave of Helgrind. Along the way, he often lowered Sloan to the floor and left him to explore a chamber or byway that he had not visited before. In them he discovered many evil instruments, including four metal flasks of Seithr oil, which he promptly destroyed so that no one else could use the flesh-eating acid to further their malicious plans.

Hot sunlight stung Eragon's cheeks when he stumbled out of the network of tunnels. Holding his breath, he hurried past the dead Lethrblaka and went to the edge of the vast cave, where he gazed down the precipitous side of Helgrind at the hills far below. To the west, he saw a pillar of orange dust billowing above the lane that connected Helgrind to Dras-Leona, marking the approach of a group of horsemen.

His right side was burning from supporting Sloan's weight, so Eragon shifted the butcher onto his other shoulder. He blinked away the beads of sweat that clung to his eyelashes as he struggled to solve the problem of how he was supposed to transport Sloan and himself five thousand–some feet to the ground.

"It's almost a mile down," he murmured. "If there were a path, I could easily walk that distance, even with Sloan. So I must have the strength to lower us with magic.… Yes, but what you can do over a length of time may be too taxing to accomplish all at once without killing yourself. As Oromis said, the body cannot convert its stockpile of fuel into energy fast enough to sustain most spells for more than a few seconds. I only have a certain amount of power available at any given moment, and once it's gone, I have to wait until I recover.… And talking to myself isn't getting me anywhere."

Securing his hold on Sloan, Eragon fixed his eyes on a narrow ledge about a hundred feet below. *This is going to hurt*, he thought, preparing himself for the attempt. Then he barked, "Audr!"

Eragon felt himself rise several inches above the floor of the cave. "Fram," he said, and the spell propelled him away from Helgrind and into open space, where he hung unsupported, like a cloud drifting in the sky. Accustomed as he was to flying with Saphira, the sight of nothing but thin air underneath his feet still caused him unease.

By manipulating the flow of magic, Eragon quickly descended from the Ra'zac's lair—which the insubstantial wall of stone once again hid—to the ledge. His boot slipped on a loose piece of rock as he alighted. For a handful of breathless seconds, he flailed, searching for solid footing but unable to look down, as tilting his head could send him toppling forward. He yelped as his left leg went off the ledge and

he began to fall. Before he could resort to magic to save himself, he came to an abrupt halt as his left foot wedged itself in a crevice. The edges of the rift dug into his calf behind his greave, but he did not mind, for it held him in place.

Eragon leaned his back against Helgrind, using it to help him prop up Sloan's limp body. "That wasn't too bad," he observed. The effort had cost him, but not so much that he was unable to continue. "I can do this," he said. He gulped fresh air into his lungs, waiting for his racing heart to slow; he felt as if he had sprinted a score of yards while carrying Sloan. "I can do this.…"

The approaching riders caught his eye again. They were noticeably closer than before and galloping across the dry land at a pace that worried him. *It's a race between them and me*, he realized. *I have to escape before they reach Helgrind. There are sure to be magicians among them, and I'm in no fit condition to duel Galbatorix's spellcasters*. Glancing over at Sloan's face, he said, "Perhaps you can help me a bit, eh? It's the least you can do, considering I'm risking death and worse for you." The sleeping butcher rolled his head, lost in the world of dreams.

With a grunt, Eragon pushed himself off Helgrind. Again he said, "Audr," and again he became airborne. This time he relied upon Sloan's strength—meager as it was—as well as his own. Together they sank like two strange birds along Helgrind's rugged flank toward another ledge whose width promised safe haven.

In such a manner Eragon orchestrated their downward climb. He did not proceed in a straight line, but rather angled off to his right, so that they curved around Helgrind and the mass of blocky stone hid him and Sloan from the horsemen.

The closer they got to the ground, the slower they went. A crushing fatigue overcame Eragon, reducing the distance he was able to traverse in a single stretch and making it increasingly difficult for him to recuperate during the pauses between his bursts of exertion. Even lifting a finger became a task that he found irritating in the extreme, as well as one that was almost unbearably laborious. Drowsiness muffled him in its warm folds and dulled his thoughts and feelings until the hardest of rocks seemed as soft as pillows to his aching muscles.

When he finally dropped onto the sun-baked soil—too weak to keep Sloan and himself from ramming into the dirt—Eragon lay with his arms folded at odd angles underneath his chest and stared with half-lidded eyes into the yellow flecks of citrine embedded within the small rock an inch or two from his nose. Sloan weighed on his back like a pile of iron ingots. Air seeped from Eragon's lungs, but none seemed to return. His vision darkened as if a cloud had covered the sun. A

deadly lull separated each beat of his heart, and the throb, when it came, was no more than a faint flutter.

Eragon was no longer capable of coherent thought, but somewhere in the back of his brain he was aware that he was about to die. It did not frighten him; to the contrary, the prospect comforted him, for he was tired beyond belief, and death would free him from the battered shell of his flesh and allow him to rest for all of eternity.

From above and behind his head, there came a bumblebee as big as his thumb. It circled his ear, then hovered by the rock, probing the nodes of citrine, which were the same bright yellow as the field-stars that bloomed among the hills. The bumblebee's mane glowed in the morning light—each hair sharp and distinct to Eragon—and its blurred wings generated a gentle bombilation, like a tattoo played on a drum. Pollen powdered the bristles on its legs.

The bumblebee was so vibrant, so alive, and so beautiful, its presence renewed Eragon's will to survive. A world that contained a creature as amazing as that bumblebee was a world he wanted to live in.

By sheer force of will, he pushed his left hand free of his chest and grasped the woody stem of a nearby shrub. Like a leech or a tick or some other parasite, he extracted the life from the plant, leaving it limp and brown. The subsequent rush of energy that coursed through Eragon sharpened his wits. Now he was scared; having regained his desire to continue existing, he found nothing but terror in the blackness beyond.

Dragging himself forward, he seized another shrub and transferred its vitality into his body, then a third shrub and a fourth shrub, and so on until he once again possessed the full measure of his strength. He stood and looked back at the trail of brown plants that stretched out behind him; a bitter taste filled his mouth as he saw what he had wrought.

Eragon knew that he had been careless with the magic and that his reckless behavior would have doomed the Varden to certain defeat if he had died. In hindsight, his stupidity made him wince. *Brom would box my ears for getting into this mess*, he thought.

Returning to Sloan, Eragon hoisted the gaunt butcher off the ground. Then he turned east and loped away from Helgrind and into the concealment of a draw. Ten minutes later, when he paused to check for pursuers, he saw a cloud of dirt swirling at the base of Helgrind, which he took to mean that the horsemen had arrived at the dark tower of stone.

He smiled. Galbatorix's minions were too far away for any lesser magicians among their ranks to detect his or Sloan's minds. *By the time they discover the Ra'zac's bodies*, he thought, *I shall have run a league or*

more. I doubt they will be able to find me then. Besides, they will be searching for a dragon and her Rider, not a man traveling on foot.

Satisfied that he did not have to worry about an imminent attack, Eragon resumed his previous pace: a steady, effortless stride that he could maintain for the entire day.

Above him, the sun gleamed gold and white. Before him, trackless wilderness extended for many leagues before lapping against the outbuildings of some village. And in his heart, a new joy and hope flared.

At last the Ra'zac were dead!

At last his quest for vengeance was complete. At last he had fulfilled his duty to Garrow and to Brom. And at last he had cast off the pall of fear and anger that he had labored beneath ever since the Ra'zac first appeared in Carvahall. Killing them had taken far longer than he expected, but now the deed was done, and a mighty deed it was. He allowed himself to revel in satisfaction over having accomplished such a difficult feat, albeit with assistance from Roran and Saphira.

Yet, to his surprise, his triumph was bittersweet, tainted by an unexpected sense of loss. His hunt for the Ra'zac had been one of his last ties to his life in Palancar Valley, and he was loath to relinquish that bond, gruesome as it was. Moreover, the task had given him a purpose in life when he had none; it was the reason why he had originally left his home. Without it, a hole gaped inside of him where he had nurtured his hate for the Ra'zac.

That he could mourn the end of such a terrible mission appalled Eragon, and he vowed to avoid making the same mistake twice. *I refuse to become so attached to my struggle against the Empire and Murtagh and Galbatorix that I won't want to move on to something else when, and if, the time comes—or, worse, that I'll try to prolong the conflict rather than adapt to whatever happens next*. He chose then to push away his misbegotten regret and to concentrate instead on his relief: relief that he was free of the grim demands of his self-imposed quest and that his only remaining obligations were those born of his current position.

Elation lightened his steps. With the Ra'zac gone, Eragon felt as if he could finally make a life for himself based not on who he had been but on who he had become: a Dragon Rider.

He smiled at the uneven horizon and laughed as he ran, indifferent as to whether anyone might hear him. His voice rolled up and down the draw, and around him, everything seemed new and beautiful and full of promise.

Eragon's stomach gurgled.

He was lying on his back, legs folded under at the knees—stretching his thighs after running farther and with more weight than he ever had before—when the loud, liquid rumble erupted from his innards.

The sound was so unexpected, Eragon bolted upright, groping for his staff.

Wind whistled across the empty land. The sun had set, and in its absence, everything was blue and purple. Nothing moved, save for the blades of grass that fluttered and Sloan, whose fingers slowly opened and closed in response to some vision in his enchanted slumber. A bone-biting cold heralded the arrival of true night.

Eragon relaxed and allowed himself a small smile.

His amusement soon vanished as he considered the source of his discomfort. Battling the Ra'zac, casting numerous spells, and bearing Sloan upon his shoulders for most of the day had left Eragon so ravenous, he imagined that if he could travel back in time, he could eat the entire feast the dwarves had cooked in his honor during his visit to Tarnag. The memory of how the roast Nagra, the giant boar, had smelled—hot, pungent, seasoned with honey and spices, and dripping with lard—was enough to make his mouth water.

The problem was, he had no supplies. Water was easy enough to come by; he could draw moisture from the soil whenever he wanted. Finding food in that desolate place, however, was not only far more difficult, it presented him with a moral dilemma that he had hoped to avoid.

Oromis had devoted many of his lessons to the various climates and geographic regions that existed throughout Alagaësia. Thus, when Eragon left their camp to investigate the surrounding area, he was able to identify most of the plants he encountered. Few were edible, and of those, none were large or bountiful enough for him to gather a meal for two grown men in a reasonable amount of time. The local animals were sure to have hidden away caches of seeds and fruit, but he had no idea where to begin searching for them. Nor did he think it was likely that a desert mouse would have amassed more than a few mouthfuls of food.

That left him with two options, neither of which appealed to him. He could—as he had before—drain the energy from the plants and insects around their camp. The price of doing so would be to leave a death-spot upon the earth, a blight where nothing, not even the tiny

organisms in the soil, still lived. And while it might keep him and Sloan on their feet, transfusions of energy were far from satisfying, as they did nothing to fill one's stomach.

Or he could hunt.

Eragon scowled and twisted the butt of his staff into the ground. After sharing the thoughts and desires of numerous animals, it revolted him to consider eating one. Nevertheless, he was not about to weaken himself and perhaps allow the Empire to capture him just because he went without supper in order to spare the life of a rabbit. As both Saphira and Roran had pointed out, every living thing survived by eating something else. *Ours is a cruel world*, he thought, *and I cannot change how it is made.… The elves may be right to avoid flesh, but at the moment, my need is great. I refuse to feel guilty if circumstances drive me to this. It is not a crime to enjoy some bacon or a trout or what have you.*

He continued to reassure himself with various arguments, yet disgust at the concept still squirmed within his gut. For almost half an hour, he remained rooted to the spot, unable to do what logic told him was necessary. Then he became aware of how late it was and swore at himself for wasting time; he needed every minute of rest he could get.

Steeling himself, Eragon sent out tendrils from his mind and probed the land until he located two large lizards and, curled in a sandy den, a colony of rodents that reminded him of a cross between a rat, a rabbit, and a squirrel. "Deyja," said Eragon, and killed the lizards and one of the rodents. They died instantly and without pain, but he still gritted his teeth as he extinguished the bright flames of their minds.

The lizards he retrieved by hand, flipping over the rocks they had been hiding underneath. The rodent, however, he extracted from the den with magic. He was careful to not wake the other animals as he maneuvered the body up to the surface; it seemed cruel to terrify them with the knowledge that an invisible predator could kill them in their most secret havens.

He gutted, skinned, and otherwise cleaned the lizards and rodent, burying the offal deep enough to hide it from scavengers. Gathering thin, flat stones, he built a small oven, lit a fire within, and started the meat cooking. Without salt, he could not properly season any sort of food, but some of the native plants released a pleasant smell when he crushed them between his fingers, and those he rubbed over and packed into the carcasses.

The rodent was ready first, being smaller than the lizards. Lifting it off the top of the makeshift oven, Eragon held the meat in front of his mouth. He grimaced and would have remained locked in the grip of his revulsion, except that he had to continue tending the fire and the

lizards. Those two activities distracted him enough that, without thinking, he obeyed the strident command of his hunger and ate.

The initial bite was the worst; it stuck in his throat, and the taste of hot grease threatened to make him sick. Then he shivered and dry-swallowed twice, and the urge passed. After that, it was easier. He was actually grateful the meat was rather bland, for the lack of flavor helped him to forget what he was chewing.

He consumed the entire rodent and then part of a lizard. Tearing the last bit of flesh off a thin leg bone, he heaved a sigh of contentment and then hesitated, chagrined to realize that, in spite of himself, he had enjoyed the meal. He was so hungry, the meager supper had seemed delicious once he overcame his inhibitions. *Perhaps*, he mused, *perhaps when I return … if I am at Nasuada's table, or King Orrin's, and meat is served … perhaps, if I feel like it and it would be rude to refuse, I might have a few bites.… I won't eat the way I used to, but neither shall I be as strict as the elves. Moderation is a wiser policy than zealotry, I think*.

By the light from the coals in the oven, Eragon studied Sloan's hands; the butcher lay a yard or two away, where Eragon had placed him. Dozens of thin white scars crisscrossed his long, bony fingers, with their oversized knuckles and long fingernails that, while they had been meticulous in Carvahall, were now ragged, torn, and blackened with accumulated filth. The scars testified to the relatively few mistakes Sloan had made during the decades he had spent wielding knives. His skin was wrinkled and weathered and bulged with wormlike veins, yet the muscles underneath were hard and lean.

Eragon sat on his haunches and crossed his arms over his knees. "I can't just let him go," he murmured. If he did, Sloan might track down Roran and Katrina, a prospect that Eragon considered unacceptable. Besides, even though he was not going to kill Sloan, he believed the butcher should be punished for his crimes.

Eragon had not been close friends with Byrd, but he had known him to be a good man, honest and steadfast, and he remembered Byrd's wife, Felda, and their children with some fondness, for Garrow, Roran, and Eragon had eaten and slept in their house on several occasions. Byrd's death, then, struck Eragon as being particularly cruel, and he felt the watchman's family deserved justice, even if they never learned about it.

What, however, would constitute proper punishment? *I refused to become an executioner*, thought Eragon, *only to make myself an arbiter. What do I know about the law?*

Rising to his feet, he walked over to Sloan and bent toward his ear and said, "Vakna."

With a jolt, Sloan woke, scrabbling at the ground with his sinewy

hands. The remnants of his eyelids quivered as, by instinct, the butcher tried to lift them and look at his surroundings. Instead, he remained trapped in his own personal night.

Eragon said, "Here, eat this." He thrust the remaining half of his lizard toward Sloan, who, although he could not see it, surely must have smelled the food.

"Where am I?" asked Sloan. With trembling hands, he began to explore the rocks and plants in front of him. He touched his torn wrists and ankles and appeared confused to discover that his fetters were gone.

"The elves—and also the Riders in days gone by—called this place Mírnathor. The dwarves refer to it as Werghadn, and humans as the Gray Heath. If that does not answer your question, then perhaps it will if I say we are a number of leagues southeast of Helgrind, where you were imprisoned."

Sloan mouthed the word *Helgrind*. "You rescued me?"

"I did."

"What about—"

"Leave your questions. Eat this first."

His harsh tone acted like a whip on the butcher; Sloan cringed and reached with fumbling fingers for the lizard. Releasing it, Eragon retreated to his place next to the rock oven and scooped handfuls of dirt onto the coals, blotting out the glow so that it would not betray their presence in the unlikely event that anyone else was in the vicinity.

After an initial, tentative lick to determine what it was Eragon had given him, Sloan dug his teeth into the lizard and ripped a thick gobbet from the carcass. With each bite, he crammed as much flesh into his mouth as he could and only chewed once or twice before swallowing and repeating the process. He stripped each bone clean with the efficiency of a man who possessed an intimate understanding of how animals were constructed and what was the quickest way to disassemble them. The bones he dropped into a neat pile on his left. As the final morsel of meat from the lizard's tail vanished down Sloan's gullet, Eragon handed him the other reptile, which was yet whole. Sloan grunted in thanks and continued to gorge himself, making no attempt to wipe the fat from his mouth and chin.

The second lizard proved to be too large for Sloan to finish. He stopped two ribs above the bottom of the chest cavity and placed what was left of the carcass on the cairn of bones. Then he straightened his back, drew his hand across his lips, tucked his long hair behind his ears, and said, "Thank you, strange sir, for your hospitality. It has been so long since I had a proper meal, I think I prize your food even above my own freedom.… If I may ask, do you know of my daughter,

Katrina, and what has happened to her? She was imprisoned with me in Helgrind." His voice contained a complex mixture of emotions: respect, fear, and submission in the presence of an unknown authority; hope and trepidation as to his daughter's fate; and determination as unyielding as the mountains of the Spine. The one element Eragon expected to hear but did not was the sneering disdain Sloan had used with him during their encounters in Carvahall.

"She is with Roran."

Sloan gaped. "Roran! How did he get here? Did the Ra'zac capture him as well? Or did—"

"The Ra'zac and their steeds are dead."

"You *killed* them? How? … Who—" For an instant, Sloan froze, as if he were stuttering with his entire body, and then his cheeks and mouth went slack and his shoulders caved in and he clutched at a bush to steady himself. He shook his head. "No, no, no.… No.… It can't be. The Ra'zac spoke of this; they demanded answers I didn't have, but I *thought* … That is, who would believe …?" His sides heaved with such violence, Eragon wondered if he would hurt himself. In a gasping whisper, as if he were forced to speak after being punched in the middle, Sloan said, "You can't be *Eragon*."

A sense of doom and destiny descended upon Eragon. He felt as if he were the instrument of those two merciless overlords, and he replied in accordance, slowing his speech so each word struck like a hammer blow and carried all the weight of his dignity, station, and anger. "I am Eragon and far more. I am Argetlam and Shadeslayer and Firesword. My dragon is Saphira, she who is also known as Bjartskular and Flametongue. We were taught by Brom, who was a Rider before us, and by the dwarves and by the elves. We have fought the Urgals and a Shade and Murtagh, who is Morzan's son. We serve the Varden and the peoples of Alagaësia. And I have brought you here, Sloan Aldensson, to pass judgment upon you for murdering Byrd and for betraying Carvahall to the Empire."

"You lie! You cannot be—"

"Lie?" roared Eragon. "I do not lie!" Thrusting out with his mind, he engulfed Sloan's consciousness in his own and forced the butcher to accept memories that confirmed the truth of his statements. He also wanted Sloan to feel the power that was now his and to realize that he was no longer entirely human. And while Eragon was reluctant to admit it, he enjoyed having control over a man who had often made trouble for him and also tormented him with gibes, insulting both him and his family. He withdrew a half minute later.

Sloan continued to quiver, but he did not collapse and grovel as Eragon thought he might. Instead, the butcher's demeanor became cold and flinty. "Blast you," he said. "I don't have to explain myself to

you, Eragon Son of None. Understand this, though: I did what I did for Katrina's sake and nothing else."

"I know. That's the only reason you're still alive."

"Do what you want with me, then. I don't care, so long as she's safe. … Well, go on! What's it to be? A beating? A branding? They already had my eyes, so one of my hands? Or will you leave me to starve or to be recaptured by the Empire?"

"I have not decided yet."

Sloan nodded with a sharp motion and pulled his tattered clothes tight around his limbs to ward off the night cold. He sat with military precision, gazing with blank, empty eye sockets into the shadows that ringed their camp. He did not beg. He did not ask for mercy. He did not deny his acts or attempt to placate Eragon. He but sat and waited, armored by his perfect stoic fortitude.

His bravery impressed Eragon.

The dark landscape around them seemed immense beyond reckoning to Eragon, and he felt as if the entire hidden expanse was converging upon him, a notion that heightened his anxiety over the choice that confronted him. *My verdict will shape the rest of his life*, he thought.

Abandoning for the moment the question of punishment, Eragon considered what he knew about Sloan: the butcher's overriding love for Katrina—obsessive, selfish, and generally unhealthy as it was, although it had once been something wholesome—his hate and fear of the Spine, which were the offspring of his grief for his late wife, Ismira, who had fallen to her death among those cloud-rending peaks; his estrangement from the remaining branches of his family; his pride in his work; the stories Eragon had heard about Sloan's childhood; and Eragon's own knowledge of what it was like to live in Carvahall.

Eragon took that collection of scattered, fragmented insights and turned them over in his mind, pondering their significance. Like the pieces of a puzzle, he tried to fit them together. He rarely succeeded, but he persisted, and gradually he traced a myriad of connections between the events and emotions of Sloan's life, and thereby he wove a tangled web, the patterns of which represented who Sloan was. Throwing the last line of his web, Eragon felt as if he finally comprehended the reasons for Sloan's behavior. Because of that, he empathized with Sloan.

More than empathy, he felt he understood Sloan, that he had isolated the core elements of Sloan's personality, those things one could not remove without irrevocably changing the man. There occurred to him, then, three words in the ancient language that seemed to embody Sloan, and without thinking about it, Eragon whispered the words under his breath.

The sound could not have reached Sloan, yet he stirred—his hands gripping his thighs—and his expression became one of unease.

A cold tingle crawled down Eragon's left side, and goosebumps appeared on his arms and legs as he watched the butcher. He considered a number of different explanations for Sloan's reaction, each more elaborate than the last, but only one seemed plausible, and even it struck him as being unlikely. He whispered the trio of words again. As before, Sloan shifted in place, and Eragon heard him mutter, "… someone walking on my grave."

Eragon released a shaky breath. It was difficult for him to believe, but his experiment left no room for doubt: he had, quite by accident, chanced upon Sloan's true name. The discovery left him rather bewildered. Knowing someone's true name was a weighty responsibility, for it granted you absolute power over that person. Because of the inherent risks, the elves rarely revealed their true names, and when they did, it was only to those whom they trusted without reservation.

Eragon had never learned anyone's true name before. He had always expected that if he did, it would be as a gift from someone he cared about a great deal. Gaining Sloan's true name without his consent was a turn of events Eragon was unprepared for and uncertain how to deal with. It dawned upon Eragon that in order to guess Sloan's true name, he must understand the butcher better than he did himself, for he had not the slightest inkling what his own might be.

The realization was an uncomfortable one. He suspected that—given the nature of his enemies—not knowing everything he could about himself might well prove fatal. He vowed, then, to devote more time to introspection and to uncovering his true name. *Perhaps Oromis and Glaedr could tell me what it is*, he thought.

Whatever the doubts and confusion Sloan's true name roused within him, it gave Eragon the beginning of an idea for how to deal with the butcher. Even once he had the basic concept, it still took him another ten minutes to thrash out the rest of his plan and make sure that it would work in the manner he intended.

Sloan tilted his head in Eragon's direction as Eragon rose and walked out of their camp into the starlit land beyond. "Where are you going?" asked Sloan.

Eragon remained silent.

He wandered through the wilderness until he found a low, broad rock covered with scabs of lichen and with a bowl-like hollow in the middle. "Adurna rïsa," said he. Around the rock, countless minuscule droplets of water filtered up through the soil and coalesced into flawless silver tubes that arched over the edge of the rock and down into the hollow. When the water started to overflow and return to the

earth, only to be again ensnared by his spell, Eragon released the flow of magic.

He waited until the surface of the water became perfectly still—so that it acted like a mirror and he stood before what looked like a basin of stars—and then he said, "Draumr kópa," and many other words besides, reciting a spell that would allow him to not only see but speak with others at a distance. Oromis had taught him the variation on scrying two days before he and Saphira had left Ellesméra for Surda.

The water went completely black, as if someone had extinguished the stars like candles. A moment or two later, an oval shape brightened in the middle of the water and Eragon beheld the interior of a large white tent, illuminated by the flameless light from a red Erisdar, one of the elves' magical lanterns.

Normally, Eragon would be unable to scry a person or place he had not seen before, but the elves' seeing glass was enchanted to transmit an image of its surroundings to anyone who contacted the glass. Likewise, Eragon's spell would project an image of himself and his surroundings onto the surface of the glass. The arrangement allowed strangers to contact each other from any location in the world, which was an invaluable ability in times of war.

A tall elf with silver hair and battle-worn armor entered Eragon's field of vision, and he recognized Lord Däthedr, who advised Queen Islanzadí and was a friend of Arya's. If Däthedr was surprised to see Eragon, he did not show it; he inclined his head, touched the first two fingers of his right hand to his lips, and said in his lilting voice, "Atra esterní ono thelduin, Eragon Shur'tugal."

Mentally making the shift to conversing in the ancient language, Eragon duplicated the gesture with his fingers and replied, "Atra du evarínya ono varda, Däthedr-vodhr."

Continuing in his native tongue, Däthedr said, "I am glad to know you are well, Shadeslayer. Arya Dröttningu informed us of your mission some days ago, and we have been much concerned on your behalf and Saphira's. I trust nothing has gone amiss?"

"No, but I encountered an unforeseen problem, and if I may, I would consult with Queen Islanzadí and seek her wisdom in this matter."

Däthedr's catlike eyes drifted nearly shut, becoming two angled slashes that gave him a fierce and unreadable expression. "I know you would not ask this unless it is important, Eragon-vodhr, but beware: a drawn bow may just as easily snap and injure the archer as it may send the arrow flying.… If it so please you, wait, and I shall inquire after the queen."

"I shall wait. Your assistance is most welcome, Däthedr-vodhr." As

the elf turned away from the seeing glass, Eragon grimaced. He disliked the elves' formality, but most of all, he hated trying to interpret their enigmatic statements. *Was he warning me that scheming and plotting around the queen is a dangerous pastime or that Islanzadí is a drawn bow about to snap? Or did he mean something else entirely?*

At least I'm able to contact the elves, thought Eragon. The elves' wards prevented anything from entering Du Weldenvarden by magical means, including the far-sight of scrying. So long as elves remained in their cities, one could communicate with them only by sending messengers into their forest. But now that the elves were on the move and had left the shade of their black-needled pine trees, their great spells no longer protected them and it was possible to use devices such as the seeing glass.

Eragon became increasingly anxious as first one minute and then another trickled past. "Come on," he murmured. He quickly glanced around to make sure that no person or beast was creeping up on him while he gazed into the pool of water.

With a sound akin to ripping cloth, the entrance flap to the tent flew open as Queen Islanzadí thrust it aside and stormed toward the seeing glass. She wore a bright corselet of golden scale armor, augmented with mail and greaves and a beautifully decorated helm—set with opals and other precious gemstones—that held back her flowing black tresses. A red cape trimmed with white billowed from her shoulders; it reminded Eragon of a looming storm front. In her left hand, Islanzadí wielded a naked sword. Her right hand was empty, but it appeared gloved in crimson, and after a moment, Eragon realized that dripping blood coated her fingers and wrist.

Islanzadí's slanting eyebrows narrowed as she looked upon Eragon. With that expression, she bore a striking resemblance to Arya, although her stature and bearing were even more impressive than her daughter's. She was beautiful and terrible, like a frightful goddess of war.

Eragon touched his lips with his fingers, then twisted his right hand over his chest in the elves' gesture of loyalty and respect and recited the opening line of their traditional greeting, speaking first, as was proper when addressing one of higher rank. Islanzadí made the expected response, and in an attempt to please her and demonstrate his knowledge of their customs, Eragon concluded with the optional third line of the salutation: "And may peace live in your heart."

The ferocity of Islanzadí's pose diminished somewhat, and a faint smile touched her lips, as if to acknowledge his maneuver. "And yours as well, Shadeslayer." Her low, rich voice contained hints of rustling pine needles and gurgling brooks and music played on reed pipes. Sheathing her sword, she moved across the tent to the folding table

and stood at an angle to Eragon as she washed the blood off her skin with water from a pitcher. “Peace is difficult to come by these days, I fear.”

“The fighting is heavy, Your Majesty?”

“It will be soon. My people are massing along the western edge of Du Weldenvarden, where we may prepare to kill and be killed while we are close to the trees we love so much. We are a scattered race and do not march in rank and file like others do—on account of the damage it inflicts upon the land—and so it takes time for us to assemble from the distant reaches of the forest.”

“I understand. Only …” He searched for a way to ask his question without being rude. “If the fighting has not started yet, I cannot help but wonder why your hand is dyed with gore.”

Shaking water droplets off her fingers, Islanzadí lifted her perfect gold-brown forearm for Eragon’s inspection, and he realized that she had been the model for the sculpture of two intertwined arms that stood in the entryway to his tree house in Ellesméra. “Dyed no more. The only stain blood leaves on a person is on her soul, not her body. I said the fighting would escalate in the near future, *not* that we had yet to start.” She pulled the sleeve of her corselet and the tunic underneath back down to her wrist. From the jeweled belt wrapped around her slim waist, she removed a gauntlet stitched with silver thread and worked her hand into it. “We have been observing the city of Ceunon, for we intend to attack there first. Two days ago, our rangers spotted teams of men and mules traveling from Ceunon into Du Weldenvarden. We thought they wished to collect timber from the edge of the forest, as is often done. ’Tis a practice we tolerate, for the humans must have wood, and the trees within the fringe are young and nearly beyond our influence, and we have not wanted to expose ourselves before. The teams did not stop at the fringe, however. They burrowed far into Du Weldenvarden, following game trails they were obviously familiar with. They were searching for the tallest, thickest trees—trees as old as Alagaësia itself, trees that were already ancient and fully grown when the dwarves discovered Farthen Dûr. When they found them, they began to saw them down.” Her voice rippled with rage. “From their remarks, we learned why they were here. Galbatorix wanted the largest trees he could acquire to replace the siege engines and battering rams he lost during the battle on the Burning Plains. If their motive had been pure and honest, we might have forgiven the loss of one monarch of our forest. Maybe even two. But not eight-and-twenty.”

A chill crept through Eragon. “What did you do?” he asked, although he already suspected the answer.

Islanzadí lifted her chin, and her face grew hard. “I was present

with two of our rangers. Together, we *corrected* the humans' mistake. In the past, the people of Ceunon knew better than to intrude upon our lands. Today we reminded them why that was so." Without seeming to notice, she rubbed her right hand, as if it pained her, and she gazed past the seeing glass, looking at some vision of her own. "You have learned what it is like, Eragon-finiarel, to touch the life force of the plants and animals around you. Imagine how you would cherish them if you had possessed that ability for centuries. We give of ourselves to sustain Du Weldenvarden, and the forest is an extension of our bodies and minds. Any hurt it suffers is our hurt as well.… We are a slow people to rouse, but once roused we are like the dragons: we go mad with anger. It has been over a hundred years since I, or most any elf, shed blood in battle. The world has forgotten what we are capable of. Our strength may have declined since the Riders' fall, but we shall still give a full reckoning of ourselves; to our enemies, it will seem as if even the elements have turned against them. We are an Elder Race, and our skill and knowledge far exceed that of mortal men. Let Galbatorix and his allies beware, for we elves are about to forsake our forest, and we shall return in triumph, or never again."

Eragon shivered. Even during his confrontations with Durza, he had never encountered such implacable determination and ruthlessness. *It's not human*, he thought, then laughed mockingly to himself. *Of course not. And I would do well to remember that. However much we may look alike—and in my case, nigh on identical—we are not the same*. "If you take Ceunon," he said, "how will you control the people there? They may hate the Empire more than death itself, but I doubt they will trust you, if only because they are humans and you are elves."

Islanzadí waved a hand. "That is unimportant. Once we are within the city walls, we have ways to ensure that no one will oppose us. This is not the first time we have fought your kind." She removed her helm then, and her hair fell forward and framed her face between raven locks. "I was not pleased to hear of your raid on Helgrind, but I take it the assault is already over and was successful?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then my objections are for naught. I warn you, however, Eragon Shur'tugal, do not imperil yourself on such needlessly dangerous ventures. It is a cruel thing I must say, but true nevertheless, and it is this: your life is more important than your cousin's happiness."

"I swore an oath to Roran that I would help him."

"Then you swore recklessly, without considering the consequences."

"Would you have me abandon those I care about? If I did that, I would become a man to despise and distrust: an ill-formed vehicle for the hopes of the people who believe I will, *somehow*, bring low Galbatorix. And also, while Katrina was Galbatorix's hostage, Roran

was vulnerable to his manipulation."

The queen lifted one dagger-sharp eyebrow. "A vulnerability that you could have prevented Galbatorix from exploiting by tutoring Roran in certain oaths in this, the language of magic.… I do not counsel you to cast away your friends or family. That would be folly indeed. But keep you firmly in mind what is at stake: the entirety of Alagaësia. If we fail now, then Galbatorix's tyranny will extend over all the races, and his reign shall have no conceivable end. You are the tip of the spear that is our effort, and if the tip should break and be lost, then our spear shall bounce off the armor of our foe, and we too shall be lost."

Folds of lichen cracked underneath Eragon's fingers as he gripped the edge of the rock basin and suppressed the urge to make an impertinent remark about how any well-equipped warrior ought to have a sword or another weapon to rely upon besides a spear. He was frustrated by the direction the conversation had taken and eager to change the topic as quickly as he could; he had not contacted the queen so she could berate him as if he were a mere child. Nevertheless, allowing his impatience to dictate his actions would do nothing to further his cause, so he remained calm and replied, "Please believe me, Your Majesty, I take your concerns very, very seriously. I can only say that if I hadn't helped Roran, I would have been as miserable as he, and more so if he attempted to rescue Katrina by himself and died as a result. In either case, I would have been too upset to be of any use to you or anyone. Cannot we at least agree to differ on the subject? Neither of us shall convince the other."

"Very well," said Islanzadí. "We shall lay the matter to rest … for the present. But do not think you have escaped a proper investigation of your decision, Eragon Dragon Rider. It seems to me you display a frivolous attitude toward your larger responsibilities, and that is a serious matter. I shall discuss it with Oromis; he will decide what is to be done about you. Now tell me, why did you seek this audience?"

Eragon clenched his teeth several times before he could bring himself to, in a civil tone, explain the day's events, the reasons for his actions in regard to Sloan, and the punishment he envisioned for the butcher.

When he finished, Islanzadí whirled around and paced the circumference of the tent—her movements as lithe as a cat's—then stopped and said, "You chose to stay behind, in the middle of the Empire, to save the life of a murderer and a traitor. You are alone with this man, on foot, without supplies or weapons, save for magic, and your enemies are close behind. I see my earlier admonishments were more than justified. You—"

"Your Majesty, if you must be angry with me, be angry with me

later. I want to resolve this quickly so I can get some rest before dawn; I have many miles to cover tomorrow."

The queen nodded. "Your survival is all that matters. I shall be furious after we are done speaking.… As for your request, such a thing is unprecedented in our history. If I had been in your place, I would have killed Sloan and rid myself of the problem then and there."

"I know you would have. I once watched Arya slay a gyrfalcon who was injured, for she said its death was inevitable, and by killing it, she saved the bird hours of suffering. Perhaps I should have done the same with Sloan, but I couldn't. I think it would have been a choice I would have regretted for the rest of my life, or worse, one that would have made it easier for me to kill in the future."

Islanzadí sighed, and suddenly she appeared tired. Eragon reminded himself that she too had been fighting that day. "Oromis may have been your proper teacher, but you have proved yourself Brom's heir, not Oromis's. Brom is the only other person who managed to entangle himself in as many predicaments as you. Like him, you seem compelled to find the deepest patch of quicksand and then dive into it."

Eragon hid a smile, pleased by the comparison. "What of Sloan?" he asked. "His fate rests with you now."

Slowly, Islanzadí sat upon a stool next to the folding table, placed her hands in her lap, and gazed to one side of the seeing glass. Her countenance became one of enigmatic observation: a beautiful mask that concealed her thoughts and feelings, and one that Eragon could not penetrate, no matter how hard he strove. When she spoke, she said, "As you have seen fit to save this man's life, at no little trouble and effort on your own part, I cannot refuse your request and thereby render your sacrifice meaningless. If Sloan survives the ordeal you have set before him, then Gilderien the Wise shall allow him to pass, and Sloan shall have a room and a bed and food to eat. More I cannot promise, for what happens afterward will depend on Sloan himself, but if the conditions you named are met, then yes, we shall light his darkness."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. You are most generous."

"No, not generous. This war does not allow me to be generous, only practical. Go and do what you must, and be you careful, Eragon Shadeslayer."

"Your Majesty." He bowed. "If I may ask one last favor: would you please refrain from telling Arya, Nasuada, or any of the Varden of my current situation? I don't want them to worry about me any longer than they have to, and they'll learn of it soon enough from Saphira."

"I shall consider your request."

Eragon waited, but when she remained silent and it became clear

she had no intention of announcing her decision, he bowed a second time and again said, “Thank you.”

The glowing image on the surface of the water flickered and then vanished into darkness as Eragon ended the spell he had used to create it. He leaned back on his heels and gazed up at the multitude of stars, allowing his eyes to readjust to the faint, glimmering light they provided. Then he left the crumbling rock with the pool of water and retraced his path across the grass and scrub to the camp, where Sloan still sat upright, rigid as cast iron.

Eragon struck a pebble with his foot, and the resulting noise revealed his presence to Sloan, who snapped his head around, quick as a bird. “Have you made up your mind?” demanded Sloan.

“I have,” said Eragon. He stopped and squatted in front of the butcher, steadying himself with one hand on the ground. “Hear me well, for I don’t intend to repeat myself. You did what you did because of your love for Katrina, or so you say. Whether you admit it or not, I believe you also had other, baser motives in wanting to separate her from Roran: anger … hate … vindictiveness … and your own hurt.”

Sloan’s lips hardened into thin white lines. “You wrong me.”

“No, I don’t think so. Since my conscience prevents me from killing you, your punishment is to be the most terrible I could invent short of death. I’m convinced that what you said before is true, that Katrina is more important to you than anything else. Therefore, your punishment is this: you shall not see, touch, or talk with your daughter again, even unto your dying day, and you shall live with the knowledge that she is with Roran and they are happy together, without you.”

Sloan inhaled through his clenched teeth. “*That* is your punishment? Ha! You cannot enforce it; you have no prison to put me in.”

“I’m not finished. I will enforce it by having you swear oaths in the elves’ tongue—in the language of truth and magic—to abide by the terms of your sentence.”

“You can’t force me to give my word,” Sloan growled. “Not even if you torture me.”

“I can, and I won’t torture you. Furthermore, I will lay upon you a compulsion to travel northward until you reach the elf city of Ellesméra, which stands deep in the heart of Du Weldenvarden. You can try to resist the urge if you want, but no matter how long you fight it, the spell will irritate you like an unscratched itch until you obey its demands and travel to the elves’ realm.”

“Don’t you have the guts to kill me yourself?” asked Sloan. “You’re too much of a coward to put a blade to my neck, so you’ll make me wander the wilderness, blind and lost, until the weather or the beasts do me in?” He spat to the left of Eragon. “You’re nothing but the

yellow-bellied offspring of a canker-ridden bunter. You're a bastard, you are, and an unlicked cub; a dung-splattered, tallow-faced rock-gnasher; a puking villain and a noxious toad; the runty, mewling spawn of a greasy sow. I wouldn't give you my last crust if you were starving, or a drop of water if you were burning, or a beggar's grave if you were dead. You have pus for marrow and fungus for brains, and you're a scug-backed cheek-biter!"

There was, Eragon thought, something rather obscenely impressive about Sloan's swearing, although his admiration did not prevent him from wanting to strangle the butcher, or to at least respond in kind. What stayed his desire for retaliation, however, was his suspicion that Sloan was deliberately trying to infuriate him enough to strike down the older man and thus give him a quick and undeserved end.

Eragon said, "Bastard I may be, but not a murderer." Sloan drew a sharp breath. Before he could resume his torrent of abuse, Eragon added: "Wherever you go, you shall not want for food, nor will wild animals attack you. I will place certain enchantments around you that will keep men and beasts from troubling you and will cause animals to bring you sustenance when you need it."

"You can't do this," whispered Sloan. Even in the starlight, Eragon could see the last remnants of color drain from his skin, leaving him bone white. "You don't have the means. You don't have the right."

"I am a Dragon Rider. I have as much right as any king or queen."

Then Eragon, who had no interest in continuing to chastise Sloan, uttered the butcher's true name loud enough for him to hear. An expression of horror and revelation crawled across Sloan's face, and he threw his arms up before him and howled as if he had been stabbed. His cry was raw and jagged and desolate: the scream of a man condemned by his own nature to a fate he could not escape. He fell forward onto the palms of his hands and remained in that position and began to sob, his face obscured by shocks of hair.

Eragon watched, transfixed by Sloan's reaction. *Does learning your true name affect everyone like this? Would this happen to me as well?*

Hardening his heart to Sloan's misery, Eragon set about doing what he said he would. He repeated Sloan's true name and, word by word, schooled the butcher in the ancient language oaths that would ensure Sloan never met or contacted Katrina again. Sloan resisted with much weeping and wailing and grinding of his teeth, but no matter how vigorously he struggled, he had no choice but to obey whenever Eragon invoked his true name. And when they finished with the oaths, Eragon cast the five spells that would drive Sloan toward Ellesméra, would protect him from unprovoked violence, and would entice the birds and the beasts and the fish that dwelled in the rivers and lakes to feed him. Eragon fashioned the spells so they would derive their

energy from Sloan and not himself.

Midnight was a fading memory by the time Eragon completed the final incantation. Drunk with weariness, he leaned against the hawthorn staff. Sloan lay curled at his feet.

"Finished," said Eragon.

A garbled moan drifted up from the figure below. It sounded as if Sloan were attempting to say something. Frowning, Eragon knelt beside him. Sloan's cheeks were red and bloody where he had scraped them with his fingers. His nose ran, and tears dripped from the corner of his left eye socket, which was the less mutilated of the two. Pity and guilt welled up inside of Eragon; it gave him no pleasure to see Sloan reduced to such a low state. He was a broken man, stripped of everything he valued in life, including his self-delusions, and Eragon was the one who had broken him. The accomplishment left Eragon feeling soiled, as if he had done something shameful. *It was necessary*, he thought, *but no one should have to do what I did*.

Another moan emanated from Sloan, and then he said, "… only a piece of rope. I didn't mean to … Ismira … No, no, please no …" The butcher's ramblings subsided, and in the intervening silence, Eragon placed his hand on Sloan's upper arm. Sloan stiffened at the contact. "Eragon …," he whispered. "Eragon … I am blind, and you send me to walk the land … to walk the land alone. I am forsaken and forsworn. I know who I am and I cannot bear it. Help me; kill me! Free me of this agony."

On an impulse, Eragon pressed the hawthorn rod into Sloan's right hand and said, "Take my staff. Let it guide you on your journey."

"Kill me!"

"No."

A cracked shout burst from Sloan's throat, and he thrashed from side to side and pounded the earth with his fists. "Cruel, cruel you are!" His meager strength depleted, he curled into an even tighter ball, panting and whimpering.

Bending over him, Eragon placed his mouth close to Sloan's ear and whispered, "I am not without mercy, so I give you this hope: If you reach Ellesméra, you will find a home waiting for you. The elves will care for you and allow you to do whatever you want for the rest of your life, with one exception: once you enter Du Weldenvarden, you cannot leave.… Sloan, listen to me. When I was among the elves, I learned that a person's true name often changes as they age. Do you understand what that means? Who you are is not fixed for all of eternity. A man could forge himself anew if he so wanted."

Sloan made no reply.

Eragon left the staff next to Sloan and crossed to the other side of the camp and stretched out his full length on the ground. His eyes

already closed, he mumbled a spell that would rouse him before dawn and then allowed himself to drift into the soothing embrace of his waking rest.

The Gray Heath was cold, dark, and inhospitable when a low buzz sounded inside Eragon's head. "Letta," he said, and the buzzing ceased. Groaning as he stretched sore muscles, he got to his feet and lifted his arms over his head, shaking them to get the blood flowing. His back felt so bruised, he hoped it would be a long while before he had to swing a weapon again. He lowered his arms and then looked for Sloan.

The butcher was gone.

Eragon smiled as he saw a set of tracks, accompanied by the round imprint of the staff, leading away from the camp. The trail was confused and meandering, and yet its general direction was northward, toward the great forest of the elves.

I want him to succeed, Eragon thought with mild surprise. *I want him to succeed, because it will mean we may all have a chance to redeem ourselves from our mistakes. And if Sloan can mend the flaws in his character and come to terms with the evil he wrought, he will find his plight is not so bleak as he believes*. For Eragon had not told Sloan that if the butcher demonstrated that he truly regretted his crimes, reformed his ways, and lived as a better person, Queen Islanzadí would have her spellweavers restore his vision. However, it was a reward Sloan had to earn without knowing about its existence, else he might seek to trick the elves into bestowing it prematurely.

Eragon stared at the footprints for a long while, then lifted his gaze to the horizon and said, "Good luck."

Tired, but also content, he turned his back on Sloan's trail and began to run across the Gray Heath. To the southwest, he knew there stood the ancient sandstone formations where Brom lay encased in his diamond tomb. He longed to divert his path and to go pay his respects but dared not, for if Galbatorix had discovered the site, he would send his agents there to look for Eragon.

"I'll return," he said. "I promise you, Brom: someday I'll return."

He sped onward.

"But we are your people!"

Fadawar, a tall, high-nosed, black-skinned man, spoke with the same heavy emphasis and altered vowels Nasuada remembered hearing during her childhood in Farthen Dûr, when emissaries from her father's tribe would arrive and she would sit on Ajihad's lap and doze while they talked and smoked cardus weed.

Nasuada gazed up at Fadawar and wished she were six inches taller so that she could look the warlord and his four retainers straight in the eyes. Still, she was accustomed to men looming over her. She found it rather more disconcerting to be among a group of people who were as dark as she was. It was a novel experience not to be the object of people's curious stares and whispered comments.

She was standing in front of the carved chair where she held her audiences—one of the only solid chairs the Varden had brought with them on their campaign—inside her red command pavilion. The sun was close to setting, and its rays filtered through the right side of the pavilion as through stained glass and gave the contents a ruddy glow. A long, low table covered with scattered reports and maps occupied one-half of the pavilion.

Just outside the entrance to the large tent, she knew the six members of her personal guard—two humans, two dwarves, and two Urgals—were waiting with drawn weapons, ready to attack if they received the slightest indication she was in peril. Jörmundur, her oldest and most trusted commander, had saddled her with guards since the day Ajihad died, but never so many for so long. However, the day after the battle on the Burning Plains, Jörmundur expressed his deep and abiding concern for her safety, a concern, he said, that often kept him up nights with a burning stomach. As an assassin had tried to kill her in Aberon, and Murtagh had actually accomplished the deed in regard to King Hrothgar less than a week past, it was Jörmundur's opinion that Nasuada ought to create a force dedicated to her own defense. She had objected that such a measure would be an overreaction but had been unable to convince Jörmundur; he had threatened to abdicate his post if she refused to adopt what he considered to be proper precautions. Eventually, she acceded, only to spend the next hour haggling over how many guards she was to have. He had wanted twelve or more at all times. She wanted four or fewer. They settled on six, which still struck Nasuada as too many; she worried about appearing afraid or, worse, as if she were attempting to

intimidate those she met. Again her protestations had failed to sway Jörmundur. When she accused him of being a stubborn old worrywart, he laughed and said, “Better a stubborn old worrywart than a foolhardy youngling dead before his time.”

As the members of her guard changed every six hours, the total number of warriors assigned to protect Nasuada was four-and-thirty, including the ten additional warriors who remained in readiness to replace their comrades in case of sickness, injury, or death.

It was Nasuada who had insisted upon recruiting the force from each of the three mortal races arrayed against Galbatorix. By doing so, she hoped to foster greater solidarity among them, as well as to convey that she represented the interests of all the races under her command, not just the humans. She would have included the elves as well, but at the moment, Arya was the only elf who fought alongside the Varden and their allies, and the twelve spellcasters Islanzadí had sent to protect Eragon had yet to arrive. To Nasuada’s disappointment, her human and dwarf guards had been hostile to the Urgals they served with, a reaction she anticipated but had been unable to avert or mitigate. It would, she knew, take more than one shared battle to ease the tensions between races that had fought and hated each other for more generations than she cared to count. Still, she viewed it as encouraging that the warriors chose to name their corps the Nighthawks, for the title was a play upon both her coloring and the fact that the Urgals invariably referred to her as Lady Nightstalker.

Although she would never admit it to Jörmundur, Nasuada had quickly come to appreciate the increased sense of security her guards provided. In addition to being masters of their chosen weapons—whether they were the humans’ swords, the dwarves’ axes, or the Urgals’ eccentric collection of instruments—many of the warriors were skilled spellweavers. And they had all sworn their undying loyalty to her in the ancient language. Since the day the Nighthawks first assumed their duties, they had not left Nasuada alone with another person, save for Farica, her handmaid.

That was, until now.

Nasuada had sent them out of the pavilion because she knew her meeting with Fadawar might lead to the type of bloodshed the Nighthawks’ sense of duty would require them to prevent. Even so, she was not entirely defenseless. She had a dagger hidden in the folds of her dress, and an even smaller knife in the bodice of her undergarments, and the prescient witch-child, Elva, was standing just behind the curtain that backed Nasuada’s chair, ready to intercede if need be.

Fadawar tapped his four-foot-long scepter against the ground. The chased rod was made of solid gold, as was his fantastic array of

jewelry: gold bangles covered his forearms; a breastplate of hammered gold armored his chest; long, thick chains of gold hung around his neck; embossed disks of white gold stretched the lobes of his ears; and upon the top of his head rested a resplendent gold crown of such huge proportions, Nasuada wondered how Fadawar's neck could support the weight without buckling and how such a monumental piece of architecture remained fixed in place. It seemed one would have to bolt the edifice, which was at least two and a half feet tall, to its bony bedrock in order to keep it from toppling over.

Fadawar's men were garbed in the same fashion, although less opulently. The gold they wore served to proclaim not only their wealth but also the status and deeds of each individual and the skill of their tribe's far-famed craftsmen. As either nomads or city dwellers, the dark-skinned peoples of Alagaësia had long been renowned for the quality of their jewelry, which at its best rivaled that of the dwarves.

Nasuada owned several pieces of her own, but she had chosen not to wear them. Her poor raiment could not compete with Fadawar's splendor. Also, she believed it would not be wise to affiliate herself with any one group, no matter how rich or influential, when she had to deal with and speak for all the differing factions of the Varden. If she displayed partiality toward one or another, her ability to control the whole lot of them would diminish.

Which was the basis of her argument with Fadawar.

Fadawar again jabbed his scepter into the ground. "Blood is the most important thing! First come your responsibilities to your family, then to your tribe, then to your warlord, then to the gods above and below, and only then to your king and to your nation, if you have them. That is how Unulukuna intended men to live, and that is how we should live if we want to be happy. Are you brave enough to spit on the shoes of the Old One? If a man does not help his family, whom can he depend upon to help him? Friends are fickle, but family is forever."

"You ask me," said Nasuada, "to give positions of power to your fellow kinsmen because you are my mother's cousin and because my father was born among you. This I would be happy to do if your kinsmen could fulfill those positions better than anyone else in the Varden, but nothing you have said thus far has convinced me that is so. And before you squander more of your gilt-tongued eloquence, you should know that appeals based upon our shared blood are meaningless to me. I would give your request greater consideration if ever you had done more to support my father than send trinkets and empty promises to Farthen Dûr. Only now that victory and influence are mine have you made yourself known to me. Well, my parents are dead, and I say I have no family but myself. You are my people, yes,

but nothing more."

Fadawar narrowed his eyes and lifted his chin and said, "A woman's pride is always without sense. You shall fail without our support."

He had switched to his native language, which forced Nasuada to respond in kind. She hated him for it. Her halting speech and uncertain tones exposed her unfamiliarity with her birth tongue, emphasizing that she had not grown up in their tribe but was an outsider. The ploy undermined her authority. "I always welcome new allies," she said. "However, I cannot indulge in favoritism, nor should you have need of it. Your tribes are strong and well gifted. They should be able to rise quickly through the ranks of the Varden without having to rely upon the charity of others. Are you starving dogs to sit whining at my table, or are you men who can feed themselves? If you can, then I look forward to working with you to better the Varden's lot and to defeat Galbatorix."

"Bah!" exclaimed Fadawar. "Your offer is as false as you are. We shall not do servants' work; we are the chosen ones. You insult us, you do. You stand there and you smile, but your heart is full of scorpion's poison."

Stifling her anger, Nasuada attempted to calm the warlord. "It was not my intent to cause offense. I was only trying to explain my position. I have no enmity for the wandering tribes, nor have I any special love for them. Is that such a bad thing?"

"It is worse than bad, it is bald-faced treachery! Your father made certain requests of us based upon our relation, and now you ignore our service and turn us away like empty-handed beggars!"

A sense of resignation overwhelmed Nasuada. *So Elva was right—it is inevitable*, she thought. A thrill of fear and excitement coursed through her. *If it must be, then I have no reason to maintain this charade*. Allowing her voice to ring forth, she said, "Requests that you did not honor half the time."

"We did!"

"You did not. And even if you were telling the truth, the Varden's position is too precarious for me to give you something for nothing. You ask for favors, yet tell me, what do you offer in return? Will you help fund the Varden with your gold and jewels?"

"Not directly, but—"

"Will you give me the use of your craftsmen, free of charge?"

"We could not—"

"How, then, do you intend to earn these boons? You cannot pay with warriors; your men already fight for me, whether in the Varden or in King Orrin's army. Be content with what you have, Warlord, and do not seek more than is rightfully yours."

"You twist the truth to suit your own selfish goals. I seek what is

rightfully ours! That is why I am here. You talk and you talk, yet your words are meaningless, for by your actions, you have betrayed us." The bangles on his arms clattered together as he gestured, as if before an audience of thousands. "You admit we are your people. Then do you still follow our customs and worship our gods?"

Here is the turning point, thought Nasuada. She could lie and claim she had abandoned the old ways, but if she did, the Varden would lose Fadawar's tribes, and other nomads besides, once they heard of her statement. *We need them. We need everyone we can get if we're to have the slightest chance of toppling Galbatorix*.

"I do," she said.

"Then I say you are unfit to lead the Varden, and as is my right, I challenge you to the Trial of the Long Knives. If you are triumphant, we shall bow to you and never again question your authority. But if you lose, then you shall step aside, and I shall take your place as head of the Varden."

Nasuada noted the spark of glee that lit Fadawar's eyes. *This is what he wanted all along*, she realized. *He would have invoked the trial even if I had complied with his demands*. She said, "Perhaps I am mistaken, but I thought it was tradition that whoever won assumed command of his rival's tribes, as well as his own. Is that not so?" She almost laughed at the expression of dismay that flashed across Fadawar's face. *You didn't expect me to know that, did you?*

"It is."

"I accept your challenge, then, with the understanding that should I win, your crown and scepter will be mine. Are we agreed?"

Fadawar scowled and nodded. "We are." He stabbed his scepter deep enough into the ground that it stood upright by itself, then grasped the first bangle on his left arm and began to work it down over his hand.

"Wait," said Nasuada. Going to the table that filled the other side of the pavilion, she picked up a small brass bell and rang it twice, paused, and then rang it four times.

Only a moment or two passed before Farica entered the tent. She cast a frank gaze at Nasuada's guests, then curtsied to the lot of them and said, "Yes, Mistress?"

Nasuada gave Fadawar a nod. "We may proceed." Then she addressed her handmaid: "Help me out of my dress; I don't want to ruin it."

The older woman looked shocked by the request. "Here, Ma'am? In front of these … men?"

"Yes, here. And be quick about it too! I shouldn't have to argue with my own servant." Nasuada was harsher than she meant to be, but her heart was racing and her skin was incredibly, terribly sensitive; the

soft linen of her undergarments seemed as abrasive as canvas. Patience and courtesy were beyond her now. All she could concentrate on was her upcoming ordeal.

Nasuada stood motionless as Farica picked and pulled at the laces to her dress, which extended from her shoulder blades to the base of her spine. When the cords were loose enough, Farica lifted Nasuada's arms out of the sleeves, and the shell of bunched fabric dropped in a pile around Nasuada's feet, leaving her standing almost naked in her white chemise. She fought back a shiver as the four warriors examined her, feeling vulnerable beneath their covetous looks. Ignoring them, she stepped forward, out of the dress, and Farica snatched the garment out of the dirt.

Across from Nasuada, Fadawar had been busy removing the bangles from his forearms, revealing the embroidered sleeves of his robes underneath. Finished, he lifted off his massive crown and handed it to one of his retainers.

The sound of voices outside the pavilion delayed further progress. Marching through the entrance, a message boy—Jarsha was his name, Nasuada remembered—planted himself a foot or two inside and proclaimed: "King Orrin of Surda, Jörmundur of the Varden, Trianna of Du Vrangr Gata, and Naako and Ramusewa of the Inapashunna tribe." Jarsha very pointedly kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling while he spoke.

Snapping about, Jarsha departed and the congregation he had announced entered, with Orrin at the vanguard. The king saw Fadawar first and greeted him, saying, "Ah, Warlord, this *is* unexpected. I trust you and—" Astonishment suffused his youthful face as he beheld Nasuada. "Why, Nasuada, what is the meaning of this?"

"I should like to know that as well," rumbled Jörmundur. He gripped the hilt of his sword and glowered at anyone who dared stare at her too openly.

"I have summoned you here," she said, "to witness the Trial of the Long Knives between Fadawar and myself and to afterward speak the truth of the outcome to everyone who asks."

The two gray-haired tribesmen, Naako and Ramusewa, appeared alarmed by her revelation; they leaned close together and began to whisper. Trianna crossed her arms—baring the snake bracelet coiled around one slim wrist—but otherwise betrayed no reaction. Jörmundur swore and said, "Have you taken leave of your senses, my Lady? This is madness. You cannot—"

"I can, and I will."

"My Lady, if you do, I—"

"Your concern is noted, but my decision is final. And I forbid

anyone from interfering." She could tell he longed to disobey her order, but as much as he wanted to shield her from harm, loyalty had ever been Jörmundur's predominant trait.

"But, Nasuada," said King Orrin. "This trial, is not it where—"

"It is."

"Blast it, then; why don't you give up this mad venture? You would have to be addled to carry it out."

"I have already given my word to Fadawar."

The mood in the pavilion became even more somber. That she had given her word meant she could not rescind her promise without revealing herself to be an honorless oath-breaker that fair-minded men would have no choice but to curse and shun. Orrin faltered for a moment, but he persisted with his questions: "To what end? That is, if you should lose—"

"If I should lose, the Varden shall no longer answer to me, but to Fadawar."

Nasuada had expected a storm of protest. Instead, there came a silence, wherein the hot anger that animated King Orrin's visage cooled and sharpened and acquired a brittle temper. "I do not appreciate your choice to endanger our entire cause." To Fadawar, he said, "Will you not be reasonable and release Nasuada from her obligation? I will reward you richly if you agree to abandon this ill-conceived ambition of yours."

"I am rich already," said Fadawar. "I have no need for your tin-tainted gold. No, nothing but the Trial of the Long Knives can compensate me for the slander Nasuada has aimed at my people and me."

"Bear witness now," said Nasuada.

Orrin clenched tight the folds of his robes, but he bowed and said, "Aye, I will bear witness."

From within their voluminous sleeves, Fadawar's four warriors produced small, hairy goat-hide drums. Squatting, they placed the drums between their knees and struck up a furious beat, pounding so fast, their hands were sooty smudges in the air. The rough music obliterated all other sound, as well as the host of frantic thoughts that had been bedeviling Nasuada. Her heart felt as if it were keeping pace with the manic tempo that assaulted her ears.

Without missing a single note, the oldest of Fadawar's men reached inside his vest and, from there, drew two long, curved knives that he tossed toward the peak of the tent. Nasuada watched the knives tumble haft over blade, fascinated by the beauty of their motion.

When it was close enough, she lifted her arm and caught her knife. The opal-studded hilt stung her palm.

Fadawar successfully intercepted his weapon as well.

He then grasped the left cuff of his garment and pushed the sleeve past his elbow. Nasuada kept her eyes fixed upon Fadawar's forearm as he did. His limb was thick and muscled, but she deemed that of no importance; athletic gifts would not help him win their contest. What she looked for instead were the telltale ridges that, if they existed, would lie across the belly of his forearm.

She observed five of them.

Five! she thought. *So many*. Her confidence wavered as she contemplated the evidence of Fadawar's fortitude. The only thing that kept her from losing her nerve altogether was Elva's prediction: the girl had said that, in this, Nasuada would prevail. Nasuada clung to the memory as if it were her only child. *She said I can do this, so I must be able to outlast Fadawar.… I must be able to!*

As he was the one who had issued the challenge, Fadawar went first. He held his left arm straight out from his shoulder, palm-upward; placed the blade of his knife against his forearm, just below the crease of his elbow; and drew the mirror-polished edge across his flesh. His skin split like an overripe berry, blood welling from within the crimson crevice.

He locked gazes with Nasuada.

She smiled and set her own knife against her arm. The metal was as cold as ice. Theirs was a test of wills to discover who could withstand the most cuts. The belief was that whoever aspired to become the chief of a tribe, or even a warlord, should be willing to endure more pain than anyone else for the sake of his or her people. Otherwise, how could the tribes trust their leaders to place the concerns of the community before their own selfish desires? It was Nasuada's opinion that the practice encouraged extremism, but she also understood the ability of the gesture to earn people's trust. Although the Trial of the Long Knives was specific to the dark-skinned tribes, besting Fadawar would solidify her standing among the Varden and, she hoped, King Orrin's followers.

She offered a quick plea for strength to Gokukara, the praying mantis goddess, and then pulled on the knife. The sharpened steel slid through her skin so easily, she struggled to avoid cutting too deeply. She shuddered at the sensation. She wanted to fling the knife away and clutch her wound and scream.

She did none of those things. She kept her muscles slack; if she tensed, the process would hurt all the more. And she kept smiling as, slowly, the blade mutilated her body. The cut ended after only three seconds, but in those seconds, her outraged flesh delivered a thousand shrieking complaints, and each one nearly made her stop. As she lowered the knife, she noticed that while the tribesmen still beat upon their drums, she heard naught but the pounding of her pulse.

Then Fadawar slashed himself a second time. The cords in his neck stood in high relief, and his jugular vein bulged as if it would burst while the knife carved its bloody path.

Nasuada saw it was her turn again. Knowing what to expect only increased her fear. Her instinct for self-preservation—an instinct that had served her well on all other occasions—warred against the commands she sent to her arm and hand. Desperate, she concentrated upon her desire to preserve the Varden and overthrow Galbatorix: the two causes to which she had devoted her entire being. In her mind, she saw her father and Jörmundur and Eragon and the people of the Varden, and she thought, *For them! I do this for them. I was born to serve, and this is my service.*

She made the incision.

A moment later, Fadawar opened up a third gash on his forearm, as did Nasuada on her own.

The fourth cut followed soon thereafter.

And the fifth …

A strange lethargy overtook Nasuada. She was so very tired, and cold as well. It occurred to her then that tolerance of pain might not decide the trial, but rather who would faint first from loss of blood. Shifting streams of it ran across her wrist and down her fingers, splashing into the thick pool by her feet. A similar, if larger, puddle gathered around Fadawar's boots.

The row of gaping red slits on the warlord's arm reminded Nasuada of the gills of a fish, a thought that for some reason seemed incredibly funny to her; she had to bite her tongue to keep from giggling.

With a howl, Fadawar succeeded in completing his sixth cut. "Best that, you feckless witch!" he shouted over the noise of the drums, and dropped to one knee.

She did.

Fadawar trembled as he transferred his knife from his right hand to his left; tradition dictated a maximum of six cuts per arm, else you risked severing the veins and tendons close to the wrist. As Nasuada imitated his movement, King Orrin sprang between them and said, "Stop! I won't allow this to continue. You're going to kill yourselves."

He reached toward Nasuada, then jumped back as she stabbed at him. "Don't meddle," she growled between her teeth.

Now Fadawar started on his right forearm, releasing a spray of blood from his rigid muscles. *He's clenching,* she realized. She hoped the mistake would be enough to break him.

Nasuada could not help herself; she uttered a wordless cry when the knife parted her skin. The razor edge burned like a white-hot wire. Halfway through the cut, her traumatized left arm twitched. The knife swerved as a result, leaving her with a long, jagged laceration twice as

deep as the others. Her breath stopped while she weathered the agony. *I can't go on*, she thought. *I can't … I can't! It's too much to bear. I'd rather die.… Oh please, let it end!* It gave her some relief to indulge in those and other desperate complaints, but in the depths of her heart, she knew she would never give up.

For the eighth time, Fadawar positioned his blade above one of his forearms, and there he held it, the pale metal suspended a quarter of an inch away from his sable skin. He remained thus as sweat dripped over his eyes and his wounds shed ruby tears. It appeared as though his courage might have failed him, but then he snarled and, with a quick yank, sliced his arm.

His hesitation bolstered Nasuada's flagging strength. A fierce exhilaration overtook her, transmuting her pain into an almost pleasurable sensation. She matched Fadawar's effort and then, spurred onward by her sudden, heedless disregard for her own well-being, brought the knife down again.

"Best *that*," she whispered.

The prospect of having to make two cuts in a row—one to equal the number of Nasuada's and one to advance the contest—seemed to intimidate Fadawar. He blinked, licked his lips, and adjusted his grip on his knife three times before he raised the weapon over his arm.

His tongue darted out and moistened his lips again.

A spasm distorted his left hand, and the knife dropped from his contorted fingers, burying itself upright in the ground.

He picked it up. Underneath his robe, his chest rose and fell with frantic speed. Lifting the knife, he touched it to his arm; it promptly drew a small trickle of blood. Fadawar's jaw knotted and writhed, and then a shudder ran the length of his spine and he doubled over, pressing his injured arms against his belly. "I submit," he said.

The drums stopped.

The ensuing silence lasted for only an instant before King Orrin, Jörmundur, and everyone else filled the pavilion with their overlapping exclamations.

Nasuada paid no attention to their remarks. Groping behind herself, she found her chair and sank into it, eager to take the weight off her legs before they gave way beneath her. She strove to remain conscious as her vision dimmed and flickered; the last thing she wanted to do was pass out in front of the tribesmen. A gentle pressure on her shoulder alerted her to the fact that Farica was standing next to her, holding a pile of bandages.

"My Lady, may I tend to you?" asked Farica, her expression both concerned and hesitant, as if she were uncertain how Nasuada would react.

Nasuada nodded her approval.

As Farica began to wind strips of linen around her arms, Naako and Ramusewa approached. They bowed, and Ramusewa said, “Never before has anyone endured so many cuts in the Trial of the Long Knives. Both you and Fadawar proved your mettle, but you are undoubtedly the victor. We shall tell our people of your achievement, and they shall give you their fealty.”

“Thank you,” said Nasuada. She closed her eyes as the throbbing in her arms increased.

“My Lady.”

Around her, Nasuada heard a confused medley of sounds, which she made no effort to decipher, preferring instead to retreat deep inside herself, where her pain was no longer so immediate and menacing. She floated in the womb of a boundless black space, illuminated by formless blobs of ever-changing color.

Her respite was interrupted by the voice of Trianna as the sorceress said, “Leave off what you’re doing, handmaid, and remove those bandages so I can heal your mistress.”

Nasuada opened her eyes to see Jörmundur, King Orrin, and Trianna standing over her. Fadawar and his men had departed the pavilion. “No,” said Nasuada.

The group looked at her with surprise, and then Jörmundur said, “Nasuada, your thoughts are clouded. The trial is over. You don’t have to live with these cuts any longer. In any event, we have to stanch your bleeding.”

“Farica is doing that well enough as is. I shall have a healer stitch my wounds and make a poultice to reduce the swelling, and that is all.”

“But why!”

“The Trial of the Long Knives requires participants to allow their wounds to heal at their natural pace. Otherwise, we won’t have experienced the full measure of pain the trial entails. If I violate the rule, Fadawar will be declared the victor.”

“Will you at least allow me to alleviate your suffering?” asked Trianna. “I know several spells that can eliminate any amount of pain. If you had consulted me beforehand, I could have arranged it so that you could lop off an entire limb without the slightest discomfort.”

Nasuada laughed and allowed her head to loll to the side, feeling rather giddy. “My answer would have been the same then as it is now: trickery is dishonorable. I had to win the trial without deceit so no one can question my leadership in the future.”

In a deadly soft tone, King Orrin said, “But what if you had lost?”

“I could not lose. Even if it meant my death, I never would have allowed Fadawar to gain control of the Varden.”

Grave, Orrin studied her for a long while. “I believe you. Only, is

the tribes' loyalty worth such a great sacrifice? You are not so common that we can easily replace you."

"The tribes' loyalty? No. But this will have an effect far beyond the tribes, as you must know. It should help unify our forces. And that is a prize valuable enough for me to willingly brave a host of unpleasant deaths."

"Pray tell, what would the Varden have gained if you *had* died today? No benefit would exist then. Your legacy would be discouragement, chaos, and likely ruin."

Whenever Nasuada drank wine, mead, and especially strong spirits, she became most cautious with her speech and motions, for even if she did not notice it at once, she knew the alcohol degraded her judgment and coordination, and she had no desire to behave inappropriately or to give others an advantage in their dealings with her.

Pain-drunk as she was, she later realized she should have been as vigilant in her discussion with Orrin as if she had imbibed three tankards of the dwarves' blackberry-honey mead. If she had, her well-developed sense of courtesy would have prevented her from replying so: "You worry like an old man, Orrin. I had to do this, and it is done. 'Tis bootless to fret about it now.… I took a risk, yes. But we cannot defeat Galbatorix unless we dance along the very cliff edge of disaster. You are a king. You ought to understand that danger is the mantle a person assumes when he—or she—has the arrogance to decide the fates of other men."

"I understand well enough," growled Orrin. "My family and I have defended Surda against the Empire's encroachment every day of our lives for generations, while the Varden merely hid in Farthen Dûr and leeched off Hrothgar's generosity." His robes swirled about him as he turned and stalked out of the pavilion.

"That was badly handled, my Lady," observed Jörmundur.

Nasuada winced as Farica tugged on her bandages. "I know," she gasped. "I'll mend his broken pride tomorrow."

A gap appeared then in Nasuada's memories: an absence of sensory information so complete, she only became aware of the missing time when it dawned upon her that Jörmundur was shaking her shoulder and saying something loudly. It took her several moments to decipher the sounds coming out of his mouth, and then she heard: "… keep looking at me, blast it! That's the thing! Don't go to sleep again. You won't wake up again if you do."

"You can let go of me, Jörmundur," she said, and mustered a weak smile. "I'm all right now."

"And my uncle Undset was an elf."

"Wasn't he?"

"Bah! You are the same as your father: always ignoring caution when it comes to your own safety. The tribes can rot in their bloody old customs, for all I care. Let a healer at you. You're in no condition to make decisions."

"That's why I waited until it was evening. See, the sun is almost down. I can rest tonight, and tomorrow I will be able to deal with the affairs that require my attention."

Farica appeared from the side and hovered over Nasuada. "Oh, Ma'am, you gave us quite a fright there."

"Still are, as a matter of fact," muttered Jörmundur.

"Well, I'm better now." Nasuada pushed herself upright in the chair, ignoring the heat from her forearms. "You can both go; I shall be fine. Jörmundur, send word to Fadawar that he may remain chief of his own tribe, so long as he swears loyalty to me as his warlord. He is too skilled a leader to waste. And, Farica, on your way back to your tent, please inform Angela the herbalist that I require her services. She agreed to mix some tonics and poultices for me."

"I won't leave you alone in this condition," declared Jörmundur.

Farica nodded. "Begging your pardon, my Lady, but I agree with him. It's not safe."

Nasuada glanced toward the entrance to the pavilion, to ensure none of the Nighthawks were close enough to overhear, and then dropped her voice into a low whisper. "I shall not *be* alone." Jörmundur's eyebrows shot up, and an alarmed expression crossed Farica's face. "I am *never* alone. Do you understand?"

"You have taken certain … precautions, my Lady?" asked Jörmundur.

"I have."

Both her caretakers appeared uneasy with her assurance, and Jörmundur said, “Nasuada, your safety is my responsibility; I need to know what additional protection you may have and who exactly has access to your person.”

“No,” she said gently. Seeing the hurt and indignation that appeared in Jörmundur’s eyes, she continued. “It’s not that I doubt your loyalty —far from it. Only, this I must have for myself. For the sake of my own peace of mind, I need to have a dagger no one else can see: a hidden weapon tucked up my sleeve, if you will. Consider it a flaw in my character, but do not torment yourself by imagining my choice is in any way a criticism of how you perform your duties.”

“My Lady.” Jörmundur bowed, a formality he almost never used with her.

Nasuada lifted her hand, indicating her permission for them to leave, and Jörmundur and Farica hurried from the red pavilion.

For a long minute, perhaps two, the only sound Nasuada heard was the harsh cry of gore-crows circling above the Varden’s encampment. Then, from behind her, there came a slight rustling, like that of a mouse nosing about for food. Turning her head, she saw Elva slip out of her hiding place, emerging between two panels of fabric into the main chamber of the pavilion.

Nasuada studied her.

The girl’s unnatural growth had continued. When Nasuada first met her but a short while ago, Elva had appeared between three and four years old. Now she looked closer to six. Her plain dress was black, with a few folds of purple around the neck and shoulders. Her long, straight hair was even darker: a liquid void that flowed down to the small of her back. Her sharp-angled face was bone white, for she rarely ventured outside. The dragon mark on her brow was silver. And her eyes, her violet eyes, contained a jaded, cynical air—the result of Eragon’s blessing that was a curse, for it forced her to both endure other people’s pain and also try to prevent it. The recent battle had almost killed her, what with the combined agony of thousands beating upon her mind, even though one of Du Vrangr Gata had placed her in an artificial slumber for the duration of the fighting, in an attempt to protect her. Only recently had the girl begun to speak and take interest in her surroundings again.

She wiped her rosebud mouth with the back of her hand, and Nasuada asked, “Were you ill?”

Elva shrugged. “The pain I’m used to, but it never gets any easier to resist Eragon’s spell.… I am hard to impress, Nasuada, but you are a strong woman to withstand so many cuts.”

Even though Nasuada had heard it many times, Elva’s voice still inspired a thrill of alarm in her, for it was the bitter, mocking voice of

a world-weary adult, not that of a child. She struggled to ignore it as she responded: “You are stronger. I did not have to suffer through Fadawar’s pain as well. Thank you for staying with me. I know what it must have cost you, and I’m grateful.”

“Grateful? Ha! There’s an empty word for me, *Lady Nightstalker.*” Elva’s small lips twisted in a misshapen smile. “Have you anything to eat? I’m famished.”

“Farica left some bread and wine behind those scrolls,” said Nasuada, pointing across the pavilion. She watched the girl make her way to the food and begin wolfing down the bread, cramming large chunks into her mouth. “At least you won’t have to live like this for much longer. As soon as Eragon returns, he’ll remove the spell.”

“Perhaps.” After she had devoured half a loaf, Elva paused. “I lied about the Trial of the Long Knives.”

“What do you mean?”

“I foresaw that you would lose, not win.”

“What!”

“If I had allowed events to take their course, your nerve would have broken on the seventh cut and Fadawar would be sitting where you are now. So I told you what you needed to hear in order to prevail.”

A chill crept over Nasuada. If what Elva said was true, then she was in the witch-child’s debt more than ever. Still, she disliked being manipulated, even if it was for her own benefit. “I see. It seems I must thank you once again.”

Elva laughed then, a brittle sound. “And you hate every moment of it, don’t you? No matter. You need not worry about offending me, Nasuada. We are useful to each other, no more.”

Nasuada was relieved when one of the dwarves guarding the pavilion, the captain of that particular watch, banged his hammer against his shield and proclaimed, “The herbalist Angela requests an audience with you, Lady Nightstalker.”

“Granted,” said Nasuada, raising her voice.

Angela bustled into the pavilion, carrying several bags and baskets looped over her arms. As always, her curly hair formed a stormy cloud around her face, which was pinched with concern. At her heels padded the werecat Solembum, in his animal form. He immediately angled toward Elva and began to rub against her legs, arching his back as he did.

Depositing her luggage on the ground, Angela rolled her shoulders and said, “Really! Between you and Eragon, I seem to spend most of my time among the Varden healing people too silly to realize they need to *avoid* getting chopped into tiny little pieces.” While she spoke, the short herbalist marched over to Nasuada and began unwinding the bandages around her right forearm. She clucked with disapproval.

“Normally, this is when the healer asks her patient how she is, and the patient lies through her teeth and says, ‘Oh, not too bad,’ and the healer says, ‘Good, good. Be cheery and you’ll make a fine recovery.’ I think it’s obvious, however, you’re *not* about to start running around and leading charges against the Empire. Far from it.”

“I will recover, won’t I?” asked Nasuada.

“You would if I could use magic to seal up these wounds. Since I can’t, it’s a bit harder to tell. You’ll have to muddle along like most people do and hope none of these cuts get infected.” She paused in her work and gazed directly at Nasuada. “You do realize these will scar?”

“It will be what it will be.”

“True enough.”

Nasuada stifled a groan and gazed upward as Angela stitched each of her wounds and then covered them with a thick, wet mat of pulped plants. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Solembum jump onto the table and sit next to Elva. Extending a large, shaggy paw, the werecat hooked a piece of bread off Elva’s plate and nibbled on the morsel, his white fangs flashing. The black tassels on his oversized ears quivered as he swiveled his ears from side to side, listening to metal-clad warriors walking past the red pavilion.

“Barzûl,” muttered Angela. “Only men would think of cutting themselves to determine who the pack leader is. Idiots!”

It hurt to laugh, but Nasuada could not help herself. “Indeed,” she said after her fit subsided.

Just as Angela finished retying the last strip of cloth around Nasuada’s arms, the dwarf captain outside the pavilion shouted, “Halt!” and there came a chorus of shimmering, bell-like notes as the human guards crossed their swords, barring the way to whoever sought entrance.

Without pausing to think, Nasuada drew the four-inch knife from the sheath sewn within the bodice of her chemise. It was difficult for her to grasp the hilt, as her fingers felt thick and clumsy and the muscles in her arm were slow to respond. It was as if the limb had fallen asleep, save for the sharp, burning lines scribed into her flesh.

Angela also pulled a dagger from somewhere in her clothes, and she placed herself before Nasuada and muttered a line of the ancient language. Leaping to the ground, Solembum crouched next to Angela. His fur stood on end, making him appear larger than most dogs. He growled low in his throat.

Elva continued eating, seemingly unperturbed by the commotion. She examined the morsel of bread she was holding between her thumb and index finger, as one might inspect a strange species of insect, and then dipped it into a goblet of wine and popped the bread into her mouth.

“My Lady!” shouted a man. “Eragon and Saphira fast approach from the northeast!”

Nasuada sheathed her knife. Pushing herself out of her chair, she said to Angela, “Help me dress.”

Angela held the garment open in front of Nasuada, who stepped into it. Then Angela gently guided Nasuada’s arms into the sleeves and, when they were in place, set about lacing up the back of the dress. Elva joined her. Together, they soon had Nasuada properly attired.

Nasuada surveyed her arms and saw no trace of her bandages. “Should I hide or reveal my injuries?” she asked.

“That depends,” said Angela. “Do you think showing them will increase your standing or encourage your enemies, because they assume you are weak and vulnerable? The question is actually a rather philosophical one, predicated on whether when looking at a man who has lost a big toe, you say, ‘Oh, he’s a cripple’ or ‘Oh, he was smart or strong or lucky enough to escape worse injury.’ ”

“You make the strangest comparisons.”

“Thank you.”

“The Trial of the Long Knives is a contest of strength,” said Elva. “That is well known among the Varden and Surdans. Are you proud of your strength, Nasuada?”

“Cut off the sleeves,” said Nasuada. When they hesitated, she said, “Go on! At the elbows. Don’t mind the dress; I shall have it repaired later.”

With a few deft movements, Angela removed the sections Nasuada had identified and dropped the excess fabric on the table.

Nasuada lifted her chin. “Elva, if you sense I’m about to faint, please tell Angela and have her catch me. Shall we, then?” The three of them gathered into a tight formation, with Nasuada at the lead. Solembum walked alone.

As they exited the red pavilion, the dwarf captain barked, “Stations!” and the six present members of the Nighthawks ranged themselves around Nasuada’s group: the humans and dwarves fore and aft, and the hulking Kull—Urgals who stood eight feet and taller—on either side.

Dusk spread its gold and purple wings over the Varden’s encampment, lending a sense of mystery to the rows of canvas tents that extended beyond the limits of Nasuada’s sight. Deepening shadows presaged the advent of night, and countless torches and watchfires already glowed pure and bright in the warm twilight. The sky was clear to the east. South, a long, low cloud of black smoke hid the horizon and the Burning Plains, which were a league and a half away. West, a line of beeches and aspens marked the path of the Jiet

River, upon which floated the *Dragon Wing*, the ship Jeod and Roran and the other villagers from Carvahall had pirated. But Nasuada had eyes only for the north, and the glittering shape of Saphira descending thence. Light from the fading sun still illuminated her, cloaking her in a blue halo. She appeared like a cluster of stars falling from the heavens.

The sight was so majestic, Nasuada stood transfixed for a moment, thankful she was fortunate enough to witness it. *They're safe!* she thought, and breathed a sigh of relief.

The warrior who had brought word of Saphira's arrival—a thin man with a large, untrimmed beard—bowed and then pointed. "My Lady, as you can see, I spoke the truth."

"Yes. You did well. You must have exceedingly sharp eyes to have spotted Saphira earlier. What is your name?"

"Fletcher, son of Harden, my Lady."

"You have my thanks, Fletcher. You may return to your post now."

With another bow, the man trotted off toward the edge of the camp.

Keeping her gaze fixed upon Saphira, Nasuada picked her way between the rows of tents toward the large clearing set aside as a place for Saphira to land and take off. Her guards and companions accompanied her, but she paid them little heed, eager as she was to rendezvous with Eragon and Saphira. She had spent much of the previous days worrying about them, both as the leader of the Varden and, somewhat to her surprise, as a friend.

Saphira flew as fast as any hawk or falcon Nasuada had seen, but she was still a number of miles away from the camp, and it took her almost ten minutes to traverse the remaining distance. In that time, a massive crowd of warriors gathered around the clearing: humans, dwarves, and even a contingent of gray-skinned Urgals, led by Nar Garzhvog, who spit at the men closest to them. Also in the congregation were King Orrin and his courtiers, who positioned themselves opposite Nasuada; Narheim, the dwarf ambassador who had assumed Orik's duties since Orik left for Farthen Dûr; Jörmundur; the other members of the Council of Elders; and Arya.

The tall elf woman wove her way through the crowd toward Nasuada. Even with Saphira nigh upon them, men and women alike tore their gaze from the sky to watch Arya's progress, she presented such a striking image. Dressed all in black, she wore leggings like a man, a sword on her hip, and a bow and quiver on her back. Her skin was the color of light honey. Her face was as angular as a cat's. And she moved with a slinking, muscular grace that bespoke her skill with a blade, and also her supernatural strength.

Her eccentric ensemble had always struck Nasuada as slightly indecent; it revealed so much of her form. But Nasuada had to admit

that even if Arya donned a gown of rags, she would still appear more regal and dignified than any mortal-born noble.

Halting before Nasuada, Arya gestured with one elegant finger at Nasuada's wounds. "As the poet Earnë said, to place yourself in harm's way for the sake of the people and the country you love is the finest thing one can do. I have known every leader of the Varden, and they were all mighty men and women, and none so much as Ajihad. In this, though, I believe you have surpassed even him."

"You honor me, Arya, but I fear that if I burn so brightly, too few shall remember my father as he deserves."

"The deeds of the children are a testament of the upbringing they received from their parents. Burn like the sun, Nasuada, for the brighter you burn, the more people there shall be who will respect Ajihad for teaching you how to bear the responsibilities of command at such a tender age."

Nasuada dipped her head, taking to heart Arya's advice. Then she smiled and said, "A tender age? I'm a grown woman, by our reckoning."

Amusement gleamed in Arya's green eyes. "True. But if we judge by years, and not wisdom, no human would be considered an adult among my kind. Except for Galbatorix, that is."

"And me," Angela chimed in.

"Come now," said Nasuada, "you can't be much older than I am."

"Ha! You're confusing appearances with age. You ought to have more sense than that after being around Arya so long."

Before Nasuada could ask just how old Angela really was, she felt a hard tug on the back of her dress. Looking around, she saw that it was Elva who had taken such a liberty and that the girl was beckoning. Bending, Nasuada placed an ear close to Elva, who muttered, "Eragon's not on Saphira."

Nasuada's chest tightened, restricting her breathing. She peered upward: Saphira circled directly over the camp, some thousands of feet high. Her huge, batlike wings were black against the sky. Nasuada could see Saphira's underside, and her talons white against the lapped scales of her belly, but nothing of whoever might be riding her.

"How do you know?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"I cannot feel his discomfort, nor his fears. Roran is there, and a woman I guess is Katrina. No one else."

Straightening, Nasuada clapped her hands and said, "Jörmundur!" allowing her voice to ring forth.

Jörmundur, who was almost a dozen yards away, came running, shoving aside those who got in his way; he was experienced enough to know when an emergency was at hand. "My Lady."

"Clear the field! Get everyone away from here before Saphira

lands."

"Including Orrin and Narheim and Garzhvog?"

She grimaced. "No, but allow no one else to remain. Hurry!"

As Jörmundur began shouting orders, Arya and Angela converged upon Nasuada. They appeared as alarmed as she felt. Arya said, "Saphira would not be so calm if Eragon was hurt or dead."

"Where is he, then?" demanded Nasuada. "What trouble has he gotten himself into now?"

A raucous commotion filled the clearing as Jörmundur and his men directed the onlookers back to their tents, laying about them with swagger sticks whenever the reluctant warriors lingered or protested. Several scuffles broke out, but the captains under Jörmundur quickly overwhelmed the culprits, so as to prevent the violence from taking root and spreading. Fortunately, the Urgals, at the word of their war chief, Garzhvog, left without incident, although Garzhvog himself advanced toward Nasuada, as did King Orrin and the dwarf Narheim.

Nasuada felt the ground tremble under her feet as the eight-and-a-half-foot-tall Urgal approached her. He lifted his bony chin, baring his throat as was the custom of his race, and said, "What means this, Lady Nightstalker?" The shape of his jaws and teeth, coupled with his accent, made it difficult for Nasuada to understand him.

"Yes, I'd bloody well like an explanation myself," said Orrin. His face was red.

"And I," said Narheim.

It occurred to Nasuada, as she regarded them, that this was probably the first time in thousands of years that members of so many of the races of Alagaësia had gathered together in peace. The only ones missing were the Ra'zac and their mounts, and Nasuada knew no sane being would ever invite those foul creatures into their secret councils. She pointed at Saphira and said, "She shall provide the answers you desire."

Just as the last stragglers quit the clearing, a torrent of air rushed across Nasuada as Saphira swooped to the ground, raking her wings to slow herself before alighting upon her rear legs. She dropped to all fours, and a dull boom resounded across the camp. Unbuckling themselves from her saddle, Roran and Katrina quickly dismounted.

Striding forward, Nasuada examined Katrina. She was curious to see what kind of woman could inspire a man to undertake such extraordinary feats in order to rescue her. The young woman before her was strong-boned, with the pallid complexion of an invalid, a mane of copper hair, and a dress so torn and filthy, it was impossible to determine what it might have looked like originally. In spite of the toll her captivity had taken, it was apparent to Nasuada that Katrina was attractive enough, but not what the bards would call a great

beauty. However, she possessed a certain force of gaze and bearing that made Nasuada think that if Roran had been the one captured, Katrina would have been just as capable of rousing the villagers of Carvahall, getting them south to Surda, fighting in the Battle of the Burning Plains, and then continuing on to Helgrind, all for the sake of her beloved. Even when she noticed Garzhvog, Katrina did not flinch or quail but remained standing where she was, next to Roran.

Roran bowed to Nasuada and, swiveling, also to King Orrin. "My Lady," he said, his face grave. "Your Majesty. If I may, this is my betrothed, Katrina." She curtsied to them both.

"Welcome to the Varden, Katrina," said Nasuada. "We have all heard your name here, on account of Roran's uncommon devotion. Songs of his love for you already spread across the land."

"You are most welcome," added Orrin. "Most welcome indeed."

Nasuada noticed that the king had eyes only for Katrina, as did every man present, including the dwarves, and Nasuada was certain they would be recounting tales of Katrina's charms to their comrades-in-arms before the night was out. What Roran had done on her behalf elevated her far above ordinary women; it made her an object of mystery, fascination, and allure to the warriors. That anyone should sacrifice so much for another person meant, by reason of the price paid, that person must be unusually precious.

Katrina blushed and smiled. "Thank you," she said. Along with her embarrassment at such attentions, a hint of pride colored her expression, as if she knew how remarkable Roran was and delighted in having captured his heart, of all the women in Alagaësia. He was hers, and that was all the status or treasure she desired.

A pang of loneliness shot through Nasuada. *I wish I had what they have*, she thought. Her responsibilities prevented her from entertaining girlish dreams of romance and marriage—and certainly children—unless she were to arrange a marriage of convenience for the good of the Varden. She had often considered doing that with Orrin, but her nerve always failed her. Still, she was content with her lot and did not begrudge Katrina and Roran their happiness. Her cause was what she cared about; defeating Galbatorix was far more important than something as trifling as marriage. Most everyone got married, but how many had the opportunity to oversee the birth of a new age?

I'm not myself this evening, realized Nasuada. *My wounds have set my thoughts ahumming like a nest of bees*. Shaking herself, she looked past Roran and Katrina to Saphira. Nasuada opened up the barriers she usually maintained around her mind so she might hear what Saphira had to say and then asked: "Where is he?"

With the dry rustle of scales sliding over scales, Saphira crept forward and lowered her neck so her head was directly in front of

Nasuada, Arya, and Angela. The dragon's left eye sparkled with blue fire. She sniffed twice, and her crimson tongue darted out of her mouth. Hot, moist breath ruffled the lace collar on Nasuada's dress.

Nasuada swallowed as Saphira's consciousness brushed against her own. Saphira felt unlike any other being Nasuada had encountered: ancient, alien, and both ferocious and gentle. That, along with Saphira's imposing physical presence, always reminded Nasuada that if Saphira wanted to eat them, she could. It was impossible, Nasuada believed, to be complacent around a dragon.

I smell blood, said Saphira. *Who has hurt you, Nasuada? Name them, and I shall tear them from neck to groin and bring you their heads for trophies*.

"There's no need for you to tear anyone apart. Not yet, at least. I wielded the knife myself. However, this is the wrong time to delve into the matter. Right now, all I care about is Eragon's whereabouts."

Eragon, said Saphira, *decided to remain in the Empire*.

For a few seconds, Nasuada was unable to move or think. Then a mounting sense of doom replaced her stunned denial of Saphira's revelation. The others reacted in various ways as well, from which Nasuada deduced Saphira had spoken to them all at once.

"How … how could you allow him to stay?" she asked.

Small tongues of fire rippled in Saphira's nostrils as she snorted. *Eragon made his own choice. I could not stop him. He insists upon doing what he thinks is right, no matter the consequences for him or the rest of Alagaësia.… I could shake him like a hatchling, but I'm proud of him. Fear not; he can take care of himself. So far, no misfortune has befallen him. I would know if he was hurt*.

Arya spoke: "And why did he make this choice, Saphira?"

It would be faster for me to show you rather than explain with words. May I?

They all indicated their consent.

A river of Saphira's memories poured into Nasuada. She saw black Helgrind from above a layer of clouds; heard Eragon, Roran, and Saphira discussing how best to attack; watched them discover the Ra'zac's lair; and experienced Saphira's epic battle with the Lethrblaka. The procession of images fascinated Nasuada. She had been born in the Empire but could remember nothing of it; this was the first time as an adult that she had looked upon anything besides the wild fringes of Galbatorix's holdings.

Lastly came Eragon and his confrontation with Saphira. Saphira attempted to hide it, but the anguish she felt over leaving Eragon was still so raw and piercing, Nasuada had to dry her cheeks with the bandages on her forearms. However, the reasons Eragon gave for staying—killing the last Ra'zac and exploring the remainder of

Helgrind—were reasons Nasuada deemed inadequate.

She frowned. *Eragon may be rash, but he's certainly not foolish enough to endanger everything we seek to accomplish merely so he could visit a few caves and drain the last bitter dregs of his revenge. There must be another explanation*. She wondered whether she should press Saphira for the truth, but she knew Saphira would not withhold such information on a whim. *Perhaps she wants to discuss it in private*, she thought.

"Blast it!" exclaimed King Orrin. "Eragon could not have picked a worse time to set off on his own. What matters a single Ra'zac when Galbatorix's entire army resides but a few miles from us? … We have to get him back."

Angela laughed. She was knitting a sock using five bone needles, which clicked and clacked and scraped against each other with a steady, if peculiar, rhythm. "How? He'll be traveling during the day, and Saphira daren't fly around searching for him when the sun's up and anyone might spot her and alert Galbatorix."

"Yes, but he's our Rider! We cannot sit by idly while he remains in the midst of our enemies."

"I agree," said Narheim. "However it is done, we must ensure his safe return. Grimstnzborith Hrothgar adopted Eragon into his family and clan—that is mine own clan, as you know—and we owe him the loyalty of our law and our blood."

Arya knelt and, to Nasuada's surprise, began to unlace and retie the upright sections of her boots. Holding one of the cords between her teeth, Arya said, "Saphira, where exactly was Eragon when you last touched his mind?"

In the entrance to Helgrind.

"And have you any idea what path he intended to follow?"

He did not yet know himself.

Springing to her feet, Arya said, "Then I shall have to look everywhere I can."

Like a deer, she bounded forward and ran across the clearing, vanishing among the tents beyond as she sped northward as fast and light as the wind itself.

"Arya, no!" shouted Nasuada, but the elf was already gone. Hopelessness threatened to engulf Nasuada as she stared after her. *The center is crumbling*, she thought.

Grasping the edges of the mismatched pieces of armor that covered his torso as if to tear them off, Garzhvog said to Nasuada, "Do you want me to follow, Lady Nightstalker? I cannot run as fast as little elves, but I can run as long."

"No … no, stay. Arya can pass for human at a distance, but soldiers would hunt you down the moment some farmer caught sight of you."

“I am used to being hunted.”

“But not in the middle of the Empire, with hundreds of Galbatorix’s men wandering the countryside. No, Arya will have to fend for herself. I pray that she can find Eragon and keep him safe, for without him, we are doomed.”

ESCAPE AND EVASION

Eragon's feet drummed against the ground.

The pounding beat of his stride originated in his heels and ran up his legs, through his hips, and along his spine until it terminated at the base of his skull, where the recurring impact jarred his teeth and exacerbated the headache that seemed to worsen with every passing mile. The monotonous music of his running had annoyed him at first, but before long, it lulled him into a trancelike state where he did not think, but moved.

As Eragon's boots descended, he heard brittle stalks of grass snap like twigs and glimpsed puffs of dirt rising from the cracked soil. He guessed it had been at least a month since it last rained in this part of Alagaësia. The dry air leached the moisture from his breath, leaving his throat raw. No matter how much he drank, he could not compensate for the amount of water the sun and the wind stole from him.

Thus his headache.

Helgrind was far behind him. However, he had made slower progress than he had hoped. Hundreds of Galbatorix's patrols—containing both soldiers and magicians—swarmed across the land, and he often had to hide in order to avoid them. That they were searching for him, he had no doubt. The previous evening, he had even spotted Thorn riding low on the western horizon. He had immediately shielded his mind, thrown himself into a ditch, and stayed there for half an hour, until Thorn dipped back down below the edge of the world.

Eragon had decided to travel on established roads and trails wherever possible. The events of the past week had pushed him to the limits of his physical and emotional endurance. He preferred to allow his body to rest and recover, rather than strain himself forging through brambles, over hills, and across muddy rivers. The time for desperate, violent exertion would come again, but now was not it.

So long as he held to the roads, he dared not run as fast as he was capable; indeed, it would be wiser to avoid running altogether. A fair number of villages and outbuildings were scattered throughout the area. If any of the inhabitants observed a lone man sprinting across the countryside as if a pack of wolves were chasing him, the spectacle would be sure to arouse curiosity and suspicion and might even inspire a frightened crofter to report the incident to the Empire. That could prove fatal for Eragon, whose greatest defense was the cloak of

anonymity.

He only ran now because he had encountered no living creatures, except a long snake sunning itself, for over a league.

Returning to the Varden was Eragon's primary concern, and it rankled him to plod along like a common vagabond. Still, he appreciated the opportunity to be by himself. He had not been alone, truly alone, since he found Saphira's egg in the Spine. Always her thoughts had rubbed against his, or Brom or Murtagh or someone else had been at his side. In addition to the burden of constant companionship, Eragon had spent all the months since he had left Palancar Valley engaged in arduous training, breaking only for travel or to take part in the tumult of battle. Never before had he concentrated so intensely for so long or dealt with such huge amounts of worry and fear.

He welcomed his solitude, then, and the peace it brought. The absence of voices, including his own, was a sweet lullaby that, for a short while, washed away his fear of the future. He had no desire to scry Saphira—although they were too far apart to touch each other's minds, his bond with her would tell him if she was hurt—or to contact Arya or Nasuada and hear their angry words. Far better, he thought, to listen to the songs of the flitting birds and the sighing of the breeze through the grass and leafy branches.

The sound of jingling harnesses, clomping hooves, and men's voices jarred Eragon out of his reverie. Alarmed, he stopped and glanced around, trying to determine from what direction the men were approaching. A pair of cackling jackdaws spiraled upward from a nearby ravine.

The only cover close to Eragon was a small thicket of juniper trees. He sprinted toward it and dove under the drooping branches just as six soldiers emerged from the ravine and rode cantering out onto the thin dirt road not ten feet away. Normally, Eragon would have sensed their presence long before they got so close, but since Thorn's distant appearance, he had kept his mind walled off from his surroundings.

The soldiers reined in their horses and milled around in the middle of the road, arguing among themselves. "I'm telling you, I saw something!" one of them shouted. He was of medium height, with ruddy cheeks and a yellow beard.

His heart hammering, Eragon struggled to keep his breathing slow and quiet. He touched his brow to ensure the cloth strip he had tied around his head still covered his upswept eyebrows and pointed ears. *I wish I were still wearing my armor*, he thought. In order to avoid attracting unwanted attention, he had made himself a pack—using dead branches and a square of canvas he had bartered from a tinker—

and placed his armor within it. Now he dared not remove and don his armor, for fear the soldiers would hear.

The soldier with the yellow beard climbed down from his bay charger and walked along the edge of the road, studying the ground and the juniper trees beyond. Like every member of Galbatorix's army, the soldier wore a red tunic embroidered with gold thread in the outline of a jagged tongue of fire. The thread sparkled as he moved. His armor was simple—a helmet, a tapered shield, and a leather brigandine—indicating he was little more than a mounted footman. As for arms, he bore a spear in his right hand and a longsword on his left hip.

As the soldier approached his location, spurs clinking, Eragon began to whisper a complex spell in the ancient language. The words poured off his tongue in an unbroken stream, until, to his alarm, he mispronounced a particularly difficult cluster of vowels and had to start the incantation anew.

The soldier took another step toward him.

And another.

Just as the soldier paused in front of him, Eragon completed the spell and felt his strength ebb as the magic took effect. He was an instant too late, however, to completely escape detection, for the soldier exclaimed, "Aha!" and brushed aside the branches, exposing Eragon.

Eragon did not move.

The soldier peered directly at him and frowned. "What the …," he muttered. He jabbed his spear into the thicket, missing Eragon's face by less than an inch. Eragon dug his nails into his palms as a tremor racked his clenched muscles. "Ah, blast it," said the soldier, and released the branches, which sprang back to their original positions, hiding Eragon once more.

"What was it?" called another of the men.

"Nothing," said the soldier, returning to his companions. He removed his helmet and wiped his brow. "My eyes are playing tricks on me."

"What does that bastard Braethan expect of us? We've hardly gotten a wink of sleep these past two days."

"Aye. The king must be desperate to drive us so hard.… To be honest, I'd rather not find whoever it is we're searching for. It's not that I'm fainthearted, but anyone who gives Galbatorix pause is best avoided by the likes of us. Let Murtagh and his monster of a dragon catch our mysterious fugitive, eh?"

"Unless we be searching for Murtagh," suggested a third man. "You heard what Morzan's spawn said well as I did."

An uncomfortable silence settled over the soldiers. Then the one

who was on the ground vaulted back onto his charger, wrapped the reins around his left hand, and said, “Keep your yap shut, Derwood. You talk too much.”

With that, the group of six spurred their steeds forward and continued north on the road.

As the sound of the horses faded, Eragon ended the spell, then rubbed his eyes with his fists and rested his hands on his knees. A long, low laugh escaped him, and he shook his head, amused by how outlandish his predicament was compared with his upbringing in Palancar Valley. *I certainly never imagined this happening to me*, he thought.

The spell he had used contained two parts: the first bent rays of light around his body so he appeared invisible, and the second hopefully prevented other spellweavers from detecting his use of magic. The spell’s main drawbacks were that it could not conceal footprints—therefore one had to remain stone-still while using it—and it often failed to completely eliminate a person’s shadow.

Picking his way out of the thicket, Eragon stretched his arms high over his head and then faced the ravine from whence the soldiers had emerged. A single question occupied him as he resumed his journey:

What had Murtagh said?

“Ahh!”

The gauzelike illusion of Eragon’s waking dreams vanished as he tore at the air with his hands. He twisted nearly in half as he rolled away from where he had been lying. Scrabbling backward, he pushed himself to his feet and raised his arms in front of himself to deflect oncoming blows.

The dark of night surrounded him. Above, the impartial stars continued to gyrate in their endless celestial dance. Below, not a creature stirred, nor could he hear anything but the gentle wind caressing the grass.

Eragon stabbed outward with his mind, convinced that someone was about to attack him. He extended himself over a thousand feet in every direction but found no one else in the vicinity.

At last he lowered his hands. His chest heaved, and his skin burned, and he stank of sweat. In his mind, a tempest roared: a whirlwind of flashing blades and severed limbs. For a moment, he thought he was in Farthen Dûr, fighting the Urgals, and then on the Burning Plains, crossing swords with men like himself. Each location was so real, he would have sworn some strange magic had transported him backward through space and time. He saw standing before him the men and the Urgals whom he had slain; they appeared so real, he wondered if they would speak. And while he no longer bore the scars of his wounds, his

body remembered the many injuries he had suffered, and he shuddered as he again felt swords and arrows piercing his flesh.

With a shapeless howl, Eragon fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around his stomach, hugging himself as he rocked back and forth. *It's all right.… It's all right*. He pressed his forehead against the ground, curling into a hard, tight ball. His breath was hot against his belly.

"What's wrong with me?"

None of the epics Brom had recited in Carvahall mentioned that such visions had bedeviled the heroes of old. None of the warriors Eragon had met in the Varden seemed troubled by the blood they shed. And even though Roran admitted he disliked killing, he did not wake up screaming in the middle of the night.

I'm weak, thought Eragon. *A man should not feel like this. A* Rider *should not feel like this. Garrow or Brom would have been fine, I know. They did what needed to be done, and that was that. No crying about it, no endless worrying or gnashing of teeth.… I'm weak*.

Jumping up, he paced around his nest in the grass, trying to calm himself. After half an hour, when apprehension still clenched his chest in an iron grip and his skin itched as if a thousand ants crawled underneath it and he started at the slightest noise, Eragon grabbed his pack and set off at a dead run. He cared not what lay before him in the unknown darkness, nor who might notice his headlong flight.

He only sought to escape his nightmares. His mind had turned against him, and he could not rely upon rational thought to dispel his panic. His one recourse, then, was to trust in the ancient animal wisdom of his flesh, which told him to *move*. If he ran fast and hard enough, perhaps he could anchor himself in the moment. Perhaps the thrashing of his arms, the thudding of his feet on dirt, the slick chill of sweat under his arms, and a myriad of other sensations would, by their sheer weight and number, force him to forget.

Perhaps.

A flock of starlings darted across the afternoon sky, like fish through the ocean.

Eragon squinted at them. In Palancar Valley, when the starlings returned after winter, they often formed groups so large, they transformed day into night. This flock was not that large, yet it reminded him of evenings spent drinking mint tea with Garrow and Roran on the porch of their house, watching a rustling black cloud turn and twist overhead.

Lost in memory, he stopped and sat on a rock so he could retie the laces on his boots.

The weather had changed; it was cool now, and a gray smudge to

the west hinted at the possibility of a storm. The vegetation was lusher, with moss and reeds and thick clumps of green grass. Several miles away, five hills dotted the otherwise smooth land. A stand of thick oak trees adorned the central hill. Above the hazy mounds of foliage, Eragon glimpsed the crumbling walls of a long-abandoned building, constructed by some race in ages past.

Curiosity aroused, he decided to break his fast among the ruins. They were sure to contain plentiful game, and foraging would provide him with an excuse to do a bit of exploring before continuing on his way.

Eragon arrived at the base of the first hill an hour later, where he found the remnants of an ancient road paved with squares of stone. He followed it toward the ruins, wondering at its strange construction, for it was unlike any human, elf, or dwarf work he was familiar with.

The shadows under the oak trees chilled Eragon as he climbed the central hill. Near the summit, the ground leveled off underneath his feet and the thicket opened up, and he entered a large glade. A broken tower stood there. The lower part of the tower was wide and ribbed, like the trunk of a tree. Then the structure narrowed and rose toward the sky for over thirty feet, ending in a sharp, jagged line. The upper half of the tower lay on the ground, shattered into innumerable fragments.

Excitement stirred within Eragon. He suspected that he had found an elven outpost, erected long before the destruction of the Riders. No other race had the skill or inclination to build such a structure.

Then he spotted the vegetable garden at the opposite side of the glade.

A single man sat hunched among the rows of plants, weeding a patch of snap peas. Shadows covered his downturned face. His gray beard was so long, it lay piled in his lap like a mound of uncombed wool.

Without looking up, the man said, “Well, are you going to help me finish these peas or not? There’s a meal in it for you if you do.”

Eragon hesitated, unsure what to do. Then he thought, *Why should I be afraid of an old hermit?* and walked over to the garden. “I’m Bergan. … Bergan, son of Garrow.”

The man grunted. “Tenga, son of Ingvar.”

The armor in Eragon’s pack rattled as he dropped it to the ground. For the next hour, he labored in silence along with Tenga. He knew he should not stay for so long, but he enjoyed the task; it kept him from brooding. As he weeded, he allowed his mind to expand and touch the multitude of living things within the glade. He welcomed the sense of unity he shared with them.

When they had removed every last bit of grass, purslane, and

dandelions from around the peas, Eragon followed Tenga to a narrow door set into the front of the tower, through which was a spacious kitchen and dining room. In the middle of the room, a circular staircase coiled up to the second story. Books, scrolls, and sheaves of loose-bound vellum covered every available surface, including a goodly portion of the floor.

Tenga pointed at the small pile of branches in the fireplace. With a pop and a crackle, the wood burst into flame. Eragon tensed, ready to grapple physically and mentally with Tenga.

The other man did not seem to notice his reaction but continued to bustle about the kitchen, procuring mugs, dishes, knives, and various leftovers for their lunch. He muttered to himself in an undertone while he did.

Every sense alert, Eragon sank onto the bare corner of a nearby chair. *He didn't utter the ancient language*, he thought. *Even if he said the spell in his head, he still risked death or worse to start a mere cookfire!* For as Oromis had taught Eragon, words were the means by which one controlled the release of magic. To cast a spell without the structure of language binding that motive power was to risk having a stray thought or emotion distort the result.

Eragon gazed around the chamber, searching for clues about his host. He spotted an open scroll that displayed columns of words from the ancient language and recognized it as a compendium of true names similar to those he had studied in Ellesméra. Magicians coveted such scrolls and books and would sacrifice almost anything to obtain them, for with them one could learn new words for a spell and also record therein words one had discovered. Few, however, were able to acquire a compendium, for they were exceedingly rare and those who already owned them almost never parted with them willingly.

It was unusual, then, for Tenga to possess one such compendium, but to Eragon's amazement, he saw six others throughout the room, in addition to writings on subjects ranging from history to mathematics to astronomy to botany.

A mug of ale and a plate with bread, cheese, and a slice of cold meat pie appeared in front of him as Tenga shoved the dishes under his nose.

"Thank you," said Eragon, accepting them.

Tenga ignored him and sat cross-legged next to the fireplace. He continued to grumble and mutter into his beard as he devoured his lunch.

After Eragon had scraped his plate clean and drained the last drops of the fine harvest ale, and Tenga had also nearly completed his repast, Eragon could not help but ask, "Did the elves build this tower?"

Tenga fixed him with a pointed gaze, as if the question made him doubt Eragon's intelligence. "Aye. The tricky elves built Edur Ithindra."

"What is it you do here? Are you all alone, or—"

"I search for the answer!" exclaimed Tenga. "A key to an unopened door, the secret of the trees and the plants. Fire, heat, lightning, light … Most do not know the question and wander in ignorance. Others know the question but fear what the answer will mean. Bah! For thousands of years we have lived like savages. Savages! I shall end that. I shall usher in the age of light, and all shall praise my deed."

"Pray tell, what exactly do you search for?"

A frown twisted Tenga's face. "You don't know the question? I thought you might. But no, I was mistaken. Still, I see you understand my search. You search for a different answer, but you search nevertheless. The same brand burns in your heart as burns in mine. Who else but a fellow pilgrim can appreciate what we must sacrifice to find the answer?"

"The answer to what?"

"To the question we choose."

He's mad, thought Eragon. Casting about for something with which he could distract Tenga, his gaze lit upon a row of small wood animal statues arranged on the sill below a teardrop-shaped window. "Those are beautiful," he said, indicating the statues. "Who made them?"

"*She* did … before she left. She was always making things." Tenga bounded upright and placed the tip of his left index finger on the first of the statues. "Here the squirrel with his waving tail, he so bright and swift and full of laughing gibes." His finger drifted to the next statue in line. "Here the savage boar, so deadly with his slashing tusks.… Here the raven with …"

Tenga paid no attention as Eragon backed away, nor when he lifted the latch to the door and slipped out of Edur Ithindra. Shouldering his pack, Eragon trotted down through the crown of oak trees and away from the cluster of five hills and the demented spellcaster who resided among them.

Throughout the rest of that day and the next, the number of people on the road increased until it seemed to Eragon as if a new group was always appearing over a hill. Most were refugees, although soldiers and other men of business were also present. Eragon avoided those he could and trudged along with his chin tucked against his collar the rest of the time.

That practice, however, forced him to spend the night in the village of Eastcroft, twenty miles north of Melian. He had intended to abandon the road long before he arrived at Eastcroft and find a

sheltered hollow or cave where he might rest until morn, but because of his relative unfamiliarity with the land, he misjudged the distance and came upon the village while in the company of three men-at-arms. Leaving then, less than an hour from the safety of Eastcroft's walls and gates and the comfort of a warm bed, would have inspired even the slowest dullard to ask why he was trying to avoid the village. So Eragon set his teeth and silently rehearsed the stories he had concocted to explain his trip.

The bloated sun was two fingers above the horizon when Eragon first beheld Eastcroft, a medium-sized village enclosed by a tall palisade. It was almost dark by the time he finally arrived at the village and entered through the gate. Behind him, he heard a sentry ask the men-at-arms if anyone else had been close behind them on the road.

"Not that I could tell."

"That's good enough for me," replied the sentry. "If there are laggards, they'll have to wait until tomorrow to get in." To another man on the opposite side of the gate, he shouted, "Close it up!" Together they pushed the fifteen-foot-tall ironbound doors shut and barred them with four oak beams as thick as Eragon's chest.

They must expect a siege, thought Eragon, and then smiled at his own blindness. *Well, who doesn't expect trouble in these times?* A few months ago, he would have worried about being trapped in Eastcroft, but now he was confident he could scale the fortifications barehanded and, if he concealed himself with magic, escape unnoticed in the gloom of night. He chose to stay, however, for he was tired and casting a spell might attract the attention of nearby magicians, if there were any.

Before he took more than a few steps down the muddy lane that led to the town square, a watchman accosted him, thrusting a lantern toward his face. "Hold there! You've not been to Eastcroft before, have you?"

"This is my first visit," said Eragon.

The stubby watchman bobbed his head. "And have you family or friends here to welcome you?"

"No, I don't."

"What brings you to Eastcroft, then?"

"Nothing. I'm traveling south to fetch my sister's family and bring them back to Dras-Leona." Eragon's story seemed to have no effect on the watchman. *Perhaps he doesn't believe me*, Eragon speculated. *Or perhaps he's heard so many accounts like mine, they've ceased to matter to him.*

"Then you want the wayfarers' house, by the main well. Go there and you will find food and lodging. And while you stay here in Eastcroft, let me warn you, we don't tolerate murder, thievery, or

lechery in these parts. We have sturdy stocks and gallows, and they have had their share of tenants. My meaning is clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then go, and be you of good fortune. But wait! What is your name, stranger?"

"Bergan."

With that, the watchman strode away, returning to his evening rounds. Eragon waited until the combined mass of several houses concealed the lantern the watchman carried before wandering over to the message board mounted to the left of the gates.

There, nailed over a half-dozen posters of various criminals, were two sheets of parchment almost three feet long. One depicted Eragon, one depicted Roran, and both labeled them traitors to the Crown. Eragon examined the posters with interest and marveled at the reward offered: an earldom apiece to whoever captured them. The drawing of Roran was a good likeness and even included the beard he had grown since fleeing Carvahall, but Eragon's portrait showed him as he had been before the Blood-oath Celebration, when he still appeared fully human.

How things have changed, thought Eragon.

Moving on, he slipped through the village until he located the wayfarers' house. The common room had a low ceiling with tar-stained timbers. Yellow tallow candles provided a soft, flickering light and thickened the air with intersecting layers of smoke. Sand and rushes covered the floor, and the mixture crunched underneath Eragon's boots. To his left were tables and chairs and a large fireplace, where an urchin turned a pig on a spit. Opposite this was a long bar, a fortress with raised drawbridges that protected casks of lager, ale, and stout from the horde of thirsty men who assailed it from all sides.

A good sixty people filled the room, crowding it to an uncomfortable level. The roar of conversation would have been startling enough to Eragon after his time on the road, but with his sensitive hearing, he felt as if he stood in the middle of a pounding waterfall. It was hard for him to concentrate upon any one voice. As soon as he caught hold of a word or a phrase, it was swept away by another utterance. Off in one corner, a trio of minstrels was singing and playing a comic version of "Sweet Aethrid o' Dauth," which did nothing to improve the clamor.

Wincing at the barrage of noise, Eragon wormed his way through the crowd until he reached the bar. He wanted to talk with the serving woman, but she was so busy, five minutes passed before she looked at him and asked, "Your pleasure?" Strands of hair hung over her sweaty face.

"Have you a room to let, or a corner where I could spend the

night?"

"I wouldn't know. The mistress of the house is the one you should speak to about that. She'll be down directly," said the serving woman, and flicked a hand at a rank of gloomy stairs.

While he waited, Eragon rested against the bar and studied the people in the room. They were a motley assortment. About half he guessed were villagers from Eastcroft come to enjoy a night of drinking. Of the rest, the majority were men and women—families oftentimes—who were migrating to safer parts. It was easy for him to identify them by their frayed shirts and dirty pants and by how they huddled in their chairs and peered at anyone who came near. However, they studiously avoided looking at the last and smallest group of patrons in the wayfarers' house: Galbatorix's soldiers. The men in red tunics were louder than anyone else. They laughed and shouted and banged on tabletops with their armored fists while they quaffed beer and groped any maid foolish enough to walk by them.

Do they behave like that because they know no one dares oppose them and they enjoy demonstrating their power? wondered Eragon. *Or because they were forced to join Galbatorix's army and seek to dull their sense of shame and fear with their revels?*

Now the minstrels were singing:

> *So with her hair aflying, sweet Aethrid o' Dauth*
> *Ran to Lord Edel and cried, "Free my lover,*
> *Else a witch shall turn you into a woolly goat!"*
> *Lord Edel, he laughed and said, "No witch shall turn me into a woolly goat!"*

The crowd shifted and granted Eragon a view of a table pushed against one wall. At it sat a lone woman, her face hidden by the drawn hood of her dark traveling cloak. Four men surrounded her, big, beefy farmers with leathery necks and cheeks flushed with the fever of alcohol. Two of them were leaning against the wall on either side of the woman, looming over her, while one sat grinning in a chair turned around backward and the fourth stood with his left foot on the edge of the table and was bent forward over his knee. The men spoke and gestured, their movements careless. Although Eragon could not hear or see what the woman said, it was obvious to him that her response angered the farmers, for they scowled and swelled their chests, puffing themselves up like roosters. One of them shook a finger at her.

To Eragon, they appeared decent, hardworking men who had lost their manners in the depths of their tankards, a mistake he had witnessed often enough on feast days in Carvahall. Garrow had had little respect for men who knew they could not hold their beer and yet insisted on embarrassing themselves in public. "It's unseemly," he had

said. “What’s more, if you drink to forget your lot in life and not for pleasure, you ought to do it where you won’t disturb anyone.”

The man to the left of the woman suddenly reached down and hooked a finger underneath the edge of her hood, as if to toss it back. So quickly that Eragon barely saw, the woman lifted her right hand and grasped the man’s wrist, but then released it and returned to her previous position. Eragon doubted that anyone else in the common room, including the man she touched, had noticed her actions.

The hood collapsed around her neck, and Eragon stiffened, astounded. The woman was human, but she resembled Arya. The only differences between them were her eyes—which were round and level, not slanted like a cat’s—and her ears, which lacked the pointed tips of an elf’s. She was just as beautiful as the Arya Eragon knew, but in a less exotic, more familiar way.

Without hesitation, Eragon probed toward the woman with his mind. He had to know who she really was.

As soon as he touched her consciousness, a mental blow struck back at Eragon, destroying his concentration, and then in the confines of his skull, he heard a deafening voice exclaim, *Eragon!*

Arya?

Their eyes met for a moment before the crowd thickened again and hid her.

Eragon hurried across the room to her table, prying apart the bodies packed close together to clear himself a path. The farmers looked askance at him when he emerged from the press, and one said, “You’re awful rude, barging in on us uninvited-like. Best make yourself scarce, eh?”

In as diplomatic a voice as he could muster, Eragon said, “It seems to me, gentlemen, that the lady would rather be left alone. Now, you wouldn’t ignore the wishes of an honest woman, would you?”

“An honest woman?” laughed the nearest man. “No honest woman travels alone.”

“Then let me set your concern to rest, for I am her brother, and we are going to live with our uncle in Dras-Leona.”

The four men exchanged uneasy glances. Three of them began to edge away from Arya, but the largest planted himself a few inches in front of Eragon and, breathing upon his face, said, “I’m not sure I believe you, *friend*. You’re just trying to drive us away so you can be with her yourself.”

He’s not far off, thought Eragon.

Speaking quietly enough that only that man could hear, Eragon said, “I assure you, she *is* my sister. Please, sir, I have no quarrel with you. Won’t you go?”

“Not when I think you’re a lying milksop.”

“Sir, be reasonable. There’s no need for this unpleasantness. The night is young, and there’s drink and music aplenty. Let’s not quarrel about such a petty misunderstanding. It’s beneath us.”

To Eragon’s relief, the other man relaxed after a few seconds and uttered a scornful grunt. “I wouldn’t want to fight a youngling like you anyway,” he said. Turning around, he lumbered toward the bar with his friends.

Keeping his gaze fixed upon the crowd, Eragon slipped behind the table and sat next to Arya. “What are you doing here?” he asked, barely moving his lips.

“Searching for you.”

Surprised, he glanced at her, and she raised a curved eyebrow. He looked back at the throng of people and, pretending to smile, asked, “Are you alone?”

“No longer…. Did you rent a bed for the night?”

He shook his head.

“Good. I already have a room. We can talk there.”

They rose in unison, and he followed her to the stairs at the back of the common room. The worn treads creaked under their feet as they climbed to a hallway on the second story. A single candle illuminated the dingy, wood-paneled corridor. Arya led the way to the last door on the right, and from within the voluminous sleeve of her cloak, she produced an iron key. Unlocking the door, she entered the room, waited for Eragon to cross the threshold after her, and then closed and secured the door again.

A faint orange glow penetrated the lead-lined window across from Eragon. The glow came from a lantern hanging on the other side of Eastcroft’s town square. By it, he was able to make out the shape of an oil lamp on a low table to his right.

“Brisingr,” whispered Eragon, and lit the wick with a spark from his finger.

Even with the lamp burning, the room was still dark. The chamber contained the same paneling as the hallway, and the chestnut-colored wood absorbed most of the light that struck it and made the room seem small and heavy, as if a great weight pressed inward. Aside from the table, the only other piece of furniture was a narrow bed with a single blanket thrown over the ticking. A small bag of supplies rested on the mattress.

Eragon and Arya stood facing each other. Then Eragon reached up and removed the cloth strip tied around his head, and Arya unfastened the brooch that held her cloak around her shoulders and placed the garment on the bed. She wore a forest-green dress, the first dress Eragon had seen her in.

It was a strange experience for Eragon to have their appearances

reversed, so that he was the one who looked like an elf, and Arya a human. The change did nothing to diminish his regard for her, but it did make him more comfortable in her presence, for she was less alien to him now.

It was Arya who broke the silence. “Saphira said you stayed behind to kill the last Ra’zac and to explore the rest of Helgrind. Is that the truth?”

“It’s part of the truth.”

“And what is the whole truth?”

Eragon knew that nothing less would satisfy her. “Promise me that you won’t share what I’m about to tell you with anyone unless I give you permission.”

“I promise,” she said in the ancient language.

Then he told her about finding Sloan, why he decided not to bring him back to the Varden, the curse he had laid upon the butcher, and the chance he had given Sloan to redeem himself—at least partially—and to regain his sight. Eragon finished by saying, “Whatever happens, Roran and Katrina can *never* learn that Sloan is still alive. If they do, there’ll be no end of trouble.”

Arya sat on the edge of the bed and, for a long while, stared at the lamp and its jumping flame. Then: “You should have killed him.”

“Maybe, but I couldn’t.”

“Just because you find your task distasteful is no reason to shirk it. You were a coward.”

Eragon bridled at her accusation. “Was I? Anyone with a knife could have killed Sloan. What I did was far harder.”

“Physically, but not morally.”

“I didn’t kill him because I thought it was wrong.” Eragon frowned with concentration as he searched for the words to explain himself. “I wasn’t afraid … not that. Not after going into battle.… It was something else. I will kill in war. But I won’t take it upon myself to decide who lives and who dies. I don’t have the experience or the wisdom.… Every man has a line he won’t cross, Arya, and I found mine when I looked upon Sloan. Even if I had Galbatorix as my captive, I would not kill him. I would take him to Nasuada and King Orrin, and if they condemned him to death, then I would happily lop off his head, but not before. Call it weakness if you will, but that is how I am made, and I won’t apologize for it.”

“You will be a tool, then, wielded by others?”

“I will serve the people as best I can. I’ve never aspired to lead. Alagaësia does not need another tyrant king.”

Arya rubbed her temples. “Why does everything have to be so complicated with you, Eragon? No matter where you go, you seem to get yourself mired in difficult situations. It’s as if you make an effort

to walk through every bramble in the land."

"Your mother said much the same."

"I'm not surprised.… Very well, let it be. Neither of us is about to change our opinions, and we have more pressing concerns than arguing about justice and morality. In the future, though, you would do well to remember who you are and what you mean to the races of Alagaësia."

"I never forgot." Eragon paused, waiting for her response, but Arya let his statement pass unchallenged. Sitting on the edge of the table, he said, "You didn't have to come looking for me, you know. I was fine."

"Of course I did."

"How did you find me?"

"I guessed which route you would take from Helgrind. Luckily for me, my guess placed me forty miles west of here, and that was close enough for me to locate you by listening to the whispers of the land."

"I don't understand."

"A Rider does not walk unnoticed in this world, Eragon. Those who have the ears to hear and the eyes to see can interpret the signs easily enough. The birds sing of your coming, the beasts of the earth heed your scent, and the very trees and grass remember your touch. The bond between Rider and dragon is so powerful that those who are sensitive to the forces of nature can feel it."

"You'll have to teach that trick to me sometime."

"It is no trick, merely the art of paying attention to what is already around you."

"Why did you come to Eastcroft, though? It would have been safer to meet me outside the village."

"Circumstances forced me here, as I assume they did you. You did not come here willingly, no?"

"No.…" He rolled his shoulders, weary from the day's traveling. Pushing back sleep, he waved a hand at her dress and said, "Have you finally abandoned your shirt and trousers?"

A small smile appeared on Arya's face. "Only for the duration of this trip. I've lived among the Varden for more years than I care to recall, yet I still forget how humans insist upon separating their women from their men. I never could bring myself to adopt your customs, even if I did not conduct myself entirely as an elf. Who was to say yea or nay to me? My mother? She was on the other side of Alagaësia." Arya seemed to catch herself then, as if she had said more than she intended. She continued. "In any event, I had an unfortunate encounter with a pair of ox herders soon after I left the Varden, and I stole this dress directly afterward."

"It fits well."

“One of the advantages of being a spellcaster is that you never have to wait for a tailor.”

Eragon laughed for a moment. Then he asked, “What now?”

“Now we rest. Tomorrow, before the sun rises, we shall slip out of Eastcroft, and no one shall be the wiser.”

That night, Eragon lay in front of the door, while Arya took the bed. Their arrangement was not the result of deference or courtesy on Eragon’s part—although he would have insisted on giving Arya the bed in any event—but rather caution. If anyone were to barge into the room, it would seem odd to find a woman on the floor.

As the empty hours crept by, Eragon stared at the beams above his head and traced the cracks in the wood, unable to calm his racing thoughts. He tried every method he knew to relax, but his mind kept returning to Arya, to his surprise at meeting her, to her comments about his treatment of Sloan, and, above all else, to the feelings he had for her. What those were exactly, he was unsure. He longed to be with her, but she had rejected his advances, and that tarnished his affection with hurt and anger, and also frustration, for while Eragon refused to accept that his suit was hopeless, he could not think of how to proceed.

An ache formed in his chest as he listened to the gentle rise and fall of Arya’s breathing. It tormented him to be so close and yet be unable to approach her. He twisted the edge of his tunic between his fingers and wished there was something he could do instead of resigning himself to an unwelcome fate.

He wrestled with his unruly emotions deep into the night, until finally he succumbed to exhaustion and drifted into the waiting embrace of his waking dreams. There he wandered for a few fitful hours until the stars began to fade and it was time for him and Arya to leave Eastcroft.

Together, they opened the window and jumped from the sill to the ground twelve feet below, a small drop for one with an elf’s abilities. As she fell, Arya grasped the skirt of her dress to keep it from billowing around her. They landed inches apart and then set off running between the houses toward the palisade.

“People will wonder where we went,” said Eragon between strides. “Maybe we should have waited and left like normal travelers.”

“It’s riskier to stay. I paid for my room. That’s all the innkeeper really cares about, not whether we snuck out early.” The two of them parted for a few seconds as they circumvented a decrepit wagon, and then Arya added, “The most important thing is to keep moving. If we linger, the king will surely find us.”

When they arrived at the outer wall, Arya ranged along it until she

found a post that protruded somewhat. She wrapped her hands around it and pulled, testing the wood with her weight. The post swayed and rattled against its neighbors, but otherwise held.

"You first," said Arya.

"Please, after you."

With a sigh of impatience, she tapped her bodice. "A dress is somewhat breezier than a pair of leggings, Eragon."

Heat flooded his cheeks as he caught her meaning. Reaching above his head, he got a good grip and then began to climb the palisade, bracing himself with his knees and feet during the ascent. At the top, he stopped and balanced on the tips of the sharpened posts.

"Go on," whispered Arya.

"Not until you join me."

"Don't be so—"

"Watchman!" said Eragon, and pointed. A lantern floated in the darkness between a pair of nearby houses. As the light approached, the gilded outline of a man emerged from the gloom. He carried a naked sword in one hand.

Silent as a specter, Arya grasped the post and, using only the strength of her arms, pulled herself hand over hand toward Eragon. She seemed to glide upward, as if by magic. When she was close enough, Eragon seized her right forearm and lifted her above the remainder of the posts, setting her down next to him. Like two strange birds, they perched on the palisade, motionless and breathless as the watchman walked underneath them. He swung the lantern in either direction, searching for intruders.

Don't look at the ground, pleaded Eragon. *And don't look up*.

A moment later, the watchman sheathed his sword and continued on his rounds, humming to himself.

Without a word, Eragon and Arya dropped to the other side of the palisade. The armor in Eragon's pack rattled as he struck the grass-covered bank below and rolled to dissipate the force of the impact. Springing to his feet, he bent low and dashed away from Eastcroft over the gray landscape, Arya close behind. They kept to hollows and dry streambeds as they skirted the farms that surrounded the village. A half-dozen times, indignant dogs ran out to protest the invasion of their territories. Eragon tried to calm them with his mind, but the only way he found to stop the dogs from barking was to assure them that their terrible teeth and claws had scared him and Arya away. Pleased with their success, the dogs pranced with wagging tails back to the barns, sheds, and porches where they had been standing guard over their fiefdoms. Their smug confidence amused Eragon.

Five miles from Eastcroft, when it became apparent they were utterly alone and no one was trailing them, Eragon and Arya drew to

a halt by a charred stump. Kneeling, Arya scooped several handfuls of dirt from the ground in front of her. “Adurna rïsa,” she said. With a faint trickle, water welled out of the surrounding soil and poured into the hole she had dug. Arya waited until the water filled the cavity and then said, “Letta,” and the flow ceased.

She intoned a spell of scrying, and Nasuada’s face appeared upon the surface of the still water. Arya greeted her. “My Lady,” Eragon said, and bowed.

“Eragon,” she replied. She appeared tired, hollow-cheeked, as if she had suffered a long illness. A lock snapped free of her bun and coiled itself into a tight knot at her hairline. Eragon glimpsed a row of bulky bandages on her arm as she slid a hand over her head, pressing the rebellious hair flat. “You are safe, thank Gokukara. We were so worried.”

“I’m sorry I upset you, but I had my reasons.”

“You must explain them to me when you arrive.”

“As you wish,” he said. “How were you hurt? Did someone attack you? Why haven’t any of Du Vrangr Gata healed you?”

“I ordered them to leave me alone. And that I will explain when you arrive.” Thoroughly puzzled, Eragon nodded and swallowed his questions. To Arya, Nasuada said, “I’m impressed; you found him. I wasn’t sure you could.”

“Fortune smiled upon me.”

“Perhaps, but I tend to believe your skill was as important as Fortune’s generosity. How long until you rejoin us?”

“Two, three days, unless we encounter unforeseen difficulties.”

“Good. I will expect you then. From now on, I want you to contact me at least once before noon and once before nightfall. If I fail to hear from you, I’ll assume you’ve been captured, and I’ll send Saphira with a rescue force.”

“We may not always have the privacy we need to work magic.”

“Find a way to get it. I need to know where you two are and whether you’re safe.”

Arya considered for a moment and then said, “If I can, I will do as you ask, but not if it puts Eragon in danger.”

“Agreed.”

Taking advantage of the ensuing pause in the conversation, Eragon said, “Nasuada, is Saphira near at hand? I would like to talk to her.… We haven’t spoken since Helgrind.”

“She left an hour ago to scout our perimeter. Can you maintain this spell while I find out if she has returned?”

“Go,” said Arya.

A single step carried Nasuada out of their field of view, leaving behind a static image of the table and chairs inside her red pavilion.

For a good while, Eragon appraised the contents of the tent, but then restlessness overtook him and he allowed his eyes to drift from the pool of water to the back of Arya's neck. Her thick black hair fell to one side, exposing a strip of smooth skin just above the collar of her dress. That transfixed him for the better part of a minute, and then he stirred and leaned against the charred stump.

There came the sound of breaking wood, and then a field of sparkling blue scales covered the pool as Saphira forced herself into the pavilion. It was hard for Eragon to tell what part of her he saw, it was such a small part. The scales slid past the pool and he glimpsed the underside of a thigh, a spike on her tail, the baggy membrane of a folded wing, and then the gleaming tip of a tooth as she turned and twisted, trying to find a position from which she could comfortably view the mirror Nasuada used for arcane communications. From the alarming noises that originated behind Saphira, Eragon guessed she was crushing most of the furniture. At last she settled in place, brought her head close to the mirror—so that one large sapphire eye occupied the entire pool—and peered out at Eragon.

They looked at each other for a full minute, neither of them moving. It surprised Eragon how relieved he was to see her. He had not truly felt safe since he and she had separated.

"I missed you," he whispered.

She blinked once.

"Nasuada, are you still there?"

The muffled answer floated toward him from somewhere to the right of Saphira: "Yes, barely."

"Would you be so kind as to relay Saphira's comments to me?"

"I'm more than happy to, but at the moment, I'm caught between a wing and a pole, and there's no path free, so far as I can tell. You may have difficulty hearing me. If you're willing to bear with me, though, I'll give it a try."

"Please do."

Nasuada was quiet for several heartbeats, and then in a tone so like Saphira's that Eragon almost laughed, she said, "You are well?"

"I'm healthy as an ox. And you?"

"To compare myself with a bovine would be both ridiculous and insulting, but I'm as fit as ever, if that is what you are asking. I'm pleased Arya is with you. It's good for you to have someone sensible around to watch your back."

"I agree. Help is always welcome when you're in danger." While Eragon was grateful that he and Saphira were able to talk, albeit in a roundabout fashion, he found the spoken word a poor substitute for the free exchange of thoughts and emotions they enjoyed when in close proximity. Furthermore, with Arya and Nasuada privy to their

conversation, Eragon was reluctant to address topics of a more personal nature, such as whether Saphira had forgiven him for forcing her to leave him in Helgrind. Saphira must have shared in his reluctance, for she too refrained from broaching the subject. They chatted about other, inconsequential happenings and then bade each other farewell. Before he stepped away from the pool, Eragon touched his fingers to his lips and silently mouthed, *I'm sorry*.

A sliver of space appeared around each of the small scales that rimmed Saphira's eye as the underlying flesh softened. She blinked long and slow, and he knew she understood his message and that she bore him no ill will.

After Eragon and Arya took their leave of Nasuada, Arya terminated her spell and stood. With the back of her hand, she knocked the dirt from her dress.

While she did, Eragon fidgeted, impatient as he had not been before; right then he wanted nothing else but to run straight to Saphira and curl up with her in front of a campfire.

"Let us be off," he said, already moving.

✦ ✦ ✦

A Delicate Matter

The muscles of Roran's back popped and rippled as he heaved the boulder off the ground.

He rested the large rock on his thighs for an instant and then, grunting, pressed it overhead and locked his arms straight. For a full minute, he held the crushing weight in the air. When his shoulders were trembling and about to fail, he threw the boulder onto the ground in front of him. It landed with a dull thud, leaving an indentation several inches deep in the dirt.

On either side of Roran, twenty of the Varden's warriors struggled to lift boulders of similar size. Only two succeeded; the rest returned to the lighter rocks they were accustomed to. It pleased Roran that the months he had spent in Horst's forge and the years of farmwork before had given him the strength to hold his own with men who had drilled with their weapons every day since they turned twelve.

Roran shook the fire from his arms and took several deep breaths, the air cool against his bare chest. Reaching up, he massaged his right shoulder, cupping the round ball of muscle and exploring it with his fingers, confirming once again that no trace remained of the injury he had suffered when the Ra'zac had bitten him. He grinned, glad to be whole and sound again, being as it had seemed no likelier to him than a cow dancing a jig.

A yelp of pain caused him to look over at Albriech and Baldor, who were sparring with Lang, a swarthy, battle-scarred veteran who taught the arts of war. Even two against one, Lang held his own, and with his wooden practice sword, he had disarmed Baldor, knocked him across the ribs, and jabbed Albriech so hard in the leg, he fell sprawling, all in the span of a few seconds. Roran empathized with them; he had just finished his own session with Lang, and it had left him with several new bruises to go with his faded ones from Helgrind. For the most part, he preferred his hammer over a sword, but he thought he should still be able to handle a blade if the occasion called for it. Swords required more finesse than he felt most fights deserved: bash a swordsman on the wrist and, armored or not, he would be too preoccupied with his broken bones to defend himself.

After the Battle of the Burning Plains, Nasuada had invited the villagers from Carvahall to join the Varden. They had all accepted her offer. Those who would have refused had already elected to stay in Surda when the villagers stopped in Dauth on their way to the Burning Plains. Every able-bodied man from Carvahall had taken up

proper arms—discarding their makeshift spears and shields—and had worked to become warriors equal to any in Alagaësia. The people of Palancar Valley were accustomed to a hard life. Swinging a sword was no worse than chopping wood, and it was a far sight easier than breaking sod or hoeing acres of beets in the heat of summer. Those who knew a useful trade continued to ply their craft in service to the Varden, but in their spare time they still strove to master the weapons given to them, for every man was expected to fight when the call to battle sounded.

Roran had devoted himself to the training with unwavering dedication since returning from Helgrind. Helping the Varden defeat the Empire and, ultimately, Galbatorix was the one thing he could do to protect the villagers and Katrina. He was not arrogant enough to believe that he alone could tip the balance of the war, but he was confident in his ability to shape the world and knew that if he applied himself, he could increase the Varden's chances of victory. He had to stay alive, though, and that meant conditioning his body and mastering the tools and techniques of slaughter so as to avoid falling to a more experienced warrior.

As he crossed the practice field, on his way back to the tent he shared with Baldor, Roran passed a strip of grass sixty feet long whereon lay a twenty-foot log stripped of its bark and polished smooth by the thousands of hands that rubbed against it every day. Without breaking his stride, Roran turned, slipped his fingers under the thick end of the log, lifted it, and, grunting from the strain, walked it upright. He gave the log a push then, and it toppled over. Grabbing the thin end, he repeated the process twice more.

Unable to muster the energy to flip the log again, Roran left the field and trotted through the surrounding maze of gray canvas tents, waving to Loring and Fisk and others he recognized, as well as a half-dozen or so strangers who greeted him. "Hail, Stronghammer!" they cried in warm tones.

"Hail!" he replied. *It is a strange thing,* he thought, *to be known to people whom you have not met before*. A minute later, he arrived at the tent that had become his home and, ducking inside, stored away the bow, the quiver of arrows, and the short sword the Varden had given him.

He snared his waterskin from beside his bedding, then hurried back into the bright sunlight and, unstoppering the skin, poured the contents over his back and shoulders. Baths tended to be sporadic and infrequent events for Roran, but today was an important day, and he wanted to be fresh and clean for what was to come. With the sharp edge of a polished stick, he scraped the grime off his arms and legs and out from under his fingernails and then combed his hair and

trimmed his beard.

Satisfied that he was presentable, he pulled on his freshly washed tunic, stuck his hammer through his belt, and was about to head off through the camp when he became aware of Birgit watching him from behind the corner of the tent. She clenched a sheathed dagger with both hands.

Roran froze, ready to draw his hammer at the slightest provocation. He knew that he was in mortal danger, and despite his prowess, he was not confident of defeating Birgit if she attacked, for like him, she pursued her enemies with single-minded determination.

"You once asked me to help you," said Birgit, "and I agreed because I wanted to find the Ra'zac and kill them for eating my husband. Have I not upheld my bargain?"

"You have."

"And do you remember I promised that once the Ra'zac were dead, I would have my compensation from you for your role in Quimby's death?"

"I do."

Birgit twisted the dagger with increasing urgency, the back of her fists ridged with tendons. The dagger rose out of its sheath a full inch, baring the bright steel, and then slowly sank into darkness again. "Good," she said. "I would not want your memory to fail you. I *will* have my compensation, Garrowsson. Never you doubt that." With a swift, firm step, she departed, the dagger hidden among the folds of her dress.

Releasing his breath, Roran sat on a nearby stool and rubbed his throat, convinced that he had narrowly escaped being gutted by Birgit. Her visit had alarmed him but it did not surprise him; he had been aware of her intentions for months, since before they left Carvahall, and he knew that one day he would have to settle his debt with her.

A raven soared overhead, and as he tracked it, his mood lightened and he smiled. "Well," he said to himself. *A man rarely knows the day and hour when he will die. I could be killed at any moment, and there's not a blasted thing I can do about it. What will happen will happen, and I won't waste the time I have aboveground worrying. Misfortune always comes to those who wait. The trick is to find happiness in the brief gaps between disasters. Birgit will do what her conscience tells her to, and I will deal with it when I must.*

By his left foot, he noticed a yellowish stone, which he picked up and rolled between his fingers. Concentrating on it as hard as he could, he said, "Stenr rïsa." The stone ignored his command and remained immobile between his thumb and forefinger. With a snort, he tossed it away.

Standing, he strode north between the rows of tents. While he walked, he tried to untangle a knot in the lacing at his collar, but it resisted his efforts, and he gave up on it when he arrived at Horst's tent, which was twice as large as most. "Hello in there," he said, and knocked on the pole between the two entrance flaps.

Katrina burst out of the tent, copper hair flying, and wrapped her arms around him. Laughing, he lifted her by the waist and spun her in a circle, all the world a blur except her face, then gently set her down. She pecked him on the lips, once, twice, three times. Growing still, he gazed into her eyes, more happy than he could ever remember being.

"You smell nice," she said.

"How are you?" The only flaw in his joy was seeing how thin and pale imprisonment had left her. It made him want to resurrect the Ra'zac so they could endure the same suffering they had inflicted upon her and his father.

"Every day you ask me, and every day I tell you, 'Better.' Be patient; I will recover, but it will take time.… The best remedy for what ails me is being with you here under the sun. It does me more good than I can tell you."

"That was not all I was asking."

Crimson spots appeared on Katrina's cheeks, and she tilted her head back, her lips curving in a mischievous smile. "My, you are bold, dear sir. Most bold indeed. I'm not sure I should be alone with you, for fear you might take liberties with me."

The spirit of her reply set his concern to rest. "Liberties, eh? Well, since you already consider me a scoundrel, I might as well enjoy some of these *liberties*." And he kissed her until she broke the contact, although she remained in his embrace.

"Oh," she said, out of breath. "You're a hard man to argue with, Roran Stronghammer."

"That I am." Nodding toward the tent behind her, he lowered his voice and asked, "Does Elain know?"

"She would if she weren't so preoccupied with her pregnancy. I think the stress of the trip from Carvahall may cause her to lose the child. She's sick a good part of the day, and she has pains that … well, of an unfortunate nature. Gertrude has been tending her, but she can't do much to ease her discomfort. All the same, the sooner Eragon returns, the better. I'm not sure how long I can keep this secret."

"You'll do fine, I'm sure." He released her then and tugged on the hem of his tunic to smooth out the wrinkles. "How do I look?"

Katrina studied him with a critical eye and then wet the tips of her fingers and ran them through his hair, pushing it back off his forehead. Spotting the knot at his collar, she began to pick at it, saying, "You ought to pay closer attention to your clothes."

“Clothes haven’t been trying to kill me.”

“Well, things are different now. You’re the cousin of a Dragon Rider, and you should look the part. People expect it of you.”

He allowed her to continue fussing with him until she was pleased with his appearance. Kissing her goodbye, he walked the half mile to the center of the Varden’s massive camp, where Nasuada’s red command pavilion stood. The pennant mounted on the top bore a black shield and two parallel swords slanting underneath, and it whipped and snapped in a warm wind from the east.

The six guards outside the pavilion—two humans, two dwarves, and two Urgals—lowered their weapons as Roran approached, and one of the Urgals, a thickset brute with yellow teeth, challenged him, saying, “Who goes there?” His accent was nearly unintelligible.

“Roran Stronghammer, son of Garrow. Nasuada sent for me.”

Pounding his breastplate with one fist, which produced a loud crash, the Urgal announced, “Roran Stronghammer requests an audience with you, Lady Nightstalker.”

“You may admit him,” came the answer from inside.

The warriors lifted their blades, and Roran carefully made his way past. They watched him, and he them, with the detached air of men who might have to fight each other at a moment’s notice.

Inside the pavilion, Roran was alarmed to see that most of the furniture was broken and overturned. The only pieces that seemed unharmed were a mirror mounted on a pole and the grand chair in which Nasuada was sitting. Ignoring their surroundings, he knelt and bowed to her.

Nasuada’s features and bearing were so different from those of the women Roran had grown up with, he was not sure how to act. She appeared strange and imperious, with her embroidered dress and the gold chains in her hair and her dusky skin, which at the moment had a reddish cast, due to the color of the fabric walls. In stark contrast to the rest of her apparel, linen bandages encased her forearms, a testament to her astounding courage during the Trial of the Long Knives. Her feat had been a topic of constant discussion among the Varden ever since Roran had returned with Katrina. It was the one aspect of her he felt as if he understood, for he too would make any sacrifice in order to protect those he cared about. It just so happened that she cared about a group of thousands, while he was committed to his family and his village.

“Please, rise,” said Nasuada. He did as he was instructed and rested a hand on the head of his hammer, then waited while she inspected him. “My position rarely allows me the luxury of clear, direct speech, Roran, but I will be blunt with you today. You seem to be a man who appreciates candor, and we have much to discuss in a small amount of

time."

"Thank you, my Lady. I have never enjoyed playing word games."

"Excellent. To be blunt, then, you have presented me with two difficulties, neither of which I can easily resolve."

He frowned. "What sort of difficulties?"

"One of character, and one of politics. Your deeds in Palancar Valley and during your flight thence with your fellow villagers are nigh on incredible. They tell me that you have a daring mind and that you are skilled at combat, strategy, and inspiring people to follow you with unquestioning loyalty."

"They may have followed me, but they certainly never stopped questioning me."

A smile touched her lips. "Perhaps. But you still got them here, didn't you? You possess valuable talents, Roran, and the Varden could use you. I assume you wish to be of service?"

"I do."

"As you know, Galbatorix has divided his army and sent troops south to reinforce the city of Aroughs, west toward Feinster, and north toward Belatona. He hopes to drag out this fight, to bleed us dry through slow attrition. Jörmundur and I cannot be in a dozen locations at once. We need captains whom we can trust to deal with the myriad conflicts springing up around us. In this, you could prove your worth to us. But …" Her voice faded.

"But you do not yet know if you can rely upon me."

"Indeed. Protecting one's friends and family stiffens a person's spine, but I wonder how you will fare without them. Will your nerve hold? And while you can lead, can you also obey orders? I cast no aspersions on your character, Roran, but the fate of Alagaësia is at stake, and I cannot risk putting someone incompetent in charge of my men. This war does not forgive such errors. Nor would it be fair to the men already with the Varden to place you over them without just cause. You must earn your responsibilities with us."

"I understand. What would you have me do, then?"

"Ah, but it's not that easy, for you and Eragon are practically brothers, and that complicates things immeasurably. As I'm sure you are aware, Eragon is the keystone of our hopes. It is important, then, to shelter him from distractions so he may concentrate upon the task before him. If I send you into battle and you die as a result, grief and anger might very well unbalance him. I've seen it happen before. Moreover, I must take great care with whom I allow you to serve, for there are those who will seek to influence you because of your relation to Eragon. So now you have a fair idea of the scope of my concerns. What have you to say about them?"

"If the land itself is at stake and this war is as hotly contested as you

imply, then I say you cannot afford to let me sit idle. Employing me as a common swordsman would be just as much a waste. But I think you know that already. As for politics …" He shrugged. "I don't care one whit whom you put me with. No one shall get to Eragon through me. My only concern is breaking the Empire so that my kith and kin can return to our home and live in peace."

"You are determined."

"Very. Could you not allow me to remain in charge of the men from Carvahall? We are as close as family, and we work well together. Test me that way. The Varden would not suffer, then, if I failed."

She shook her head. "No. Perhaps in the future, but not yet. They require proper instruction, and I cannot judge your performance when you are surrounded by a group of people who are so loyal that at your urging they abandoned their homes and traversed the width of Alagaësia."

She considers me a threat, he realized. *My ability to influence the villagers makes her wary of me*. In an attempt to disarm her, he said, "They had their own sense to guide them. They knew it was folly to stay in the valley."

"You cannot explain away their behavior, Roran."

"What do you want of me, Lady? Will you let me serve or not? And if so, how?"

"Here is my offer. This morning, my magicians detected a patrol of twenty-three of Galbatorix's soldiers due east. I am sending out a contingent under the command of Martland Redbeard, the Earl of Thun, to destroy them and to do some scouting besides. If you are agreeable, you will serve under Martland. You will listen to and obey him and hopefully learn from him. He, in turn, will watch you and report to me whether he believes you are suitable for advancement. Martland is very experienced, and I have every confidence in his opinion. Does this strike you as fair, Roran Stronghammer?"

"It does. Only, when would I leave, and how long would I be gone?"

"You would leave today and return within a fortnight."

"Then I must ask, could you wait and send me on a different expedition, in a few days? I would like to be here when Eragon returns."

"Your concern for your cousin is admirable, but events move apace, and we cannot delay. As soon as I know Eragon's fate, I will have one of Du Vrangr Gata contact you with the tidings, whether they be good or ill."

Roran rubbed his thumb along the sharp edges of his hammer as he tried to compose a reply that would convince Nasuada to change her mind and yet would not betray the secret he held. At last he abandoned the task as impossible and resigned himself to revealing

the truth. “You’re right. I am worried about Eragon, but of all people he can fend for himself. Seeing him safe and sound isn’t why I want to stay.”

“Why, then?”

“Because Katrina and I wish to be married, and we would like Eragon to perform the ceremony.”

There was a cascade of sharp clicks as Nasuada tapped her fingernails against the arms of her chair. “If you believe I will allow you to loll about when you could be helping the Varden, just so you and Katrina can enjoy your wedding night a few days earlier, then you are sorely mistaken.”

“It is a matter of some urgency, Lady Nightstalker.”

Nasuada’s fingers paused in midair, and her eyes narrowed. “How urgent?”

“The sooner we are wed, the better it will be for Katrina’s honor. If you understand me at all, know that I would never ask favors for myself.”

Light shifted on Nasuada’s skin as she tilted her head. “I see.… Why Eragon? Why do you want him to perform the ceremony? Why not someone else: an elder from your village perhaps?”

“Because he is my cousin and I care for him, and because he is a Rider. Katrina lost nearly everything on my account—her home, her father, and her dowry. I cannot replace those things, but I at least want to give her a wedding worth remembering. Without gold or livestock, I cannot pay for a lavish ceremony, so I must find some other means besides wealth to make our wedding memorable, and it seems to me nothing could be more grand than having a Dragon Rider marry us.”

Nasuada held her peace for so long, Roran began to wonder if she expected him to leave. Then: “It would indeed be an honor to have a Dragon Rider marry you, but it would be a sorry day if Katrina had to accept your hand without a proper dowry. The dwarves furnished me with many presents of gold and jewelry when I lived in Tronjheim. Some I have already sold to fund the Varden, but what I have left would still keep a woman clothed in mink and satin for many years to come. They shall be Katrina’s, if you are amenable.”

Startled, Roran bowed again. “Thank you. Your generosity is overwhelming. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“Repay me by fighting for the Varden as you fought for Carvahall.”

“I will, I swear it. Galbatorix will curse the day he ever sent the Ra’zac after me.”

“I’m sure he already does. Now go. You may remain in camp until Eragon returns and marries you to Katrina, but then I expect you to be in the saddle the following morning.”

W*hat a proud man*, thought Nasuada as she watched Roran leave the pavilion. *It's interesting; he and Eragon are alike in so many ways, and yet their personalities are fundamentally different. Eragon may be one of the most deadly warriors in Alagaësia, but he isn't a hard or cruel person. Roran, however, is made of sterner stuff. I hope that he never crosses me; I would have to destroy him in order to stop him*.

She checked her bandages and, satisfied that they were still fresh, rang for Farica and ordered her to bring a meal. After her handmaid delivered the food and then retired from the tent, Nasuada signaled Elva, who emerged from her hiding place behind the false panel at the rear of the pavilion. Together, the two of them shared a midmorning repast.

Nasuada spent the next few hours reviewing the Varden's latest inventory reports, calculating the number of wagon trains she would need to move the Varden farther north, and adding and subtracting rows of figures that represented the finances of her army. She sent messages to the dwarves and Urgals, ordered the blade-smiths to increase their production of spearheads, threatened the Council of Elders with dissolution—as she did most every week—and otherwise attended to the Varden's business. Then, with Elva at her side, Nasuada rode out on her stallion, Battle-storm, and met with Trianna, who had captured and was busy interrogating a member of Galbatorix's spy network, the Black Hand.

As she and Elva left Trianna's tent, Nasuada became aware of a commotion to the north. She heard shouts and cheers, then a man appeared from among the tents, sprinting toward her. Without a word, her guards formed a tight circle around her, save for one of the Urgals, who planted himself in the path of the runner and hefted his club. The man slowed to a stop before the Urgal and, gasping, shouted, "Lady Nasuada! The elves are here! The elves have arrived!"

For a wild, improbable moment, Nasuada thought he meant Queen Islanzadí and her army, but then she remembered Islanzadí was near Ceunon; not even the elves could move a host across the width of Alagaësia in less than a week. *It must be the twelve spellweavers Islanzadí sent to protect Eragon*.

"Quick, my horse," she said, and snapped her fingers. Her forearms burned as she swung herself onto Battle-storm. She waited only long enough for the nearest Urgal to hand her Elva, then drove her heels into the stallion. His muscles surged beneath her as he sprang into a

gallop. Bending low over his neck, she steered him down a crude lane between two rows of tents, dodging men and animals and jumping a rain barrel that barred her way. The men did not seem to take offense; they laughed and scrambled after her so they could see the elves with their own eyes.

When she arrived at the northern entrance to the camp, she and Elva dismounted and scanned the horizon for motion.

"There," said Elva, and pointed.

Nearly two miles away, twelve long, lean figures emerged from behind a stand of juniper trees, their outlines wavering in the morning heat. The elves ran in unison, so light and fast, their feet raised no dust and they appeared to fly over the countryside. Nasuada's scalp prickled. Their speed was both beautiful and unnatural. They reminded her of a pack of predators chasing their prey. She felt the same sense of danger as when she had seen a Shrrg, a giant wolf, in the Beor Mountains.

"Awe-inspiring, aren't they?"

Nasuada started to find Angela next to her. She was annoyed and mystified by how the herbalist had been able to sneak up on her. She wished Elva had warned her of Angela's approach. "How is it you always manage to be present when something interesting is about to occur?"

"Oh well, I like to know what's going on, and being there is so much faster than waiting for someone to tell me about it afterward. Besides, people always leave out important pieces of information, like whether someone's ring finger is longer than their index finger, or whether they have magical shields protecting them, or whether the donkey they are riding happens to have a bald patch in the shape of a rooster's head. Don't you agree?"

Nasuada frowned. "You never reveal your secrets, do you?"

"Now, what good would that do? Everyone would get all excited over some piffle of a spell, and then I'd have to spend hours trying to explain, and in the end, King Orrin would want to chop off my head and I would have to fight off half your spellcasters during my escape. It's just not worth the effort, if you ask me."

"Your answer hardly inspires confidence. But—"

"That's because you are too serious, Lady Nightstalker."

"But tell me," Nasuada persisted, "why would you want to know if someone is riding a donkey with a bald patch shaped like a rooster's head?"

"Ah, that. Well, the man who owns that particular donkey cheated me at a game of knucklebones out of three buttons and a rather interesting shard of enchanted crystal."

"Cheated *you*?"

Angela pursed her lips, obviously irked. “The knucklebones were loaded. I switched them on him, but then he replaced them with a set of his own when I was distracted.… I’m still not quite sure how he tricked me.”

“So you were both cheating.”

“It was a valuable crystal! Besides, how can you cheat a cheater?”

Before Nasuada could respond, the six Nighthawks came pounding out of the camp and took up positions around her. She hid her distaste as the heat and smell of their bodies assailed her. The odor of the two Urgals was especially pungent. Then, somewhat to her surprise, the captain of the shift, a burly man with a crooked nose and the name of Garven, accosted her. “My Lady, may I have a word with you in private?” He spoke through close-set teeth, as if struggling to contain a great emotion.

Angela and Elva looked at Nasuada for confirmation that she wanted them to withdraw. She nodded, and they began walking west, toward the Jiet River. Once Nasuada was confident they were out of hearing, she began to speak, but Garven overrode her, exclaiming, “Blast it, Lady Nasuada, you shouldn’t have left us as you did!”

“Peace, Captain,” she replied. “It was a small enough risk, and I felt it was important to be here in time to greet the elves.”

Garven’s mail rustled as he struck his leg with a bunched fist. “A small risk? Not an hour ago, you received proof that Galbatorix still has agents hidden among us. He has been able to infiltrate us again and again, and yet you see fit to abandon your escort and go racing through a host of potential assassins! Have you forgotten the attack in Aberon, or how the Twins slew your father?”

“Captain Garven! You go too far.”

“I’ll go even further if it means ensuring your well-being.”

The elves, Nasuada observed, had halved the distance between them and the camp. Angry, and eager to end the conversation, she said, “I am not without my own protection, Captain.”

Flicking his eyes toward Elva, Garven said, “We have suspected as much, Lady.” A pause followed, as if he were hoping she would volunteer more information. When she remained silent, he forged onward: “If you were actually safe, then I was wrong to accuse you of recklessness, and I apologize. Still, safety and the appearance of safety are two different things. For the Nighthawks to be effective, we have to be the smartest, toughest, meanest warriors in the land, and people have to *believe* that we’re the smartest, the toughest, and the meanest. They have to believe that if they try to stab you or shoot you with a crossbow or use magic against you, that we *will* stop them. If they believe they have about as much chance of killing you as a mouse does a dragon, then they may very well give up the idea as hopeless,

and we will have averted an attack without ever having to lift a finger.

"We cannot fight all your enemies, Lady Nasuada. That would take an army. Even Eragon couldn't save you if all who want you dead had the courage to act upon their hatred. You might survive a hundred attempts on your life or a thousand, but eventually one would succeed. The only way to keep that from happening is to convince the majority of your enemies that they will *never* get past the Nighthawks. Our reputation can protect you just as surely as our swords and our armor. It does us no good, then, for people to see you riding off without us. No doubt we looked a right bunch of fools back there, frantically trying to catch up. After all, if you do not respect us, Lady, why should anyone else?"

Garven moved closer, dropping his voice. "We will gladly die for you if we must. All we ask in return is that you allow us to perform our duties. It is a small favor, considering. And the day may come when you are grateful we are here. Your other protection is human, and therefore fallible, whatever her arcane powers may be. She has not sworn the same oaths in the ancient language that we of the Nighthawks have. Her sympathies could shift, and you would do well to ponder your fate if she turned against you. The Nighthawks, however, will never betray you. We are yours, Lady Nasuada, fully and completely. So please, let the Nighthawks do what they are supposed to do.… Let us protect you."

Initially, Nasuada was indifferent to his arguments, but his eloquence and the clarity of his reasoning impressed her. He was, she thought, a man she might have use for elsewhere. "I see Jörmundur has surrounded me with warriors as skilled with their tongues as they are with their swords," she said with a smile.

"My Lady."

"You are right. I should not have left you and your men behind, and I am sorry. It was careless and inconsiderate. I am still unaccustomed to having guards with me at all hours of the day, and sometimes I forget I cannot move about with the freedom I once did. You have my word of honor, Captain Garven, it shall not happen again. I do not wish to cripple the Nighthawks any more than you."

"Thank you, my Lady."

Nasuada turned back toward the elves, but they were hidden from sight below the bank of a dry stream a quarter of a mile away. "It strikes me, Garven, that you may have invented a motto for the Nighthawks a moment ago."

"Did I? If so, I cannot recall."

"You did. 'The smartest, the toughest, and the meanest,' you said. That would be a fine motto, although perhaps without the and. If the

other Nighthawks approve of it, you should have Trianna translate the phrase into the ancient language, and I will have it inscribed on your shields and embroidered on your standards."

"You are most generous, my Lady. When we return to our tents, I shall discuss the matter with Jörmundur and my fellow captains. Only …"

He hesitated then, and guessing at what troubled him, Nasuada said, "But you are worried that such a motto may be too vulgar for men of your position, and you would prefer something more noble and high-minded, am I right?"

"Exactly, my Lady," he said with a relieved expression.

"It's a valid concern, I suppose. The Nighthawks represent the Varden, and you must interact with notables of every race and rank in the course of your duty. It would be regrettable if you were to convey the wrong impression.… Very well, I leave it to you and your compatriots to devise an appropriate motto. I am confident you will do an excellent job."

At that moment, the twelve elves emerged from the dry streambed, and Garven, after murmuring additional thanks, moved a discreet distance from Nasuada. Composing herself for a state visit, Nasuada signaled Angela and Elva to return.

When he was still several hundred feet away, the lead elf appeared soot-black from head to toe. At first Nasuada assumed he was dark-skinned, like herself, and wearing dark attire, but as he drew closer, she saw that the elf wore only a loincloth and a braided fabric belt with a small pouch attached. The rest of him was covered with midnight-blue fur that glistened with a healthy sheen under the glare of the sun. On average, the fur was a quarter-inch long—a smooth, flexible armor that mirrored the shape and movement of the underlying muscles—but on his ankles and the undersides of his forearms, it extended a full two inches, and between his shoulder blades, there was a ruffled mane that stuck out a handsbreadth from his body and tapered down along his back to the base of his spine. Jagged bangs shadowed his brow, and catlike tufts sprouted from the tips of his pointed ears, but otherwise the fur on his face was so short and flat, only its color betrayed its presence. His eyes were bright yellow. Instead of fingernails, a claw protruded from each of his middle fingers. And as he slowed to a stop before her, Nasuada noticed that a certain odor surrounded him: a salty musk reminiscent of dry juniper wood, oiled leather, and smoke. It was such a strong smell, and so obviously masculine, Nasuada felt her skin go hot and cold and crawl with anticipation, and she blushed and was glad it would not show.

The rest of the elves were more as she had expected, of the same

general build and complexion as Arya, with short tunics of dusky orange and pine-needle green. Six were men, and six were women. They all had raven hair, save for two of the women whose hair was like starlight. It was impossible to determine their ages, for their faces were smooth and unlined. They were the first elves besides Arya that Nasuada had met in person, and she was eager to find out if Arya was representative of her race.

Touching his first two fingers to his lips, the lead elf bowed, as did his companions, and then twisted his right hand against his chest and said, "Greetings and felicitations, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad. Atra esterní onto thelduin." His accent was more pronounced than Arya's: a lilting cadence that gave his words music.

"Atra du evarínya ono varda," replied Nasuada, as Arya had taught her.

The elf smiled, revealing teeth that were sharper than normal. "I am Blödhgarm, son of Ildrid the Beautiful." He introduced the other elves in turn before continuing. "We bring you glad tidings from Queen Islanzadí; last night our spellcasters succeeded in destroying the gates of Ceunon. Even as we speak, our forces advance through the streets toward the tower where Lord Tarrant has barricaded himself. Some few still resist us, but the city has fallen, and soon we shall have complete control over Ceunon."

Nasuada's guards and the Varden gathered behind her burst into cheers at the news. She too rejoiced at the victory, but then a sense of foreboding and disquiet tempered her celebratory mood as she pictured elves—especially ones as strong as Blödhgarm—invading human homes. *What unearthly forces have I unleashed?* she wondered. "These are glad tidings indeed," she said, "and I am well pleased to hear them. With Ceunon captured, we are that much closer to Urû'baen, and thus to Galbatorix and the fulfillment of our goals." In a more private voice, she said, "I trust that Queen Islanzadí will be gentle with the people of Ceunon, with those who have no love for Galbatorix but lack the means or the courage to oppose the Empire."

"Queen Islanzadí is both kind and merciful to her subjects, even if they are her unwilling subjects, but if anyone dares oppose us, we shall sweep them aside like dead leaves before an autumn storm."

"I would expect nothing less from a race as old and mighty as yours," Nasuada replied. After satisfying the demands of courtesy with several more polite exchanges of increasing triviality, Nasuada deemed it appropriate to address the reason for the elves' visit. She ordered the assembled crowd to disperse, then said, "Your purpose here, as I understand it, is to protect Eragon and Saphira. Am I right?"

"You are, Nasuada Svit-kona. And we are aware that Eragon is still inside the Empire but that he will return soon."

“Are you also aware that Arya left in search of him and that they are now traveling together?”

Blödhgarm flicked his ears. “We were informed of that as well. It is unfortunate that they should both be in such danger, but hopefully no harm will befall them.”

“What do you intend to do, then? Will you seek them out and escort them back to the Varden? Or will you stay and wait and trust that Eragon and Arya can defend themselves against Galbatorix’s minions?”

“We will remain as your guests, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad. Eragon and Arya are safe enough as long as they avoid detection. Joining them in the Empire could very well attract unwanted attention. Under the circumstances, it seems best to bide our time where we can yet do some good. Galbatorix is most likely to strike here, at the Varden, and if he does, and if Thorn and Murtagh should reappear, Saphira will need all our help to drive them off.”

Nasuada was surprised. “Eragon said you were among the strongest spellcasters of your race, but do you really have the wherewithal to thwart that accursed pair? Like Galbatorix, they have powers far beyond those of ordinary Riders.”

“With Saphira helping us, yes, we believe that we can match or overcome Thorn and Murtagh. We know what the Forsworn were capable of, and while Galbatorix has probably made Thorn and Murtagh stronger than any individual member of the Forsworn, he certainly won’t have made them his equals. In that regard, at least, his fear of treachery is to our benefit. Even three of the Forsworn could not conquer the twelve of us and a dragon. Therefore, we are confident that we can hold our own against all but Galbatorix.”

“That is heartening. Since Eragon’s defeat at the hands of Murtagh, I have been wondering if we should retreat and hide until Eragon’s strength increases. Your assurances convince me that we are not entirely without hope. We may have no idea how to kill Galbatorix himself, but until we batter down the gates of his citadel in Urû’baen, or until he chooses to fly out on Shruikan and confront us on the field of battle, nothing shall stop us.” She paused. “You have given me no reason to distrust you, Blödhgarm, but before you enter our camp, I must ask that you allow one of my men to touch each of your minds to confirm that you are actually elves, and not humans Galbatorix has sent here in disguise. It pains me to make such a request, but we have been plagued by spies and traitors, and we dare not take you, or anyone else, at their word. It is not my intention to cause offense, but war has taught us these precautions are necessary. Surely you, who have ringed the entire leafy expanse of Du Weldenvarden with protective spells, can understand my reasons. So I ask, will you agree

to this?"

Blödhgarm's eyes were feral and his teeth were alarmingly sharp as he said, "For the most part, the trees of Du Weldenvarden have needles, not leaves. Test us if you must, but I warn you, whomever you assign the task should take great care he does not delve too deeply into our minds, else he may find himself stripped of his reason. It is perilous for mortals to wander among our thoughts; they can easily become lost and be unable to return to their bodies. Nor are our secrets available for general inspection."

Nasuada understood. The elves would destroy anyone who ventured into forbidden territory. "Captain Garven," she said.

Stepping forward with the expression of a man approaching his doom, Garven stood opposite Blödhgarm, closed his eyes, and frowned intensely as he searched out Blödhgarm's consciousness. Nasuada bit the inside of her lip as she watched. When she was a child, a one-legged man by the name of Hargrove had taught her how to conceal her thoughts from telepaths and how to block and divert the stabbing lances of a mental attack. At both those skills she excelled, and although she had never succeeded at initiating contact with the mind of another, she was thoroughly familiar with the principles involved. She empathized, then, with the difficulty and the delicacy of what Garven was trying to do, a trial only made harder by the strange nature of the elves.

Leaning toward her, Angela whispered, "You should have had me check the elves. It would have been safer."

"Perhaps," said Nasuada. Despite all the help the herbalist had given her and the Varden, she still felt uncomfortable relying upon her for official business.

For a few moments longer, Garven continued his efforts, and then his eyes snapped open and he released his breath in an explosive burst. His neck and face were mottled from the strain, and his pupils were dilated, as if it were night. In contrast, Blödhgarm appeared undisturbed; his fur was smooth, his breathing regular, and a faint smile of amusement flickered about the corners of his lips.

"Well?" asked Nasuada.

It seemed to take Garven a longish while to hear her question, and then the burly captain with the crooked nose said, "He is not human, my Lady. Of that I have no doubt. No doubt whatsoever."

Pleased and disturbed, for there was something uncomfortably remote about his reply, Nasuada said, "Very well. Proceed." Thereafter, Garven required less and less time to examine each elf, spending no more than a half-dozen seconds on the very last of the group. Nasuada kept a close eye on him throughout the process, and she saw how his fingers became white and bloodless, and the skin at

his temples sank into his skull like the eardrums of a frog, and he acquired the languid appearance of a person swimming deep underwater.

Having completed his assignment, Garven returned to his post beside Nasuada. He was, she thought, a changed man. His original determination and fierceness of spirit had faded into the dreamy air of a sleepwalker, and while he looked at her when she asked if he was well, and he answered in an even enough tone, she felt as if his spirit was far away, ambling among dusty, sunlit glades somewhere in the elves' mysterious forest. Nasuada hoped he would soon recover. If he did not, she would ask Eragon or Angela, or perhaps the two of them together, to attend to Garven. Until such time as his condition improved, she decided that he should no longer serve as an active member of the Nighthawks; Jörmundur would give him something simple to do, so she would not suffer guilt at causing him any further injury, and he might at least have the pleasure of enjoying whatever visions his contact with the elves had left him with.

Bitter at her loss, and furious with herself, with the elves, and with Galbatorix and the Empire for making such a sacrifice necessary, she had difficulty maintaining a soft tongue and good manners. "When you spoke of peril, Blödhgarm, you would have done well to mention that even those who return to their bodies do not escape entirely unscathed."

"My Lady, I am fine," said Garven. His protestation was so weak and ineffectual, hardly anyone noticed, and it only served to strengthen Nasuada's sense of outrage.

The fur on Blödhgarm's nape rippled and stiffened. "If I failed to explain myself clearly enough before, then I apologize. However, do not blame us for what has happened; we cannot help our nature. And do not blame yourself either, for we live in an age of suspicion. To allow us to pass unchallenged would have been negligent on your part. It is regrettable that such an unpleasant incident should mar this historic meeting between us, but at least now you may rest easy, confident that you have established our origins and that we are what we seem to be: elves of Du Weldenvarden."

A fresh cloud of his musk drifted over Nasuada, and even though she was hard with anger, her joints weakened and she was assailed by thoughts of bowers draped in silk, goblets of cherry wine, and the mournful dwarf songs she had often heard echoing through the empty halls of Tronjheim. Distracted, she said, "I would Eragon or Arya were here, for they could have looked at your minds without fear of losing their sanity."

Again she succumbed to the wanton attraction of Blödhgarm's odor, imagining what it would feel like to run her hands through his mane.

She only returned to herself when Elva pulled on her left arm, forcing her to bend over and place her ear close to the witch-child's mouth. In a low, harsh voice, Elva said, "Horehound. Concentrate upon the taste of horehound."

Following her advice, Nasuada summoned a memory from the previous year, when she had eaten horehound candy during one of King Hrothgar's feasts. Just thinking about the acrid flavor of the candy dried out her mouth and counteracted the seductive qualities of Blödhgarm's musk. She attempted to conceal her lapse in concentration by saying, "My young companion here is wondering why you look so different from other elves. I must confess to some curiosity on the subject as well. Your appearance is not what we have come to expect from your race. Would you be so kind as to share with us the reason for your more *animalistic* features?"

A shiny ripple flowed through Blödhgarm's fur as he shrugged. "This shape pleased me," he said. "Some write poems about the sun and the moon, others grow flowers or build great structures or compose music. As much as I appreciate those various art forms, I believe that true beauty only exists in the fang of a wolf, in the pelt of the forest cat, in the eye of an eagle. So I adopted those attributes for myself. In another hundred years, I may lose interest in the beasts of the land and instead decide that the beasts of the sea embody all that is good, and then I will cover myself with scales, transform my hands into fins and my feet into a tail, and I will vanish beneath the surface of the waves and never again be seen in Alagaësia."

If he was jesting, as Nasuada believed, he showed no indication of it. Quite to the contrary, he was so serious, she wondered if he was mocking her. "Most interesting," she said. "I hope the urge to become a fish does not strike you in the near future, for we have need of you on dry ground. Of course, if Galbatorix should decide to also enslave the sharks and the rockfish, why, then, a spellcaster who can breathe underwater may be of some use."

Without warning, the twelve elves filled the air with their clear, bright laughter, and birds for over a mile in every direction burst into song. The sound of their mirth was like water falling on crystal. Nasuada smiled without meaning to, and around her she saw similar expressions on the faces of her guards. Even the two Urgals seemed giddy with joy. And when the elves fell silent and the world became mundane again, Nasuada felt the sadness of a fading dream. A film of tears obscured her vision for a clutch of heartbeats, and then that too was gone.

Smiling for the first time, and thereby presenting a visage both handsome and terrifying, Blödhgarm said, "It will be an honor to serve alongside a woman as intelligent, capable, and witty as yourself, Lady

Nasuada. One of these days, when your duties permit, I would be delighted to teach you our game of Runes. You would make a formidable opponent, I'm sure."

The elves' sudden shift in behavior reminded her of a word she had occasionally heard the dwarves use to describe them: *capricious*. It had seemed a harmless enough description when she was a girl—it reinforced her concept of the elves as creatures who flitted from one delight to another, like fairies in a garden of flowers—but she now recognized that what the dwarves really meant was *Beware! Beware, for you never know what an elf will do*. She sighed to herself, depressed by the prospect of having to contend with another group of beings intent on controlling her for their own ends. *Is life always this complicated?* she wondered. *Or do I bring it upon myself?*

From within the camp, she saw King Orrin riding toward them at the head of a massive train of nobles, courtiers, functionaries major and minor, advisers, assistants, servants, men-at-arms, and a plethora of other species she did not bother identifying, while from the west, rapidly descending on outstretched wings, she saw Saphira. Girding herself for the loud tedium about to engulf them, she said, "It may be some months before I have the opportunity to accept your offer, Blödhgarm, but I appreciate it nevertheless. I would enjoy the distraction of a game after the work of a long day. For the present, however, it must remain a deferred pleasure. The entire weight of human society is about to crash down upon you. I suggest you prepare yourselves for an avalanche of names, questions, and requests. We humans are a curious lot, and none of us have seen so many elves before."

"We are prepared for this, Lady Nasuada," said Blödhgarm.

As King Orrin's thundering cavalcade drew near and Saphira prepared to land, flattening the grass with the wind from her wings, Nasuada's last thought was, *Oh dear. I'll have to put a battalion around Blödhgarm to keep him from being torn apart by the women in the camp. And even that might not solve the problem!*

It was midafternoon the day after they had left Eastcroft when Eragon sensed the patrol of fifteen soldiers ahead of them.

He mentioned it to Arya, and she nodded. “I noticed them as well.” Neither he nor she voiced any concerns, but worry began to gnaw at Eragon’s belly, and he saw how Arya’s eyebrows lowered into a fierce frown.

The land around them was open and flat, devoid of any cover. They had encountered groups of soldiers before, but always in the company of other travelers. Now they were alone on the faint trail of a road.

“We could dig a hole with magic, cover the top with brush, and hide in it until they leave,” said Eragon.

Arya shook her head without breaking stride. “What would we do with the excess dirt? They’d think they had discovered the biggest badger den in existence. Besides, I would rather save our energy for running.”

Eragon grunted. *I’m not sure how many more miles I have left in me*. He was not winded, but the relentless pounding was wearing him down. His knees hurt, his ankles were sore, his left big toe was red and swollen, and blisters continued to break out on his heels, no matter how tightly he bound them. The previous night, he had healed several of the aches and pains troubling him, and while that had provided a measure of relief, the spells only exacerbated his exhaustion.

The patrol was visible as a plume of dust for half an hour before Eragon was able to make out the shapes of the men and the horses at the base of the yellow cloud. Since he and Arya had keener eyesight than most humans, it was unlikely the horsemen could see them at that distance, so they continued to run for another ten minutes. Then they stopped. Arya removed her skirt from her pack and tied it over the leggings she wore while running, and Eragon stored Brom’s ring in his own pack and smeared dirt over his right palm to hide his silvery gedwëy ignasia. They resumed their journey with bowed heads, hunched shoulders, and dragging feet. If all went well, the soldiers would assume they were just another pair of refugees.

Although Eragon could feel the rumble of approaching hoofbeats and hear the cries of the men driving their steeds, it still took the better part of an hour for their two groups to meet on the vast plain. When they did, Eragon and Arya moved off the road and stood looking down between their feet. Eragon caught a glimpse of horse

legs from under the edge of his brow as the first few riders pounded past, but then the choking dust billowed over him, obscuring the rest of the patrol. The dirt in the air was so thick, he had to close his eyes. Listening carefully, he counted until he was sure that more than half the patrol had gone by. *They're not going to bother questioning us!* he thought.

His elation was short-lived. A moment later, someone in the swirling blizzard of dust shouted, "Company, halt!" A chorus of *Whoas*, *Steady there*s, and *Hey there, Nell*s rang out as the fifteen men coaxed their mounts to form a circle around Eragon and Arya. Before the soldiers completed their maneuver and the air cleared, Eragon pawed the ground for a large pebble, then stood back up.

"Be still!" hissed Arya.

While he waited for the soldiers to make their intentions known, Eragon strove to calm his racing heart by rehearsing the story he and Arya had concocted to explain their presence so close to the border with Surda. His efforts failed, for notwithstanding his strength, his training, the knowledge of the battles he had won, and the half-dozen wards protecting him, his flesh remained convinced that imminent injury or death awaited him. His gut twisted, his throat constricted, and his limbs were light and unsteady. *Oh, get on with it!* he thought. He longed to tear something apart with his hands, as if an act of destruction would relieve the pressure building inside of him, but the urge only heightened his frustration, for he dared not move. The one thing that steadied him was Arya's presence. He would sooner cut off a hand than have her consider him a coward. And although she was a mighty warrior in her own right, he still felt the desire to defend her.

The voice that had ordered the patrol to halt again issued forth. "Let me see your faces." Raising his head, Eragon saw a man sitting before them on a roan charger, his gloved hands folded over the pommel of his saddle. Upon his upper lip there sprouted an enormous curly mustache that, after descending to the corners of his mouth, extended a good nine inches in either direction and was in stark contrast to the straight hair that fell to his shoulders. How such a massive piece of sculpted foliage supported its own weight puzzled Eragon, especially since it was dull and lusterless and obviously had not been impregnated with warm beeswax.

The other soldiers held spears pointed at Eragon and Arya. So much dirt covered them, it was impossible to see the flames stitched on their tunics.

"Now then," said the man, and his mustache wobbled like an unbalanced set of scales. "Who are you? Where are you going? And what is your business in the king's lands?" Then he waved a hand. "No, don't bother answering. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters

nowadays. The world is coming to an end, and we waste our days interrogating peasants. Bah! Superstitious vermin who scurry from place to place, devouring all the food in the land and reproducing at a ghastly rate. At my family's estate near Urû'baen, we would have the likes of you flogged if we caught you wandering around without permission, and if we learned that you had stolen from your master, why, then we'd hang you. Whatever you want to tell me is lies. It always is.…

"What have you got in that pack of yours, eh? Food and blankets, yes, but maybe a pair of gold candlesticks, eh? Silverware from the locked chest? Secret letters for the Varden? Eh? Cat got your tongue? Well, we'll soon sort the matter out. Langward, why don't you see what treasures you can excavate from yonder knapsack, there's a good boy."

Eragon staggered forward as one of the soldiers struck him across the back with the haft of a spear. He had wrapped his armor in rags to keep the pieces from rubbing against each other. The rags, however, were too thin to entirely absorb the force of the blow and muffle the clang of metal.

"Oho!" exclaimed the man with the mustache.

Grabbing Eragon from behind, the soldier unlaced the top of his pack and pulled out his hauberk, saying, "Look, sir!"

The man with the mustache broke out in a delighted grin. "Armor! And of fine make as well. Very fine, I should say. Well, you *are* full of surprises. Going to join the Varden, were you? Intent on treason and sedition, mmh?" His expression soured. "Or are you one of those who generally give honest soldiers a bad name? If so, you are a most incompetent mercenary; you don't even have a weapon. Was it too much trouble to cut yourself a staff or a club, eh? Well, how about it? Answer me!"

"No, sir."

"No, sir? Didn't occur to you, I suppose. It's a pity we have to accept such slow-minded wretches, but that's what this blasted war has reduced us to, scrounging for leftovers."

"Accept me where, sir?"

"Silence, you insolent rascal! No one gave you permission to speak!" His mustache quivering, the man gestured. Red lights exploded across Eragon's field of vision as the soldier behind him bashed him on the head. "Whether you are a thief, a traitor, a mercenary, or merely a fool, your fate will be the same. Once you swear the oath of service, you will have no choice but to obey Galbatorix and those who speak for him. We are the first army in history to be free of dissent. No mindless blathering about what we should do. Only orders, clear and direct. You too shall join our cause, and you shall have the privilege of

helping to make real the glorious future our great king has foreseen. As for your lovely companion, there are other ways she can be of use to the Empire, eh? Now tie them up!"

Eragon knew then what he had to do. Glancing over, he found Arya already looking at him, her eyes hard and bright. He blinked once. She blinked in return. His hand tightened around the pebble.

Most of the soldiers Eragon had fought on the Burning Plains had possessed certain rudimentary wards intended to shield them from magical attacks, and he suspected these men were likewise equipped. He was confident he could break or circumvent any spells Galbatorix's magicians invented, but it would require more time than he now had. Instead, he cocked his arm and, with a flick of his wrist, threw the pebble at the man with the mustache.

The pebble punctured the side of his helm.

Before the soldiers could react, Eragon twisted around, yanked the spear from the hands of the man who had been tormenting him, and used it to knock him off his horse. As the man landed, Eragon stabbed him through the heart, breaking the blade of the spear on the metal plates of the soldier's gambeson. Releasing the spear, Eragon dove backward, his body parallel with the ground as he passed underneath seven spears that were flying toward where he had been. The lethal shafts seemed to float above him as he fell.

The instant Eragon had released the pebble, Arya bounded up the side of the horse nearest her, jumping from stirrup to saddle, and kicked the head of the oblivious soldier who was perched on the mare. He went hurtling more than thirty feet. Then Arya leaped from the back of horse to horse, killing the soldiers with her knees, her feet, and her hands in an incredible display of grace and balance.

Jagged rocks tore at Eragon's stomach as he tumbled to a stop. Grimacing, he sprang upright. Four soldiers who had dismounted confronted him with drawn swords. They charged. Dodging to the right, he caught the first soldier's wrist as the man swung his sword and punched him in the armpit. The man collapsed and was still. Eragon dispatched his next opponents by twisting their heads until their spines snapped. The fourth soldier was so close by then, running at him with sword held high, Eragon could not evade him.

Trapped, he did the one thing he could: he struck the man in the chest with all his might. A fount of blood and sweat erupted as his fist connected. The blow staved in the man's ribs and propelled him more than a dozen feet over the grass, where he fetched up against another corpse.

Eragon gasped and doubled over, cradling his throbbing hand. Four of his knuckles were disjointed, and white cartilage showed through his mangled skin. *Blast,* he thought as hot blood poured from the

wounds. His fingers refused to move when he ordered them to; he realized that his hand would be useless until he could heal it. Fearing another attack, he looked around for Arya and the rest of the soldiers.

The horses had scattered. Only three soldiers remained alive. Arya was grappling with two of them some distance away while the third and final soldier fled south along the road. Gathering his strength, Eragon pursued him. As he narrowed the gap between them, the man began to plead for mercy, promising he would tell no one about the massacre and holding out his hands to show they were empty. When Eragon was within arm's reach, the man veered to the side and then a few steps later changed direction again, darting back and forth across the countryside like a frightened jack-rabbit. All the while, the man continued to beg, tears streaming down his cheeks, saying that he was too young to die, that he had yet to marry and father a child, that his parents would miss him, and that he had been pressed into the army and this was only his fifth mission and why couldn't Eragon leave him alone? "What have you against me?" he sobbed. "I only did what I had to. I'm a good person!"

Eragon paused and forced himself to say: "You can't keep up with us. We can't leave you; you'll catch a horse and betray us."

"No, I won't!"

"People will ask what happened here. Your oath to Galbatorix and the Empire won't let you lie. I'm sorry, but I don't know how to release you from your bond, except …"

"Why are you doing this? You're a monster!" screamed the man. With an expression of pure terror, he made an attempt to dash around Eragon and return to the road. Eragon overtook him in less than ten feet, and as the man was still crying and asking for clemency, Eragon wrapped his left hand around his neck and squeezed. When he relaxed his grip, the soldier fell across his feet, dead.

Bile coated Eragon's tongue as he stared down at the man's slack face. *Whenever we kill, we kill a part of ourselves*, he thought. Shaking with a combination of shock, pain, and self-loathing, he walked back to where the fight had begun. Arya was kneeling beside a body, washing her hands and arms with water from a tin flask one of the soldiers had been carrying.

"How is it," asked Arya, "you could kill that man, but you could not bring yourself to lay a finger on Sloan?" She stood and faced him, her gaze frank.

Devoid of emotion, he shrugged. "He was a threat. Sloan wasn't. Isn't it obvious?"

Arya was quiet for a while. "It ought to be, but it isn't.… I am ashamed to be instructed in morality by one with so much less experience. Perhaps I have been too certain, too confident of my own

choices."

Eragon heard her speak, but the words meant nothing to him as his gaze drifted over the corpses. *Is this all my life has become?* he wondered. *A never-ending series of battles?* "I feel like a murderer."

"I understand how difficult this is," said Arya. "Remember, Eragon, you have experienced only a small part of what it means to be a Dragon Rider. Eventually, this war will end, and you will see that your duties encompass more than violence. The Riders were not just warriors, they were teachers, healers, and scholars."

His jaw muscles knotted for a moment. "Why are we fighting these men, Arya?"

"Because they stand between us and Galbatorix."

"Then we should find a way to strike at Galbatorix directly."

"None exist. We cannot march to Urû'baen until we defeat his forces. And we cannot enter his castle until we disarm almost a century's worth of traps, magical and otherwise."

"There has to be a way," he muttered. He remained where he was as Arya strode forward and picked up a spear. But when she placed the tip of the spear under the chin of a slain soldier and thrust it into his skull, Eragon sprang toward her and pushed her away from the body. "What are you doing?" he shouted.

Anger flashed across Arya's face. "I will forgive that only because you are distraught and not of your right mind. Think, Eragon! It is too late in the day for anyone to be coddling you. Why is this necessary?"

The answer presented itself to him, and he grudgingly said, "If we don't, the Empire will notice that most of the men were killed by hand."

"Exactly! The only ones capable of such a feat are elves, Riders, and Kull. And since even an imbecile could figure out a Kull was not responsible for this, they'll soon know we are in the area, and in less than a day, Thorn and Murtagh will be flying overhead, searching for us." There was a wet squelch as she pulled the spear out of the body. She held it out to him until he accepted it. "I find this as repulsive as you do, so you might as well make yourself useful and help."

Eragon nodded. Then Arya scavenged a sword, and together they set out to make it appear as if a troop of ordinary warriors had killed the soldiers. It was grisly work, but it went quickly, for they both knew exactly what kinds of wounds the soldiers should have to ensure the success of the deception, and neither of them wished to linger. When they came to the man whose chest Eragon had destroyed, Arya said, "There's little we can do to disguise an injury like that. We will have to leave it as is and hope people assume a horse stepped on him." They moved on. The last soldier they dealt with was the commander of the patrol. His mustache was now limp and torn and

had lost most of its former splendor.

After enlarging the pebble hole so it more closely resembled the triangular pit left by the spike of a war hammer, Eragon rested for a moment, contemplating the commander's sad mustache, then said, "He was right, you know."

"About what?"

"I need a weapon, a proper weapon. I need a sword." Wiping his palms on the edge of his tunic, he surveyed the plain around them, counting the bodies. "That's it, then, isn't it? We're done." He went and collected his scattered armor, rewrapped it in cloth, and returned it to the bottom of his pack. Then he joined Arya on the low hillock she had climbed.

"We had best avoid the roads from now on," she said. "We cannot risk another encounter with Galbatorix's men." Indicating his deformed right hand, which stained his tunic with blood, she said, "You should tend to that before we set forth." She gave him no time to respond but grasped his paralyzed fingers and said, "Waíse heill."

An involuntary groan escaped him as his fingers popped back into their sockets, and as his abraded tendons and crushed cartilage regained the fullness of their proper shapes, and as the flaps of skin hanging from his knuckles again covered the raw flesh below. When the spell ended, he opened and closed his hand to confirm that it was fully cured. "Thank you," he said. It surprised him that she had taken the initiative when he was perfectly capable of healing his own wounds.

Arya seemed embarrassed. Looking away, out over the plains, she said, "I am glad you were by my side today, Eragon."

"And you by mine."

She favored him with a quick, uncertain smile. They lingered on the hillock for another minute, neither of them eager to resume their journey. Then Arya sighed and said, "We should be off. The shadows lengthen, and someone else is bound to appear and raise a hue and cry when they discover this crows' feast."

Abandoning the hillock, they orientated themselves in a southwesterly direction, angling away from the road, and loped out across the uneven sea of grass. Behind them, the first of the carrion eaters dropped from the sky.

That night, Eragon sat staring at their meager fire, chewing on a dandelion leaf. Their dinner had consisted of an assortment of roots, seeds, and greens that Arya had gathered from the surrounding countryside. Eaten uncooked and unseasoned, they were hardly appetizing, but he had refrained from augmenting the meal with a bird or rabbit, of which there was an abundance in the immediate vicinity, for he did not wish Arya to regard him with disapproval. Moreover, after their fight with the soldiers, the thought of taking another life, even an animal's, sickened him.

It was late, and they would have to get an early start the next morning, but he made no move to retire, nor did Arya. She was situated at right angles to him, her legs pulled up, with her arms wrapped around them and her chin resting on her knees. The skirt of her dress spread outward, like the wind-battered petals of a flower.

His chin sunk low against his chest, Eragon massaged his right hand with his left, trying to dispel a deep-seated ache. *I need a sword*, he thought. *Short of that, I could use some sort of protection for my hands so I don't cripple myself whenever I hit something. The problem is, I'm so strong now, I would have to wear gloves with several inches of padding, which is ridiculous. They would be too bulky, too hot, and what's more, I can't go around with gloves on for the rest of my life*. He frowned. Pushing the bones of his hand out of their normal positions, he studied how they altered the play of light over his skin, fascinated by the malleability of his body. *And what happens if I get in a fight while I'm wearing Brom's ring? It's of elvish make, so I probably don't have to worry about breaking the sapphire. But if I hit anything with the ring on my finger, I won't just dislocate a few joints, I'll splinter every bone in my hand.… I might not even be able to repair the damage*.… He tightened his hands into fists and slowly turned them from side to side, watching the shadows deepen and fade between his knuckles. *I could invent a spell that would stop any object that was moving at a dangerous speed from touching my hands. No, wait, that's no good. What if it was a boulder? What if it was a mountain? I'd kill myself trying to stop it*.

Well, if gloves and magic won't work, I'd like to have a set of the dwarves' Ascûdgamln, their "fists of steel." With a smile, he remembered how the dwarf Shrrgnien had a steel spike threaded into a metal base that was embedded in each of his knuckles, excluding those on his thumbs. The spikes allowed Shrrgnien to hit whatever he wanted with little fear of pain, and they were convenient too, for he could remove

them at will. The concept appealed to Eragon, but he was not about to start drilling holes in his knuckles. *Besides*, he thought, *my bones are thinner than dwarf bones, too thin, perhaps, to attach the base and still have the joints function as they should.... So Ascûdgamln are a bad idea, but maybe instead I can ...*

Bending low over his hands, he whispered, "Thaefathan."

The backs of his hands began to crawl and prickle as if he had fallen into a patch of stinging nettles. The sensation was so intense and so unpleasant, he longed to jump up and scratch himself as hard as he could. With an effort of will, he stayed where he was and watched as the skin on his knuckles bulged, forming a flat, whitish callus half an inch thick over each joint. They reminded him of the hornlike deposits that appear on the inside of horses' legs. When he was pleased with the size and density of the knobs, he released the flow of magic and set about exploring, by touch and sight, the mountainous new terrain that loomed over his fingers.

His hands were heavier and stiffer than before, but he could still move his fingers through their full range of motion. *It may be ugly*, he thought, rubbing the rough protuberances on his right hand against the palm of his left, *and people may laugh and sneer if they notice, but I don't care, for it will serve its purpose and may keep me alive*.

Brimming with silent excitement, he struck the top of a domed rock that rose out of the ground between his legs. The impact jarred his arm and produced a muted thud but caused him no more discomfort than it would have to punch a board covered with several layers of cloth. Emboldened, he retrieved Brom's ring from his pack and slipped on the cool gold band, checking that the adjacent callus was higher than the face of the ring. He tested his observation by again ramming his fist against the rock. The only resulting sound was that of dry, compacted skin colliding with unyielding stone.

"What are you doing?" asked Arya, peering at him through a veil of her black hair.

"Nothing." Then he held out his hands. "I thought it would be a good idea, since I'll probably have to hit someone again."

Arya studied his knuckles. "You are going to have difficulty wearing gloves."

"I can always cut them open to make room."

She nodded and returned to gazing at the fire.

Eragon leaned back on his elbows and stretched out his legs, content that he was prepared for whatever fights might await him in the immediate future. Beyond that, he dared not speculate, for if he did, he would begin to ask himself how he and Saphira could possibly defeat Murtagh or Galbatorix, and then panic would sink its icy claws into him.

He fixed his gaze on the flickering depths of the fire. There, in that writhing inferno, he sought to forget his cares and responsibilities. But the constant motion of the flames soon lulled him into a passive state where unrelated fragments of thoughts, sounds, images, and emotions drifted through him like snowflakes falling from a calm winter's sky. And amid that flurry, there appeared the face of the soldier who had begged for his life. Again Eragon saw him crying, and again he heard his desperate pleas, and again he felt how his neck snapped like a wet branch of wood.

Tormented by the memories, Eragon clenched his teeth and breathed hard through flared nostrils. Cold sweat sprang up over his entire body. He shifted in place and strove to dispel the soldier's unfriendly ghost, but to no avail. *Go away!* he shouted. *It wasn't my fault. Galbatorix is the one you should blame, not me. I didn't want to kill you!*

Somewhere in the darkness surrounding them, a wolf howled. From various locations across the plains, a score of other wolves answered, raising their voices in a discordant melody. The eerie singing made Eragon's scalp tingle and goosebumps break out on his arms. Then, for a brief moment, the howls coalesced into a single tone that was similar to the battle-cry of a charging Kull.

Eragon shifted, uneasy.

"What's wrong?" asked Arya. "Is it the wolves? They shall not bother us, you know. They are teaching their pups how to hunt, and they won't allow their younglings near creatures who smell as strangely as we do."

"It's not the wolves out there," said Eragon, hugging himself. "It's the wolves in here." He tapped the middle of his forehead.

Arya nodded, a sharp, birdlike motion that betrayed the fact she was not human, even though she had assumed the shape of one. "It is always thus. The monsters of the mind are far worse than those that actually exist. Fear, doubt, and hate have hamstrung more people than beasts ever have."

"And love," he pointed out.

"And love," she admitted. "Also greed and jealousy and every other obsessive urge the sentient races are susceptible to."

Eragon thought of Tenga alone, in the ruined elf outpost of Edur Ithindra, hunched over his precious hoard of tomes, searching, always searching, for his elusive "answer." He refrained from mentioning the hermit to Arya, for it was not in him to discuss that curious encounter at the present. Instead, he asked, "Does it bother you when you kill?"

Arya's green eyes narrowed. "Neither I nor the rest of my people eat the flesh of animals because we cannot bear to hurt another creature to satisfy our hunger, and you have the effrontery to ask if killing

disturbs us? Do you really understand so little of us that you believe we are coldhearted murderers?"

"No, of course not," he protested. "That's not what I meant."

"Then say what you mean, and do not give insult unless it is your intention."

Choosing his words with greater care now, Eragon said, "I asked this of Roran before we attacked Helgrind, or a question very like it. What I want to know is, how do you feel when you kill? How are you supposed to feel?" He scowled at the fire. "Do you see the warriors you have vanquished staring back at you, as real as you are before me?"

Arya tightened her arms around her legs, her gaze pensive. A flame jetted upward as the fire incinerated one of the moths circling the camp. "Gánga," she murmured, and motioned with a finger. With a flutter of downy wings, the moths departed. Never lifting her eyes from the clump of burning branches, she said, "Nine months after I became an ambassador, my mother's only ambassador, if truth be told, I traveled from the Varden in Farthen Dûr to the capital of Surda, which was still a new country in those days. Soon after my companions and I left the Beor Mountains, we encountered a band of roving Urgals. We were content to keep our swords in their sheaths and continue on our way, but as is their wont, the Urgals insisted on trying to win honor and glory to better their standing within their tribes. Our force was larger than theirs—for Weldon, the man who succeeded Brom as leader of the Varden, was with us—and it was easy for us to drive them off.… That day was the first time I took a life. It troubled me for weeks afterward, until I realized I would go mad if I continued to dwell upon it. Many do, and they become so angry, so grief-ridden, they can no longer be relied upon, or their hearts turn to stone and they lose the ability to distinguish right from wrong."

"How did you come to terms with what you had done?"

"I examined my reasons for killing to determine if they were just. Satisfied they were, I asked myself if our cause was important enough to continue supporting it, even though it would probably require me to kill again. Then I decided that whenever I began to think of the dead, I would picture myself in the gardens of Tialdarí Hall."

"Did it work?"

Brushing her hair out of her face, she tucked it behind one round ear. "It did. The only antidote for the corrosive poison of violence is finding peace within yourself. It's a difficult cure to obtain, but well worth the effort." She paused and then added, "Breathing helps too."

"Breathing?"

"Slow, regular breathing, as if you were meditating. It is one of the most effective methods for calming yourself."

Following her advice, Eragon began to consciously inhale and exhale, taking care to maintain a steady tempo and to expel all the air from his lungs with each breath. Within a minute, the knot inside his gut loosened, his frown eased, and the presence of his fallen enemies no longer seemed quite so tangible.… The wolves howled again, and after an initial burst of trepidation, he listened without fear, for their baying had lost the power to unsettle him. “Thank you,” he said. Arya responded with a gracious tilt of her chin.

Silence reigned for a quarter of an hour until Eragon said, “Urgals.” He let the statement stand for a while, a verbal monolith of ambivalence. “What do you think about Nasuada allowing them to join the Varden?”

Arya picked up a twig by the edge of her splayed dress and rolled it between her aquiline fingers, studying the crooked piece of wood as if it contained a secret. “It was a courageous decision, and I admire her for it. She always acts in the best interests of the Varden, no matter what the cost may be.”

“She upset many of the Varden when she accepted Nar Garzhvog’s offer of support.”

“And she won back their loyalty with the Trial of the Long Knives. Nasuada is very clever when it comes to maintaining her position.” Arya flicked the twig into the fire. “I have no love for Urgals, but neither do I hate them. Unlike the Ra’zac, they are not inherently evil, merely overfond of war. It is an important distinction, even if it can provide no consolation to the families of their victims. We elves have treated with Urgals before, and we shall again when the need arises. It is a futile prospect, however.”

She did not have to explain why. Many of the scrolls Oromis had assigned Eragon to read were devoted to the subject of Urgals, and one in particular, *The Travels of Gnaevaldrskald*, had taught him that the Urgals’ entire culture was based upon feats of combat. Male Urgals could only improve their standing by raiding another village—whether Urgal, human, elf, or dwarf mattered little—or by fighting their rivals one on one, sometimes to the death. And when it came to picking a mate, Urgal females refused to consider a ram eligible unless he had defeated at least three opponents. As a result, each new generation of Urgals had no choice but to challenge their peers, challenge their elders, and scour the land for opportunities to prove their valor. The tradition was so deeply ingrained, every attempt to suppress it had failed. *At least they are true to who they are*, mused Eragon. *That’s more than most humans can claim*.

“How is it,” he asked, “that Durza was able to ambush you, Glenwing, and Fäolin with Urgals? Didn’t you have wards to protect yourself against physical attacks?”

“The arrows were enchanted.”

“Were the Urgals spellcasters, then?”

Closing her eyes, Arya sighed and shook her head. “No. It was some dark magic of Durza’s invention. He gloated about it when I was in Gil’ead.”

“I don’t know how you managed to resist him for so long. I saw what he did to you.”

“It … it was not easy. I viewed the torments he inflicted on me as a test of my commitment, as a chance to demonstrate that I had not made a mistake and I was indeed worthy of the yawë symbol. As such, I welcomed the ordeal.”

“But still, even elves are not immune to pain. It’s amazing you could keep the location of Ellesméra hidden from him all those months.”

A touch of pride colored her voice. “Not just the location of Ellesméra but also where I had sent Saphira’s egg, my vocabulary in the ancient language, and everything else that might be of use to Galbatorix.”

The conversation lapsed, and then Eragon said, “Do you think about it much, what you went through in Gil’ead?” When she did not respond, he added, “You never talk about it. You recount the facts of your imprisonment readily enough, but you never mention what it was like for you, nor how you feel about it now.”

“Pain is pain,” she said. “It needs no description.”

“True, but ignoring it can cause more harm than the original injury. … No one can live through something like that and escape unscathed. Not on the inside, at least.”

“Why do you assume I have not already confided in someone?”

“Who?”

“Does it matter? Ajihad, my mother, a friend in Ellesméra.”

“Perhaps I am wrong,” he said, “but you do not seem that close to anyone. Where you walk, you walk alone, even among your own people.”

Arya’s countenance remained impassive. Her lack of expression was so complete, Eragon began to wonder if she would deign to respond, a doubt that had just transformed into conviction when she whispered, “It was not always so.”

Alert, Eragon waited without moving, afraid that whatever he might do would stop her from saying more.

“Once, I had someone to talk to, someone who understood what I was and where I came from. Once … He was older than I, but we were kindred spirits, both curious about the world outside our forest, eager to explore and eager to strike against Galbatorix. Neither of us could bear to stay in Du Weldenvarden—studying, working magic, pursuing our own personal projects—when we knew the Dragon Killer, the

bane of the Riders, was searching for a way to conquer our race. He came to that conclusion later than I—decades after I assumed my position as ambassador and a few years before Hefring stole Saphira's egg—but the moment he did, he volunteered to accompany me wherever Islanzadí's orders might take me." She blinked, and her throat convulsed. "I wasn't going to let him, but the queen liked the idea, and he was so very convincing…." She pursed her lips and blinked again, her eyes brighter than normal.

As gently as he could, Eragon asked, "Was it Fäolin?"

"Yes," she said, releasing the confirmation almost as a gasp. "Did you love him?"

Casting back her head, Arya gazed up at the twinkling sky, her long neck gold with firelight, her face pale with the radiance of the heavens. "Do you ask out of friendly concern or your own self-interest?" She gave an abrupt, choked laugh, the sound of water falling over cold rocks. "Never mind. The night air has addled me. It has undone my sense of courtesy and left me free to say the most spiteful things that occur to me."

"No matter."

"It does matter, because I regret it, and I shall not tolerate it. Did I love Fäolin? How would you define love? For over twenty years, we traveled together, the only immortals to walk among the short-lived races. We were companions … and friends."

A pang of jealousy afflicted Eragon. He wrestled with it, subdued it, and tried to eliminate it but was not altogether successful. A slight remnant of the feeling continued to aggravate him, like a splinter burrowing underneath his skin.

"Over twenty years," repeated Arya. Persisting in her survey of the constellations, she rocked back and forth, seemingly oblivious to Eragon. "And then in a single instant, Durza tore that away from me. Fäolin and Glenwing were the first elves to die in combat for nearly a century. When I saw Fäolin fall, I understood then that the true agony of war isn't being wounded yourself, it's having to watch those you care about being hurt. It was a lesson I thought I had already learned during my time with the Varden when, one after another, the men and women I had come to respect died from swords, arrows, poison, accidents, and old age. The loss had never been so personal, however, and when it happened, I thought, 'Now I must surely die as well.' For whatever danger we had encountered before, Fäolin and I had always survived it together, and if he could not escape, then why should I?"

Eragon realized she was crying, thick tears rolling from the outer corners of her eyes, down her temples, and into her hair. By the stars, her tears appeared like rivers of silvered glass. The intensity of her distress startled him. He had not thought it was possible to elicit such

a reaction from her, nor had he intended to.

"Then Gil'ead," she said. "Those days were the longest of my life. Fäolin was gone, I did not know whether Saphira's egg was safe or if I had inadvertently returned her to Galbatorix, and Durza … Durza sated the bloodlust of the spirits that controlled him by doing the most horrible things he could imagine to me. Sometimes, if he went too far, he would heal me so he could begin anew the following morning. If he had given me a chance to collect my wits, I might have been able to fool my jailer, as you did, and avoid consuming the drug that kept me from using magic, but I never had more than a few hours' respite.

"Durza needed sleep no more than you or I, and he kept at me whenever I was conscious and his other duties permitted. While he worked on me, every second was an hour, every hour a week, and every day an eternity. He was careful not to drive me mad—Galbatorix would have been displeased with that—but he came close. He came very, very close. I began to hear birdsong where no birds could fly and to see things that could not exist. Once, when I was in my cell, gold light flooded the room and I grew warm all over. When I looked up, I found myself lying on a branch high in a tree near the center of Ellesméra. The sun was about to set, and the whole city glowed as if it were on fire. The Äthalvard were chanting on the path below, and everything was so calm, so peaceful … so beautiful, I would have stayed there forever. But then the light faded, and I was again on my cot.… I had forgotten, but once there was a soldier who left a white rose in my cell. It was the only kindness anyone ever showed me in Gil'ead. That night, the flower took root and matured into a huge rosebush that climbed the wall, forced its way between the blocks of stone in the ceiling, breaking them, and pushed its way out of the dungeon and into the open. It continued to ascend until it touched the moon and stood as a great, twisting tower that promised escape if I could but lift myself off the floor. I tried with every ounce of my remaining strength, but it was beyond me, and when I glanced away, the rosebush vanished.… That was my state of mind when you dreamed of me and I felt your presence hovering over me. Small wonder I disregarded the sensation as another delusion."

She gave him a wan smile. "And then you came, Eragon. You and Saphira. After hope had deserted me and I was about to be taken to Galbatorix in Urû'baen, a Rider appeared to rescue me. A Rider and dragon!"

"And Morzan's son," he said. "*Both* of Morzan's sons."

"Describe it how you will, it was such an improbable rescue, I occasionally think that I did go mad and that I've imagined everything since."

"Would you have imagined me causing so much trouble by staying

behind at Helgrind?"

"No," she said. "I suppose not." With the cuff of her left sleeve, she dabbed her eyes, drying them. "When I awoke in Farthen Dûr, there was too much that needed doing for me to dwell on the past. But events of late have been dark and bloody, and increasingly I have found myself remembering that which I should not. It makes me grim and out of sorts, without patience for the ordinary delays of life." She shifted into a kneeling position and placed her hands on the ground on either side of her, as if to steady herself. "You say I walk alone. Elves do not incline toward the open displays of friendship humans and dwarves favor, and I have ever been of a solitary disposition. But if you had known me before Gil'ead, if you had known me as I was, you would not have considered me so aloof. Then I could sing and dance and not feel threatened by a sense of impending doom."

Reaching out, Eragon placed his right hand over her left. "The stories about the heroes of old never mention that this is the price you pay when you grapple with the monsters of the dark and the monsters of the mind. Keep thinking about the gardens of Tialdarí Hall, and I'm sure you will be fine."

Arya permitted the contact between them to endure for almost a minute, a time not of heat or passion for Eragon, but rather of quiet companionship. He made no attempt to press his suit with her, for he cherished her trust more than anything besides his bond with Saphira and he would sooner march into battle than endanger it. Then, with a slight lift of her arm, Arya let him know the moment had passed, and without complaint he withdrew his hand.

Eager to lighten her burden however he could, Eragon glanced about the ground nearest him and then murmured so softly as to be inaudible, "Loivissa." Guided by the power of the true name, he sifted through the earth by his feet until his fingers closed upon what he sought: a thin, papery disk half the size of his smallest fingernail. Holding his breath, he deposited it in his right palm, centering it over his gedwëy ignasia with as much delicacy as he could muster. He reviewed what Oromis had taught him concerning the sort of spell he was about to cast to ensure he would not make a mistake, and then he began to sing after the fashion of the elves, smooth and flowing:

Eldhrimner O Loivissa nuanen, dautr abr deloi,
Eldhrimner nen ono weohnataí medh solus un thringa,
Eldhrimner un fortha onr fëon vara,
Wiol allr sjon.

Eldhrimner O Loivissa nuanen …

Again and again, Eragon repeated the same four lines, directing

them toward the brown flake in his hand. The flake trembled and then swelled and bulged, becoming spherical. White tendrils an inch or two long sprouted from the bottom of the peeling globe, tickling Eragon, while a thin green stem poked its way out of the tip and, at his urging, shot nearly a foot in the air. A single leaf, broad and flat, grew from the side of the stem. Then the tip of the stem thickened, drooped, and, after a moment of seeming inactivity, split into five segments that expanded outward to reveal the waxy petals of a deep-throated lily. The flower was pale blue and shaped like a bell.

When it reached its full size, Eragon released the magic and examined his handiwork. Singing plants into shape was a skill most every elf mastered at an early age, but it was one Eragon had practiced only a few times, and he had been uncertain whether his efforts would meet with success. The spell had exacted a heavy toll from him; the lily required a surprising amount of energy to feed what was the equivalent of a year and a half of growth.

Satisfied with what he had wrought, he handed the lily to Arya. "It's not a white rose, but …" He smiled and shrugged.

"You should not have," she said. "But I am glad you did." She caressed the underside of the blossom and lifted it to smell. The lines on her face eased. For several minutes, she admired the lily. Then she scooped a hole in the soil next to her and planted the bulb, pressing down the soil with the flat of her hand. She touched the petals again and kept glancing at the lily as she said, "Thank you. Giving flowers is a custom both our races share, but we elves attach greater importance to the practice than do humans. It signifies all that is good: life, beauty, rebirth, friendship, and more. I explain so you understand how much this means to me. You did not know, but—"

"I knew."

Arya regarded him with a solemn countenance, as if to decide what he was about. "Forgive me. That is twice now I have forgotten the extent of your education. I shall not make the mistake again."

She repeated her thanks in the ancient language, and—joining her in her native tongue—Eragon replied that it was his pleasure and he was happy she enjoyed his gift. He shivered, hungry despite the meal they had just eaten. Noticing, Arya said, "You used too much of your strength. If you have any energy left in Aren, use it to steady yourself."

It took Eragon a moment to remember that Aren was the name of Brom's ring; he had heard it uttered only once before, from Islanzadí, on the day he arrived in Ellesméra. *My ring now*, he told himself. *I have to stop thinking of it as Brom's*. He cast a critical gaze at the large sapphire that sparkled in its gold setting on his finger. "I don't know if there *is* any energy in Aren. I've never stored any there myself, and I

never checked if Brom had." Even as he spoke, he extended his consciousness toward the sapphire. The instant his mind came into contact with the gem, he felt the presence of a vast, swirling pool of energy. To his inner eye, the sapphire thrummed with power. He wondered that it did not explode from the amount of force contained within the boundaries of its sharp-edged facets. After he used the energy to wash away his aches and pains and restore strength to his limbs, the treasure trove inside Aren was hardly diminished.

His skin tingling, Eragon severed his link with the gem. Delighted by his discovery and his sudden sense of well-being, he laughed out loud, then told Arya what he had found. "Brom must have squirreled away every bit of energy he could spare the whole time he was hiding in Carvahall." He laughed again, marveling. "All those years … With what's in Aren, I could tear apart an entire castle with a single spell."

"He knew he would need it to keep the new Rider safe when Saphira hatched," observed Arya. "Also, I am sure Aren was a way for him to protect himself if he had to fight a Shade or some other similarly powerful opponent. It was not by accident that he managed to frustrate his enemies for the better part of a century.… If I were you, I would save the energy he left you for your hour of greatest need, and I would add to it whenever I could. It is an incredibly valuable resource. You should not squander it."

No, thought Eragon, *that I will not*. He twirled the ring around his finger, admiring how it gleamed in the firelight. *Since Murtagh stole Zar'roc, this, Saphira's saddle, and Snowfire are the only things I have of Brom, and even though the dwarves brought Snowfire from Farthen Dûr, I rarely ride him nowadays. Aren is really all I have to remember him by.… My only legacy of him. My only inheritance. I wish he were still alive! I never had a chance to talk with him about Oromis, Murtagh, my father.… Oh, the list is endless. What would he have said about my feelings for Arya?* Eragon snorted to himself. *I know what he would have said: he would have berated me for being a love-struck fool and for wasting my energy on a hopeless cause.… And he would have been right too, I suppose, but, ah, how can I help it? She is the only woman I wish to be with*.

The fire cracked. A flurry of sparks flew upward. Eragon watched with half-closed eyes, contemplating Arya's revelations. Then his mind returned to a question that had been bothering him ever since the battle on the Burning Plains. "Arya, do male dragons grow any faster than female dragons?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because of Thorn. He's only a few months old, and yet he's already nearly as big as Saphira. I don't understand it."

Picking a dry blade of grass, Arya began sketching in the loose soil, tracing the curved shapes of glyphs from the elves' script, the Liduen

Kvaedhí. “Most likely Galbatorix accelerated his growth so Thorn would be large enough to hold his own with Saphira.”

“Ah.… Isn’t that dangerous, though? Oromis told me that if he used magic to give me the strength, speed, endurance, and other skills I needed, I would not understand my new abilities as well as if I had gained them the ordinary way: by hard work. He was right too. Even now, the changes the dragons made to my body during the Agaetí Blödhren still sometimes catch me by surprise.”

Arya nodded and continued sketching glyphs in the dirt. “It is possible to reduce the undesirable side effects by certain spells, but it is a long and arduous process. If you wish to achieve true mastery of your body, it is still best to do so through normal means. The transformation Galbatorix has forced upon Thorn must be incredibly confusing for him. Thorn now has the body of a nearly grown dragon, and yet his mind is still that of a youngling.”

Eragon fingered the newly formed calluses on his knuckles. “Do you also know why Murtagh is so powerful … more powerful than I am?”

“If I did, no doubt I would also understand how Galbatorix has managed to increase his own strength to such unnatural heights, but alas, I do not.”

But Oromis does, Eragon thought. Or at least the elf had hinted as much. However, he had yet to share the information with Eragon and Saphira. As soon as they were able to return to Du Weldenvarden, Eragon intended to ask the elder Rider for the truth of the matter. *He has to tell us now! Because of our ignorance, Murtagh defeated us, and he could have easily taken us to Galbatorix*. Eragon almost mentioned Oromis’s comments to Arya but held his tongue, for he realized that Oromis would not have concealed such an important fact for over a hundred years unless secrecy was of the utmost importance.

Arya signed a stop to the sentence she had been writing on the ground. Bending over, Eragon read, *Adrift upon the sea of time, the lonely god wanders from shore to distant shore, upholding the laws of the stars above*.

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” she said, and smoothed out the line with a sweep of her arm.

“Why is it,” he asked, speaking slowly as he organized his thoughts, “that no one ever refers to the dragons of the Forsworn by name? We say ‘Morzan’s dragon’ or ‘Kialandí’s dragon,’ but we never actually name the dragon. Surely they were as important as their Riders! I don’t even remember seeing their names in the scrolls Oromis gave me … although they *must* have been there.… Yes, I’m certain they were, but for some reason, they don’t stick in my head. Isn’t that strange?” Arya started to answer, but before she could do more than

open her mouth, he said, “For once I’m glad Saphira’s not here. I’m ashamed I haven’t noticed this before. Even you, Arya, and Oromis and every other elf I’ve met refuse to call them by name, as if they were dumb animals, undeserving of the honor. Do you do it on purpose? Is it because they were your enemies?”

“Did none of your lessons speak of this?” asked Arya. She seemed genuinely surprised.

“I think,” he said, “Glaedr mentioned something about it to Saphira, but I’m not exactly sure. I was in the middle of a backbend during the Dance of Snake and Crane, so I wasn’t really paying attention to what Saphira was doing.” He laughed a little, embarrassed by his lapse and feeling as if he had to explain himself. “It got confusing at times. Oromis would be talking to me while I was listening to Saphira’s thoughts while she and Glaedr communicated with their minds. What’s worse, Glaedr rarely uses a recognizable language with Saphira; he tends to use images, smells, and feelings, rather than words. Instead of names, he sends impressions of the people and objects he means.”

“Do you recall nothing of what he said, whether with words or not?”

Eragon hesitated. “Only that it concerned a name that was no name, or some such. I couldn’t make heads or tails out of it.”

“What he spoke of,” said Arya, “was Du Namar Aurboda, The Banishing of the Names.”

“The Banishing of the Names?”

Touching her dry blade of grass to the ground, she resumed writing in the dirt. “It is one of the most significant events that happened during the fighting between the Riders and the Forsworn. When the dragons realized that thirteen of their own had betrayed them—that those thirteen were helping Galbatorix to eradicate the rest of their race and that it was unlikely anyone could stop their rampage—the dragons grew so angry, every dragon not of the Forsworn combined their strength and wrought one of their inexplicable pieces of magic. Together, they stripped the thirteen of their names.”

Awe crawled over Eragon. “How is that possible?”

“Did I not just say it was inexplicable? All we know is that after the dragons cast their spell, no one could utter the names of the thirteen; those who remembered the names soon forgot them; and while you can read the names in scrolls and letters where they are recorded and even copy them if you look at only one glyph at a time, they are as gibberish. The dragons spared Jarnunvösk, Galbatorix’s first dragon, for it was not his fault he was killed by Urgals, and also Shruikan, for he did not choose to serve Galbatorix but was forced to by Galbatorix and Morzan.”

What a horrible fate, to lose one's name, thought Eragon. He shivered. *If there's one thing I've learned since becoming a Rider, it's that you never, ever want to have a dragon for an enemy*. "What about their true names?" he asked. "Did they erase those as well?"

Arya nodded. "True names, birth names, nicknames, family names, titles. Everything. And as a result, the thirteen were reduced to little more than animals. No longer could they say, 'I like this' or 'I dislike that' or 'I have green scales,' for to say that would be to name themselves. They could not even call themselves dragons. Word by word, the spell obliterated everything that defined them as thinking creatures, and the Forsworn had no choice but to watch in silent misery as their dragons descended into complete ignorance. The experience was so disturbing, at least five of the thirteen, and several of the Forsworn, went mad as a result." Arya paused, considering the outline of a glyph, then rubbed it out and redrew it. "The Banishing of the Names is the main reason so many people now believe that dragons were nothing more than animals to ride from one place to another."

"They wouldn't believe that if they had met Saphira," said Eragon.

Arya smiled. "No." With a flourish, she completed the latest sentence she had been working on. He tilted his head and sidled closer in order to decipher the glyphs she had inscribed. They read: *The trickster, the riddler, the keeper of the balance, he of the many faces who finds life in death and who fears no evil; he who walks through doors*.

"What prompted you to write this?"

"The thought that many things are not what they appear." Dust billowed around her hand as she patted the ground, effacing the glyphs from the surface of the earth.

"Has anyone tried to guess Galbatorix's true name?" Eragon asked. "It seems as if that would be the fastest way to end this war. To be honest, I think it might be the only hope we have of vanquishing him in battle."

"Were you not being honest with me before?" asked Arya, a gleam in her eyes.

Her question forced him to chuckle. "Of course not. It's just a figure of speech."

"And a poor one at that," she said. "Unless you happen to be in the habit of lying."

Eragon floundered for a moment before he caught hold of his thread of speech again and could say, "I know it would be hard to find Galbatorix's true name, but if all the elves and all the members of the Varden who know the ancient language searched for it, we could not help but succeed."

Like a pale, sun-bleached pennant, the dry blade of grass hung from

between Arya's left thumb and forefinger. It trembled in sympathy with each surge of blood through her veins. Pinching it at the top with her other hand, she tore the leaf in half lengthwise, then did the same with each of the resulting strips, quartering the leaf. Then she began to plait the strips, forming a stiff braided rod. She said, "Galbatorix's true name is no great secret. Three different elves—one a Rider, and two ordinary spellcasters—discovered it on their own and many years apart."

"They did!" exclaimed Eragon.

Unperturbed, Arya picked another blade of grass, tore it into strips, inserted the pieces into the gaps in her braided rod, and continued plaiting in a different direction. "We can only speculate whether Galbatorix himself knows his true name. I am of the opinion that he does not, for whatever it is, his true name must be so terrible, he could not go on living if he heard it."

"Unless he is so evil or so demented, the truth about his actions has no power to disturb him."

"Perhaps." Her nimble fingers flew so fast, twisting, braiding, weaving, that they were nearly invisible. She picked two more blades of grass. "Either way, Galbatorix is certainly aware that he has a true name, like all creatures and things, and that it is a potential weakness. At some point before he embarked upon his campaign against the Riders, he cast a spell that kills whoever uses his true name. And since we do not know exactly how this spell kills, we cannot shield ourselves from it. You see, then, why we have all but abandoned that line of inquiry. Oromis is one of the few who are brave enough to continue seeking out Galbatorix's name, albeit in a roundabout manner." With a pleased expression, she held out her hands, palms-upward. Resting on them was an exquisite ship made of green and white grass. It was no more than four inches long, but so detailed, Eragon descried benches for rowers, tiny railings along the edge of the deck, and portholes the size of raspberry seeds. The curved prow was shaped somewhat like the head and neck of a rearing dragon. There was a single mast.

"It's beautiful," he said.

Arya leaned forward and murmured, "Flauga." She gently blew upon the ship, and it rose from her hands and sailed around the fire and then, gathering speed, slanted upward and glided off into the sparkling depths of the night sky.

"How far will it go?"

"Forever," she said. "It takes the energy to stay aloft from the plants below. Wherever there are plants, it can fly."

The idea bemused Eragon, but he also found it rather sad to think of the pretty grass ship wandering among the clouds for the rest of

eternity, with none but birds for company. “Imagine the stories people will tell about it in years to come.”

Arya knit her long fingers together, as if to keep them from making something else. “Many such oddities exist in the world. The longer you live and the farther you travel, the more of them you will see.”

Eragon gazed at the pulsing fire for a while, then said, “If it’s so important to protect your true name, should I cast a spell to keep Galbatorix from using my true name against me?”

“You can if you wish to,” said Arya, “but I doubt it’s necessary. True names are not so easy to find as you think. Galbatorix does not know you well enough to guess your name, and if he were inside your mind and able to examine your every thought and memory, you would be already lost to him, true name or no. If it is any comfort, I doubt that even I could divine your true name.”

“Couldn’t you?” he asked. He was both pleased and displeased that she believed any part of him was a mystery to her.

She glanced at him and then lowered her eyes. “No, I do not think so. Could you guess mine?”

“No.”

Silence enveloped their camp. Above, the stars gleamed cold and white. A wind sprang up from the east and raced across the plains, battering the grass and wailing with a long, thin voice, as if lamenting the loss of a loved one. As it struck, the coals burst into flame again and a twisting mane of sparks trailed off to the west. Eragon hunched his shoulders and pulled the collar of his tunic close around his neck. There was something unfriendly about the wind; it bit at him with unusual ferocity, and it seemed to isolate him and Arya from the rest of the world. They sat motionless, marooned on their tiny island of light and heat, while the massive river of air rushed past, howling its angry sorrows into the empty expanse of land.

When the gusts became more violent and began to carry the sparks farther away from the bare patch where Eragon had built the fire, Arya poured a handful of dirt over the wood. Moving forward onto his knees, Eragon joined her, scooping the dirt with both hands to speed the process. With the fire extinguished, he had difficulty seeing; the countryside had become a ghost of itself, full of writhing shadows, indistinct shapes, and silvery leaves.

Arya made as if to stand, then stopped in a half crouch, arms outstretched for balance, her expression alert. Eragon felt it as well: the air prickled and hummed, as if a bolt of lightning were about to strike. The hair on the back of his hands rose from his skin and waved freely in the wind.

“What is it?” he asked.

“We are being watched. Whatever happens, don’t use magic or you

may get us killed."

"Who—"

"Shh."

Casting about, he found a fist-sized rock, pried it out of the ground, and hefted it, testing its weight.

In the distance, a cluster of glowing multicolored lights appeared. They darted toward the camp, flying low over the grass. As they drew near, he saw that the lights were constantly changing in size—ranging from an orb no larger than a pearl to one several feet in diameter—and that their colors also varied, cycling through every hue in the rainbow. A crackling nimbus surrounded each orb, a halo of liquid tendrils that whipped and lashed, as if hungry to entangle something in their grasp. The lights moved so fast, he could not determine exactly how many there were, but he guessed it was about two dozen.

The lights hurtled into the camp and formed a whirling wall around him and Arya. The speed with which they spun, combined with the barrage of pulsing colors, made Eragon dizzy. He put a hand on the ground to steady himself. The humming was so loud now, his teeth vibrated against one another. He tasted metal, and his hair stood on end. Arya's did the same, despite its additional length, and when he glanced at her, he found the sight so ridiculous, he had to resist the urge to laugh.

"What do they want?" shouted Eragon, but she did not answer.

A single orb detached itself from the wall and hung before Arya at eye level. It shrank and expanded like a throbbing heart, alternating between royal blue and emerald green, with occasional flashes of red. One of its tendrils caught hold of a strand of Arya's hair. There was a sharp *pop*, and for an instant, the strand shone like a fragment of the sun, then it vanished. The smell of burnt hair drifted toward Eragon.

Arya did not flinch or otherwise betray alarm. Her face calm, she lifted an arm and, before Eragon could leap forward and stop her, laid her hand upon the lambent orb. The orb turned gold and white, and it swelled until it was over three feet across. Arya closed her eyes and tilted her head back, radiant joy suffusing her features. Her lips moved, but whatever she said, Eragon could not hear. When she finished, the orb flushed blood-red and then in quick succession shifted from red to green to purple to a ruddy orange to a blue so bright he had to avert his gaze and then to pure black fringed with a corona of twisting white tendrils, like the sun during an eclipse. Its appearance ceased to fluctuate then, as if only the absence of color could adequately convey its mood.

Drifting away from Arya, it approached Eragon, a hole in the fabric of the world, encircled by a crown of flames. It hovered in front of him, humming with such intensity, his eyes watered. His tongue

seemed plated with copper, his skin crawled, and short filaments of electricity danced on the tips of his fingers. Somewhat frightened, he wondered whether he should touch the orb as Arya had. He looked at her for advice. She nodded and gestured for him to proceed.

He extended his right hand toward the void that was the orb. To his surprise, he encountered resistance. The orb was incorporeal, but it pushed against his hand the way a swift stream of water might. The closer he got, the harder it pushed. With an effort, he reached across the last few inches and came into contact with the center of the creature's being.

Bluish rays shot out from between Eragon's palm and the surface of the orb, a dazzling, fanlike display that overwhelmed the light from the other orbs and bleached everything a pale blue white. Eragon shouted with pain as the rays stabbed at his eyes, and he ducked his head, squinting. Then something moved inside the orb, like a sleeping dragon uncoiling, and a *presence* entered his mind, brushing aside his defenses as if they were dry leaves in an autumn storm. He gasped. Transcendent joy filled him; whatever the orb was, it seemed to be composed of distilled happiness. It enjoyed being alive, and everything around it pleased it to a greater or lesser degree. Eragon would have wept with sheer gladness, but he no longer had control of his body. The creature held him in place, the shimmering rays still blazing from underneath his hand while it flitted through his bones and muscles, lingering at the sites where he had been injured, and then returned to his mind. Euphoric as Eragon was, the creature's presence was so strange and so unearthly, he wanted to flee from it, but inside his consciousness, there was nowhere to hide. He had to remain in intimate contact with the fiery soul of the creature while it scoured his memories, dashing from one to the next with the speed of an elvish arrow. He wondered how it could comprehend so much information so quickly. While it searched, he tried to probe the orb's mind in return, to learn what he could about its nature and its origins, but it defied his attempts to understand it. The few impressions he gleaned were so different from those he had found in the minds of other beings, they were incomprehensible.

After a final, nearly instantaneous circuit through his body, the creature withdrew. The contact between them broke like a twisted cable under too much tension. The panoply of rays outlining Eragon's hand faded into oblivion, leaving behind lurid pink afterimages streaked across his field of vision.

Again changing colors, the orb in front of Eragon shrank to the size of an apple and rejoined its companions in the swirling vortex of light that encircled him and Arya. The humming increased to an almost unbearable pitch, and then the vortex exploded outward as the blazing

orbs scattered in every direction. They regrouped a hundred feet or so from the dim camp, tumbling over each other like wrestling kittens, then raced off to the south and disappeared, as if they had never existed in the first place. The wind subsided to a gentle breeze.

Eragon fell to his knees, arm outstretched toward where the orbs had gone, feeling empty without the bliss they had given him. “What,” he asked, and then had to cough and start over again, his throat was so dry. “What are they?”

“Spirits,” said Arya. She sat.

“They didn’t look like the ones that came out of Durza when I killed him.”

“Spirits can assume many different guises, dictated by their whim.”

He blinked several times and wiped the corners of his eyes with the back of a finger. “How can anyone bear to enslave them with magic? It’s monstrous. I would be ashamed to call myself a sorcerer. Gah! And Trianna boasts of being one. I’ll have her stop using spirits or I’ll expel her from Du Vrangr Gata and ask Nasuada to banish her from the Varden.”

“I would not be so hasty.”

“Surely you don’t think it’s right for magicians to force spirits to obey their will.… They are so beautiful that—” He broke off and shook his head, overcome with emotion. “Anyone who harms them ought to be thrashed within an inch of their life.”

With a hint of a smile, Arya said, “I take it Oromis had yet to address the topic when you and Saphira left Ellesméra.”

“If you mean spirits, he mentioned them several times.”

“But not in any great detail, I dare say.”

“Perhaps not.”

In the darkness, the outline of her shape moved as she leaned to one side. “Spirits always induce a sense of rapture when they choose to communicate with we who are made of matter, but do not allow them to deceive you. They are not as benevolent, content, or cheerful as they would have you believe. Pleasing those they interact with is their way of defending themselves. They hate to be bound in one place, and they realized long ago that if the person they are dealing with is happy, then he or she will be less likely to detain the spirits and keep them as servants.”

“I don’t know,” said Eragon. “They make you feel so good, I can understand why someone would want to keep them nearby, instead of releasing them.”

Her shoulders rose and fell. “Spirits have as much difficulty predicting our behavior as we do theirs. They share so little in common with the other races of Alagaësia, conversing with them in even the simplest terms is a challenging prospect, and any meeting is

fraught with peril, for one never knows how they will react."

"None of which explains why I shouldn't order Trianna to abandon sorcery."

"Have you ever seen her summon spirits to do her bidding?"

"No."

"I thought not. Trianna has been with the Varden for nigh on six years, and in that time she has demonstrated her mastery of sorcery exactly once, and that after much coaxing on Ajihad's part and much consternation and preparation on Trianna's. She has the necessary skills—she is no charlatan—but summoning spirits is exceedingly dangerous, and one does not embark upon it lightly."

Eragon rubbed his shining palm with his left thumb. The hue of light changed as blood rushed to the surface of his skin, but his efforts did nothing to reduce the amount of light radiating from his hand. He scratched at the gedwëy ignasia with his fingernails. *This had better not last more than a few hours. I can't go around shining like a lantern. It could get me killed. And it's silly too. Whoever heard of a Dragon Rider with a glowing body part?*

Eragon considered what Brom had told him. "They aren't human spirits, are they? Nor elf, nor dwarf, nor those of any other creature. That is, they aren't ghosts. We don't become them after we die."

"No. And please do not ask me, as I know you are about to, what, then, they really are. It is a question for Oromis to answer, not me. The study of sorcery, if properly conducted, is long and arduous and should be approached with care. I do not want to say anything that may interfere with the lessons Oromis has planned for you, and I certainly don't want you to hurt yourself trying something I mentioned when you lack the proper instruction."

"And when am I supposed to return to Ellesméra?" he demanded. "I can't leave the Varden again, not like this, not while Thorn and Murtagh are still alive. Until we defeat the Empire, or the Empire defeats us, Saphira and I have to support Nasuada. If Oromis and Glaedr really want to finish our training, they should join us, and Galbatorix be blasted!"

"Please, Eragon," she said. "This war shall not end as quickly as you think. The Empire is large, and we have but pricked its hide. As long as Galbatorix does not know about Oromis and Glaedr, we have an advantage."

"Is it an advantage if they never make full use of themselves?" he grumbled. She did not answer, and after a moment, he felt childish for complaining. Oromis and Glaedr wanted more than anyone else to destroy Galbatorix, and if they chose to bide their time in Ellesméra, it was because they had excellent reasons for doing so. Eragon could even name several of them if he was so inclined, the most prominent

being Oromis's inability to cast spells that required large amounts of energy.

Cold, Eragon pulled his sleeves down over his hands and crossed his arms. "What was it you said to the spirit?"

"It was curious why we had been using magic; that was what brought us to their attention. I explained, and I also explained that you were the one who freed the spirits trapped inside of Durza. That seemed to please them a great deal." Silence crept between them, and then she sidled toward the lily and touched it again. "Oh!" she said. "They were indeed grateful. Naina!"

At her command, a wash of soft light illuminated the camp. By it, he saw that the leaf and stem of the lily were solid gold, the petals were a whitish metal he failed to recognize, and the heart of the flower, as Arya revealed by tilting the blossom upward, appeared to have been carved out of rubies and diamonds. Amazed, Eragon ran a finger over the curved leaf, the tiny wire hairs on it tickling him. Bending forward, he discerned the same collection of bumps, grooves, pits, veins, and other minute details with which he had adorned the original version of the plant; the only difference was they were now made of gold.

"It's a perfect copy!" he said.

"And it is still alive."

"No!" Concentrating, he searched for the faint signs of warmth and movement that would indicate the lily was more than an inanimate object. He located them, strong as they ever were in a plant during the night. Fingering the leaf again, he said, "This is beyond everything I know of magic. By all rights, this lily ought to be dead. Instead, it is thriving. I cannot even imagine what would be involved in turning a plant into living metal. Perhaps Saphira could do it, but she would never be able to teach the spell to anyone else."

"The real question," said Arya, "is whether this flower will produce seeds that are fertile."

"It could spread?"

"I would not be surprised if it does. Numerous examples of self-perpetuating magic exist throughout Alagaësia, such as the floating crystal on the island of Eoam and the dream well in Mani's Caves. This would be no more improbable than either of those phenomena."

"Unfortunately, if anyone discovers this flower or the offspring it may have, they will dig them all up. Every fortune hunter in the land would come here to pick the golden lilies."

"They will not be so easy to destroy, I think, but only time will tell for sure."

A laugh bubbled up inside of Eragon. With barely contained glee, he said, "I've heard the expression 'to gild the lily' before, but the spirits

actually did it! They gilded the lily!" And he fell to laughing, letting his voice boom across the empty plain.

Arya's lips twitched. "Well, their intentions were noble. We cannot fault them for being ignorant of human sayings."

"No, but … oh, ha, ha, ha!"

Arya snapped her fingers, and the wash of light faded into oblivion. "We have talked away most of the night. It is time we rested. Dawn is fast approaching, and we must depart soon thereafter."

Eragon stretched himself out on a rock-free expanse of the ground, still chuckling as he drifted into his waking dreams.

AMID THE RESTLESS CROWD

It was midafternoon when the Varden finally came into sight.

Eragon and Arya stopped on the crest of a low hill and studied the sprawling city of gray tents that lay before them, teeming as it was with thousands of men, horses, and smoking cookfires. To the west of the tents, there wound the tree-lined Jiet River. Half a mile to the east was a second, smaller camp—like an island floating close off the shore of its mother continent—where the Urgals led by Nar Garzhvog resided. Ranging for several miles around the perimeter of the Varden were numerous groups of horsemen. Some were riding patrol, others were banner-carrying messengers, and others were raiding parties either setting out on or returning from a mission. Two of the patrols spotted Eragon and Arya and, after sounding signal horns, galloped toward them with all possible speed.

A broad smile stretched Eragon's face, and he laughed, relieved. "We made it!" he exclaimed. "Murtagh, Thorn, hundreds of soldiers, Galbatorix's pet magicians, the Ra'zac—none of them could catch us. Ha! How's that for taunting the king? This'll tweak his beard for sure when he hears of it."

"He will be twice as dangerous then," warned Arya.

"I know," he said, grinning even wider. "Maybe he'll get so angry, he'll forget to pay his troops and they will all throw away their uniforms and join the Varden."

"You are in fine fettle today."

"And why shouldn't I be?" he demanded. Bouncing on the tips of his toes, he opened his mind as wide as he could and, gathering his strength, shouted, *Saphira!* sending the thought flying over the countryside like a spear.

A response was not long in coming:

Eragon!

They embraced with their minds, smothering each other with warm waves of love, joy, and concern. They exchanged memories of their time apart, and Saphira comforted Eragon over the soldiers he had killed, drawing off the pain and anger that had accumulated within him since the incident. He smiled. With Saphira so close, everything seemed right in the world.

I missed you, he said.

And I you, little one. Then she sent him an image of the soldiers he and Arya had fought and said, *Without fail, every time I leave you, you get yourself in trouble. Every time! I hate to so much as turn tail on you for*

fear you will be locked in mortal combat the moment I take my eyes off you.

Be fair: I've gotten into plenty of trouble when I am with you. It's not something that just happens when I'm alone. We seem to be lodestones for unexpected events.

No, you are a lodestone for unexpected events, she sniffed. *Nothing out of the ordinary ever occurs to me when I'm by myself. But you attract duels, ambushes, immortal enemies, obscure creatures such as the Ra'zac, long-lost family members, and mysterious acts of magic as if they were starving weasels and you were a rabbit that wandered into their den.*

What about the time you spent as Galbatorix's possession? Was that an ordinary event?

I had not hatched yet, she said. *You cannot count that. The difference between you and me is that things happen* to *you, whereas* I *cause things to happen.*

Maybe, but that's because I'm still learning. Give me a few years, and I'll be as good as Brom at getting things done, eh? You can't say I didn't seize the initiative with Sloan.

Mmh. We still have to talk about that. If you ever surprise me like that again, I will pin you on the ground and lick you from head to toe.

Eragon shivered. Her tongue was covered with hooked barbs that could strip hair, hide, and meat off a deer with a single swipe. *I know, but I wasn't sure myself whether I was going to kill Sloan or let him go free until I was standing in front of him. Besides, if I had told you I was going to stay behind, you would have insisted on stopping me.*

He sensed a faint growl as it rumbled through her chest. She said, *You should have trusted me to do the right thing. If we cannot talk openly, how are we supposed to function as dragon and Rider?*

Would doing the right thing have involved taking me from Helgrind, regardless of my wishes?

It might not *have*, she said with a hint of defensiveness.

He smiled. *You're right, though. I should have discussed my plan with you. I'm sorry. From now on, I promise I will consult with you before I do anything you don't expect. Is that acceptable?*

Only if it involves weapons, magic, kings, or family members, she said.

Or flowers.

Or flowers, she agreed. *I don't need to know if you decide to eat some bread and cheese in the middle of the night.*

Unless a man with a very long knife is waiting for me outside of my tent.

If you could not defeat a single man with a very long knife, you would be a poor excuse for a Rider indeed.

Not to mention dead.

Well …

By your own argument, you should take comfort in the fact that while I

may attract more trouble than most people, I am perfectly capable of escaping from situations that would kill most anyone else.

Even the greatest warriors can fall prey to bad luck, she said. *Remember the dwarf king Kaga, who was killed by a novice swordsman—swordsdwarf?—when he tripped on a rock. You should always remain cautious, for no matter your skills, you cannot anticipate and prevent every misfortune fate directs your way*.

Agreed. Now, can we please abandon such weighty conversation? I have become thoroughly exhausted with thoughts of fate, destiny, justice, and other, equally gloomy topics over the past few days. As far as I am concerned, philosophic questioning is just as likely to make you confused and depressed as it is to improve your condition. Swiveling his head, Eragon surveyed the plain and sky, searching for the distinctive blue glitter of Saphira's scales. *Where are you? I can feel you are nearby, but I can't see you.*

Right above you!

With a bugle of joy, Saphira dove out of the belly of a cloud several thousand feet overhead, spiraling toward the ground with her wings tucked close to her body. Opening her fearsome jaws, she released a billow of fire, which streamed back over her head and neck like a burning mane. Eragon laughed and held his arms outstretched to her. The horses of the patrol galloping toward him and Arya shied at the sight and sound of Saphira and bolted in the opposite direction while their riders frantically tried to rein them in.

"I had hoped we could enter the camp without attracting undue attention," Arya said, "but I suppose I should have realized we could not be unobtrusive with Saphira around. A dragon is hard to ignore."

I heard that, said Saphira, spreading her wings and landing with a thunderous crash. Her massive thighs and shoulders rippled as she absorbed the force of the impact. A blast of air struck Eragon's face, and the earth shuddered underneath him. He flexed his knees to maintain his balance. Folding her wings so they lay flat upon her back, she said, *I can be stealthy if I want.* Then she cocked her head and blinked, the tip of her tail whipping from side to side. *But I don't want to be stealthy today! Today I am a dragon, not a frightened pigeon trying to avoid being seen by a hunting falcon*.

When are you not a dragon? asked Eragon as he ran toward her. Light as a feather, he leaped from her left foreleg to her shoulder and thence to the hollow at the base of her neck that was his usual seat. Settling into place, he put his hands on either side of her warm neck, feeling the rise and fall of her banded muscles as she breathed. He smiled again, with a profound sense of contentment. *This is where I belong, here with you*. His legs vibrated as Saphira hummed with satisfaction, her deep rumbling following a strange, subtle melody he

did not recognize.

"Greetings, Saphira," said Arya, and twisted her hand over her chest in the elves' gesture of respect.

Crouching low and bending her long neck, Saphira touched Arya upon the brow with the tip of her snout, as she had when she blessed Elva in Farthen Dûr, and said, *Greetings, älfa-kona. Welcome, and may the wind rise under your wings*. She spoke to Arya with the same tone of affection that, until then, she had reserved for Eragon, as if she now considered Arya part of their small family and worthy of the same regard and intimacy as they shared. Her gesture surprised Eragon, but after an initial flare of jealousy, he approved. Saphira continued speaking: *I am grateful to you for helping Eragon to return without harm. If he had been captured, I do not know what I would have done!*

"Your gratitude means much to me," said Arya, and bowed. "As for what you would have done if Galbatorix had seized Eragon, why, you would have rescued him, and I would have accompanied you, even if it was to Urû'baen itself."

Yes, I like to think I would have rescued you, Eragon, said Saphira, turning her neck to look at him, *but I worry that I would have surrendered to the Empire in order to save you, no matter the consequences for Alagaësia*. Then she shook her head and kneaded the soil with her claws. *Ah, these are pointless meanderings. You are here and safe, and that is the true shape of the world. To while away the day contemplating evils that might have been is to poison the happiness we already have….*

At that moment, a patrol galloped toward them and, halting thirty yards away because of their nervous horses, asked if they might escort the three to Nasuada. One of the men dismounted and gave his steed to Arya, and then as a group, they advanced toward the sea of tents to the southwest. Saphira set the pace: a leisurely crawl that allowed her and Eragon to enjoy the pleasure of each other's company before they immersed themselves in the noise and chaos that were sure to assault them once they neared the camp.

Eragon inquired after Roran and Katrina, then said, *Have you been eating enough fireweed? Your breath seems stronger than usual*.

Of course I have. You only notice it because you have been gone for many days. I smell exactly as a dragon should smell, and I'll thank you not to make disparaging comments about it unless you want me to drop you on your head. Besides, you humans have nothing to brag about, sweaty, greasy, pungent things that you are. The only creatures in the wild as smelly as humans are male goats and hibernating bears. Compared to you, the scent of a dragon is a perfume as delightful as a meadow of mountain flowers.

Come now, don't exaggerate. Although, he said, wrinkling his nose, *since the Agaetí Blödhren, I have noticed that humans tend to be rather*

smelly. But you cannot lump me in with the rest, for I am no longer entirely human.

Perhaps not, but you still need a bath!

As they crossed the plain, more and more men congregated around Eragon and Saphira, providing them with a wholly unnecessary but very impressive honor guard. After so long spent in the wilds of Alagaësia, the dense press of bodies, the cacophony of high, excited voices, the storm of unguarded thoughts and emotions, and the confused motion of flailing arms and prancing horses were overwhelming for Eragon.

He retreated deep within himself, where the discordant mental chorus was no louder than the distant thunder of crashing waves. Even through the layers of barriers, he sensed the approach of twelve elves, running in formation from the other side of the camp, swift and lean as yellow-eyed mountain cats. Wanting to make a favorable impression, Eragon combed his hair with his fingers and squared his shoulders, but he also tightened the armor around his consciousness so that no one but Saphira could hear his thoughts. The elves had come to protect him and Saphira, but ultimately their allegiance belonged to Queen Islanzadí. While he was grateful for their presence, and he doubted their inherent politeness would allow them to eavesdrop on him, he did not want to provide the queen of the elves with any opportunity to learn the secrets of the Varden, nor to gain a hold over him. If she could wrest him away from Nasuada, he knew she would. On the whole, the elves did not trust humans, not after Galbatorix's betrayal, and for that and other reasons, he was sure Islanzadí would prefer to have him and Saphira under her direct command. And of the potentates he had met, he trusted Islanzadí the least. She was too imperious and too erratic.

The twelve elves halted before Saphira. They bowed and twisted their hands as Arya had done and, one by one, introduced themselves to Eragon with the initial phrase of the elves' traditional greeting, to which he replied with the appropriate lines. Then the lead elf, a tall, handsome male with glossy blue-black fur covering his entire body, proclaimed the purpose of their mission to everyone within earshot and formally asked Eragon and Saphira if the twelve might assume their duties.

"You may," said Eragon.

You may, said Saphira.

Then Eragon asked, "Blödhgarm-vodhr, did I perchance see you at the Agaetí Blödhren?" For he remembered watching an elf with a similar pelt gamboling among the trees during the festivities.

Blödhgarm smiled, exposing the fangs of an animal. "I believe you met my cousin Liotha. We share a most striking family resemblance,

although her fur is brown and flecked, whereas mine is dark blue."

"I would have sworn it was you."

"Unfortunately, I was otherwise engaged at the time and was unable to attend the celebration. Perhaps I shall have the opportunity when next the occasion occurs, a hundred years from now."

Would you not agree, Saphira said to Eragon, *that he has a pleasant aroma?*

Eragon sniffed the air. *I don't smell anything. And I would if there was anything to smell.*

That's odd. She provided him then with the range of odors she had detected, and at once he realized what she meant. Blödhgarm's musk surrounded him like a cloud, thick and heady, a warm, smoky scent that contained hints of crushed juniper berries and that set Saphira's nostrils to tingling. *All the women in the Varden seem to have fallen in love with him*, she said. *They stalk him wherever he goes, desperate to talk with him but too shy to utter so much as a squeak when he looks at them.*

Maybe only females can smell him. He cast a concerned glance at Arya. *She does not seem to be affected.*

She has protection against magical influences.

I hope so.… Do you think we should put a stop to Blödhgarm? What he is doing is a sneaky, underhanded way of gaining a woman's heart.

Is it any more underhanded than adorning yourself with fine clothing to catch the eye of your beloved? Blödhgarm has not taken advantage of the women who are fascinated by him, and it seems improbable that he would have composed the notes of his scent to appeal specifically to human women. Rather, I would guess it is an unintended consequence and that he created it to serve another purpose altogether. Unless he discards all semblance of decency, I think we should refrain from interfering.

What about Nasuada? Is she vulnerable to his charms?

Nasuada is wise and wary. She had Trianna place a ward around her that protects her against Blödhgarm's influence.

Good.

When they arrived at the tents, the crowd swelled in size until half the Varden appeared to be gathered around Saphira. Eragon raised his hand in response as people shouted, "Argetlam!" and "Shadeslayer!" and he heard others say, "Where have you been, Shadeslayer? Tell us of your adventures!" A fair number referred to him as the Bane of the Ra'zac, which he found so immensely satisfying, he repeated the phrase four times to himself under his breath. People also shouted blessings upon his health and Saphira's too, and invitations to dine, and offers of gold and jewelry, and piteous requests for aid: would he please heal a son who had been born blind, or would he remove a growth that was killing a man's wife, or would he fix a horse's broken leg or repair a bent sword, for as the man bellowed, "It was my

grandfather's!" Twice a woman's voice cried out, "Shadeslayer, will you marry me?" and while he looked, he was unable to identify the source.

Throughout the commotion, the twelve elves hovered close. The knowledge that they were watching for that which he could not see and listening for that which he could not hear was a comfort to Eragon and allowed him to interact with the massed Varden with an ease that had escaped him in the past.

Then from between the curving rows of woolen tents, the former villagers of Carvahall began to appear. Dismounting, Eragon walked among the friends and acquaintances of his childhood, shaking hands, slapping shoulders, and laughing at jokes that would be incomprehensible to anyone who had not grown up around Carvahall. Horst was there, and Eragon grasped the smith's brawny forearm. "Welcome back, Eragon. Well done. We're in your debt for avenging us on the monsters that drove us from our homes. I'm glad to see you are still in one piece, eh?"

"The Ra'zac would have had to move a sight faster to chop any parts off of me!" said Eragon. Then he found himself greeting Horst's sons, Albriech and Baldor; and then Loring the shoemaker and his three sons; Tara and Morn, who had owned Carvahall's tavern; Fisk; Felda; Calitha; Delwin and Lenna; and then fierce-eyed Birgit, who said, "I thank you, Eragon Son of None. I thank you for ensuring that the creatures who ate my husband were properly punished. My hearth is yours, now and forever."

Before Eragon could respond, the crowd swept them apart. *Son of None?* he thought. *Ha! I have a father, and everyone hates him*.

Then to his delight, Roran shouldered his way out of the throng, Katrina beside him. He and Roran embraced, and Roran growled, "That was a fool thing to do, staying behind. I ought to knock your block off for abandoning us like that. Next time, give me advance warning before you traipse off on your own. It's getting to be a habit with you. And you should have seen how upset Saphira was on the flight back."

Eragon put a hand on Saphira's left foreleg and said, "I'm sorry I could not tell you beforehand that I planned to stay, but I did not realize it was necessary until the very last moment."

"And why was it exactly you remained in those foul caverns?"

"Because there was something I had to investigate."

When he failed to expand upon his answer, Roran's broad face hardened, and for a moment Eragon feared he would insist upon a more satisfactory explanation. But then Roran said, "Well, what hope has an ordinary man like myself of understanding the whys and wherefores of a Dragon Rider, even if he is my cousin? All that

matters is that you helped free Katrina and you are here now, safe and sound." He craned his neck, as if he were trying to see what lay on top of Saphira, then he looked at Arya, who was several yards behind them, and said, "You lost my staff! I crossed the entire breadth of Alagaësia with that staff. Couldn't you manage to hold on to it for more than a few days?"

"It went to a man who needed it more than I," said Eragon.

"Oh, stop nipping at him," Katrina said to Roran, and after a moment's hesitation, she hugged Eragon. "He is really very glad to see you, you know. He just has difficulty finding the words to say it."

With a sheepish grin, Roran shrugged. "She's right about me, as always." The two of them exchanged a loving glance.

Eragon studied Katrina closely. Her copper hair had regained its original luster, and for the most part, the marks left by her ordeal had faded away, although she was still thinner and paler than normal.

Moving closer to him, so none of the Varden clustered around them could overhear, she said, "I never thought that I would owe you so much, Eragon. That *we* would owe you so much. Since Saphira brought us here, I have learned what you risked to rescue me, and I am most grateful. If I had spent another week in Helgrind, it would have killed me or stripped me of reason, which is a living death. For saving me from that fate, and for repairing Roran's shoulder, you have my utmost thanks, but more than that, you have my thanks for bringing the two of us back together again. If not for you, we never would have been reunited."

"Somehow I think Roran would have found a way to extricate you from Helgrind, even without me," commented Eragon. "He has a silver tongue when roused. He would have convinced another spellcaster to help him—Angela the herbalist, perhaps—and he would have succeeded all the same."

"Angela the herbalist?" scoffed Roran. "That prating girl would have been no match for the Ra'zac."

"You would be surprised. She's more than she appears … or sounds." Then Eragon dared to do something that he never would have attempted when he was living in Palancar Valley but that he felt was appropriate in his role as a Rider: he kissed Katrina upon her brow, and then he kissed Roran upon his, and he said, "Roran, you are as a brother to me. And, Katrina, you are as a sister to me. If ever you are in trouble, send for me, and whether you need Eragon the farmer or Eragon the Rider, everything I am shall be at your disposal."

"And likewise," said Roran, "if ever you are in trouble, you have but to send for us, and we shall rush to your aid."

Eragon nodded, acknowledging his offer, and refrained from mentioning that the troubles he was most likely to encounter would

not be of a sort either of them could assist him with. He gripped them both by the shoulders and said, “May you live long, may you always be together and happy, and may you have many children.” Katrina’s smile faltered for a moment, and Eragon wondered at it.

At Saphira’s urging, they resumed walking toward Nasuada’s red pavilion in the center of the encampment. In due time, they and the host of cheering Varden arrived at its threshold, where Nasuada stood waiting, King Orrin to her left and scores of nobles and other notables gathered behind a double row of guards on either side.

Nasuada was garbed in a green silk dress that shimmered in the sun, like the feathers on the breast of a hummingbird, in bright contrast to the sable shade of her skin. The sleeves of the dress ended in lace ruffs at her elbows. White linen bandages covered the rest of her arms to her narrow wrists. Of all the men and women assembled before her, she was the most distinguished, like an emerald resting on a bed of brown autumn leaves. Only Saphira could compete with the brilliance of her appearance.

Eragon and Arya presented themselves to Nasuada and then to King Orrin. Nasuada gave them formal welcome on behalf of the Varden and praised them for their bravery. She finished by saying, “Aye, Galbatorix may have a Rider and dragon who fight for him even as Eragon and Saphira fight for us. He may have an army so large that it darkens the land. And he may be adept at strange and terrible magics, abominations of the spellcaster’s art. But for all his wicked power, he could not stop Eragon and Saphira from invading his realm and killing four of his most favored servants, nor Eragon from crossing the Empire with impunity. The pretender’s arm has grown weak indeed when he cannot defend his borders, nor protect his foul agents within their hidden fortress.”

Amid the Varden’s enthusiastic cheering, Eragon allowed himself a secret smile at how well Nasuada played upon their emotions, inspiring confidence, loyalty, and high spirits in spite of a reality that was far less optimistic than she portrayed it. She did not lie to them—to his knowledge, she did not lie, not even when dealing with the Council of Elders or other of her political rivals. What she did was report the truths that best supported her position and her arguments. In that regard, he thought, she was like the elves.

When the Varden’s outpouring of excitement had subsided, King Orrin greeted Eragon and Arya as Nasuada had. His delivery was staid compared with hers, and while the crowd listened politely and applauded afterward, it was obvious to Eragon that however much the people respected Orrin, they did not love him as they loved Nasuada, nor could he fire their imagination as Nasuada fired it. The smooth-faced king was gifted with a superior intellect. But his personality was

too rarefied, too eccentric, and too subdued for him to be a receptacle for the desperate hopes of the humans that opposed Galbatorix.

If we overthrow Galbatorix, Eragon said to Saphira, *Orrin should not replace him in Urû'baen. He would not be able to unite the land as Nasuada has united the Varden*.

Agreed.

At length, King Orrin concluded. Nasuada whispered to Eragon, "Now it is your turn to address those who have assembled to catch a glimpse of the renowned Dragon Rider." Her eyes twinkled with suppressed merriment.

"Me!"

"It is expected."

Then Eragon turned and faced the multitude, his tongue dry as sand. His mind was blank, and for a handful of panic-stricken seconds, he thought the use of language would continue to elude him and he would embarrass himself in front of the entire Varden. Somewhere a horse nickered, but otherwise the camp seemed frightfully quiet. It was Saphira who broke his paralysis by nudging his elbow with her snout and saying, *Tell them how honored you are to have their support and how happy you are to be back among them*. With her encouragement, he managed to find a few fumbling words, and then, as soon as it was acceptable, he bowed and retreated a step.

Forcing a smile while the Varden clapped and cheered and beat their swords against their shields, he exclaimed, *That was horrible! I would rather fight a Shade than do that again*.

Really! It was not that hard, Eragon.

Yes, it was!

A puff of smoke drifted up from her nostrils as she snorted with amusement. *A fine Dragon Rider you are, afraid of talking to a large group! If only Galbatorix knew, he could have you at his mercy if he but asked you to make a speech to his troops. Ha!*

It's not funny, he grumbled, but she still continued to chuckle.

After Eragon gave his address to the Varden, Nasuada gestured and Jörmundur leaped to her side. “Have everyone here return to their posts. If we were attacked now, we would be overwhelmed.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

Beckoning to Eragon and Arya, Nasuada placed her left hand on King Orrin’s arm and, with him, entered the pavilion.

What about you? Eragon asked Saphira as he followed. Then he stepped inside the pavilion and saw that a panel at the back had been rolled up and tied to the wooden frame above so that Saphira might insert her head and participate in the goings-on. He had to wait but a moment before her glittering head and neck swung into view around the edge of the opening, darkening the interior as she settled into place. Purple flecks of light adorned the walls, projected by her blue scales onto the red fabric.

Eragon examined the rest of the tent. It was barren compared with when he had last visited, a result of the destruction Saphira had caused when she crawled into the pavilion to see Eragon in Nasuada’s mirror. With only four pieces of furniture, the tent was austere even by military standards. There was the polished high-backed chair where Nasuada was sitting, King Orrin standing next to her; the selfsame mirror, which was mounted at eye level on a carved brass pole; a folding chair; and a low table strewn with maps and other documents of import. An intricately knotted dwarf rug covered the ground. Besides Arya and himself, a score of people were already gathered before Nasuada. They were all looking at him. Among them he recognized Narheim, the current commander of the dwarf troops; Trianna and other spellcasters from Du Vrangr Gata; Sabrae, Umérth, and the rest of the Council of Elders, save for Jörmundur; and a random assortment of nobles and functionaries from King Orrin’s court. Those who were strangers to him he assumed also held positions of distinction in one of the many factions that made up the Varden’s army. Six of Nasuada’s guards were present—two stationed by the entrance and four behind Nasuada—and Eragon detected the convoluted pattern of Elva’s dark and twisted thoughts from where the witch-child was hidden at the far end of the pavilion.

“Eragon,” said Nasuada, “you have not met before, but let me introduce Sagabato-no Inapashunna Fadawar, chief of the Inapashunna tribe. He is a brave man.”

For the next hour, Eragon endured what seemed like an endless

procession of introductions, congratulations, and questions that he could not answer forthrightly without revealing secrets that were better left unsaid. When all of the guests had conversed with him, Nasuada bade them take their leave. As they filed out of the pavilion, she clapped her hands and the guards outside ushered in a second group and then, when the second group had enjoyed the dubious fruits of their visitation with him, a third. Eragon smiled the whole while. He shook hand after hand. He exchanged meaningless pleasantries and strove to memorize the plethora of names and titles that besieged him and otherwise acted with perfect civility the role he was expected to play. He knew that they honored him not because he was their friend but because of the chance of victory he embodied for the free peoples of Alagaësia, because of his power, and because of what they hoped to gain by him. In his heart, he howled with frustration and longed to break free of the stifling constraints of good manners and polite conduct and to climb on Saphira and fly away to somewhere peaceful.

The one part of the process Eragon enjoyed was watching how the supplicants reacted to the two Urgals who loomed behind Nasuada's chair. Some pretended to ignore the horned warriors—although from the quickness of their motions and the shrill tones of their voices, Eragon could tell that the creatures unnerved them—while others glared at the Urgals and kept their hands on the pommels of their swords or daggers, and still others affected a false bravado and belittled the Urgals' notorious strength and boasted of their own. Only a few people truly seemed unaffected by the sight of the Urgals. Foremost among them was Nasuada, but their number also included King Orrin, Trianna, and an earl who said he had seen Morzan and his dragon lay waste to an entire town when he had been but a boy.

When Eragon could bear no more, Saphira swelled her chest and released a low, humming growl, so deep that it shook the mirror in its frame. The pavilion became as silent as a tomb. Her growl was not overtly threatening, but it captured everyone's attention and proclaimed her impatience with the proceedings. None of the guests were foolish enough to test her forbearance. With hurried excuses, they gathered their things and filed out of the pavilion, quickening their pace when Saphira tapped the tips of her claws against the ground.

Nasuada sighed as the entrance flap swung closed behind the last visitor. "Thank you, Saphira. I am sorry that I had to subject you to the misery of public presentation, Eragon, but as I am sure you are aware, you occupy an exalted position among the Varden, and I cannot keep you to myself anymore. You belong to the people now. They demand that you recognize them and that you give them what

they consider their rightful share of your time. Neither you nor Orrin nor I can refuse the wishes of the crowd. Even Galbatorix in his dark seat of power at Urû'baen fears the fickle crowd, although he may deny it to everyone, including himself."

With the guests departed, King Orrin abandoned the guise of royal decorum. His stern expression relaxed into one of more human relief, irritation, and ferocious curiosity. Rolling his shoulders beneath his stiff robes, he looked at Nasuada and said, "I do not think we require your Nighthawks to wait on us any longer."

"Agreed." Nasuada clapped her hands, dismissing the six guards from the inside of the tent.

Dragging the spare chair over to Nasuada's, King Orrin seated himself in a tangle of sprawling limbs and billowing fabric. "Now," he said, switching his gaze between Eragon and Arya, "let us have a full account of your doings, Eragon Shadeslayer. I have heard only vague explanations for why you chose to delay at Helgrind, and I have had my fill of evasions and deceptive answers. I am determined to know the truth of the matter, so I warn you, do not attempt to conceal what actually transpired while you were in the Empire. Until I am satisfied you have told me everything there is to tell, none of us shall so much as step outside of this tent."

Her voice cold, Nasuada said, "You assume too much … Your Majesty. You do not have the authority to bind me in place; nor Eragon, who is my vassal; nor Saphira; nor Arya, who answers to no mortal lord but rather to one more powerful than the two of us combined. Nor do we have the authority to bind you. The five of us are as close to equals as any of us is likely to find in Alagaësia. You would do well to remember that."

King Orrin's response was equally flinty. "Do I exceed the bounds of my sovereignty? Well, perhaps I do. You are right: I have no hold over you. However, if we are equals, I have yet to see evidence of it in your treatment of me. Eragon answers to you and only you. By the Trial of the Long Knives, you have gained dominion over the wandering tribes, many of which I have long counted among my subjects. And you command as you will both the Varden and the men of Surda, who have long served my family with bravery and determination beyond that of ordinary men."

"It was you yourself who asked me to orchestrate this campaign," said Nasuada. "I have not deposed you."

"Aye, it was at my request you assumed command of our disparate forces. I am not ashamed to admit you have had more experience and success than I in waging war. Our prospects are too precarious for you, me, or any of us to indulge in false pride. However, since your investiture, you seem to have forgotten that I am still the king of

Surda, and we of the Langfeld family can trace our line back to Thanebrand the Ring Giver himself, he who succeeded old, mad Palancar and who was the first of our race to sit on the throne in what is now Urû'baen.

"Considering our heritage and the assistance the House of Langfeld has rendered you in this cause, it is insulting of you to ignore the rights of my office. You act as if yours was the only verdict of moment and the opinions of others are of no account, to be trampled over in pursuit of whatever goal you have already determined is best for the portion of free humanity that is fortunate enough to have you as their leader. You negotiate treaties and alliances, such as that with the Urgals, of your own initiative and expect me, and others, to abide by your decisions, as if you speak for us all. You arrange preemptive visits of state, such as that with Blödhgarm-vodhr, and do not trouble to alert me of his arrival, nor wait for me to join you so we might greet his embassy together as equals. And when I have the temerity to ask why Eragon—the man whose very existence is the reason I have staked my country in this venture—when I have the temerity to ask *why* this all-important person has elected to endanger the lives of Surdans and those of every creature who opposes Galbatorix by tarrying in the midst of our enemies, how is it you respond? By treating me as if I were no more than an overzealous, overinquisitive underling whose childish concerns distracted you from more pressing matters. Bah! I will not have it, I tell you. If you cannot bring yourself to respect my station and to accept a fair division of responsibility, as two allies ought to, then it is my opinion that you are unfit to command a coalition such as ours, and I shall set myself against you however I may."

What a long-winded fellow, Saphira observed.

Alarmed by the direction the conversation had taken, Eragon said, *What should I do? I had not intended to tell anyone else about Sloan, except for Nasuada. The fewer people who know he's alive, the better*.

A flickering sea-blue shimmer ran from the base of Saphira's head to the crest of her shoulders as the tips of the sharp, diamond-shaped scales along the sides of her neck rose a fraction of an inch from the underlying skin. The jagged layers of projecting scales gave her a fierce, ruffled appearance. *I cannot tell you what is best, Eragon. In this, you must rely upon your own judgment. Listen closely to what your heart says and perhaps it will become clear how to win free of these treacherous downdrafts*.

In response to King Orrin's sally, Nasuada clasped her hands in her lap, her bandages startling white against the green of her dress, and in a calm, even voice said, "If I have slighted you, Sire, then it was due to my own hasty carelessness and not to any desire on my part to

diminish you or your house. Please forgive my lapses. They shall not happen again; that I promise you. As you have pointed out, I have but recently ascended to this post, and I have yet to master all of the accompanying niceties."

Orrin inclined his head in a cool but gracious acceptance of her words.

"As for Eragon and his activities in the Empire, I could not have provided you with specific details, for I have had no further intelligence myself. It was not, as I am sure you can appreciate, a situation that I wished to advertise."

"No, of course not."

"Therefore, it seems to me that the swiftest cure for the dispute that afflicts us is to allow Eragon to lay bare the facts of his trip that we may apprehend the full scope of this event and render judgment upon it."

"Of its own, that is not a cure," said King Orrin. "But it is the beginning of a cure, and I will gladly listen."

"Then let us tarry no longer," said Nasuada. "Let us begin this beginning and have done with our suspense. Eragon, it is time for your tale."

With Nasuada and the others gazing at him with wondering eyes, Eragon made his choice. Lifting his chin, he said, "What I tell you, I tell you in confidence. I know I cannot expect either you, King Orrin, or you, Lady Nasuada, to swear that you will keep this secret bound within your hearts from now until the day you die, but I beg you to act as if you had. It could cause a great deal of grief if this knowledge were to be whispered in the wrong ears."

"A king does not remain king for long unless he appreciates the value of silence," said Orrin.

Without further ado, Eragon described everything that had happened to him in Helgrind and in the days that had followed. Afterward, Arya explained how she had gone about locating Eragon and then corroborated his account of their travels by providing several facts and observations of her own. When they had both said their fill, the pavilion was quiet as Orrin and Nasuada sat motionless upon their chairs. Eragon felt as if he were a child again, waiting for Garrow to tell him what his punishment would be for doing something foolish on their farm.

Orrin and Nasuada remained lost deep in reflection for several minutes, then Nasuada smoothed the front of her dress and said, "King Orrin may be of a different opinion, and if so, I look forward to hearing his reasons, but for my part, I believe that you did the right thing, Eragon."

"As do I," said Orrin, surprising them all.

“You do!” exclaimed Eragon. He hesitated. “I don’t mean to sound impertinent, for I’m glad you approve, but I didn’t expect you to look kindly upon my decision to spare Sloan’s life. If I may ask, why—”

King Orrin interrupted. “Why do we approve? The rule of law must be upheld. If you had appointed yourself Sloan’s executioner, Eragon, you would have taken for yourself the power that Nasuada and I wield. For he who has the audacity to determine who should live and who should die no longer serves the law but dictates the law. And however benevolent you might be, that would be no good thing for our species. Nasuada and I, at least, answer to the one lord even kings must kneel before. We answer to Angvard, in his realm of eternal twilight. We answer to the Gray Man on his gray horse. Death. We could be the worst tyrants in the whole of history, and given enough time, Angvard would bring us to heel.… But not you. Humans are a short-lived race, and we should not be governed by one of the Undying. We do not need another Galbatorix.” A strange laugh escaped from Orrin then, and his mouth twisted in a humorless smile. “Do you understand, Eragon? You are so dangerous, we are forced to acknowledge the danger to your face and hope that you are one of the few people able to resist the lure of power.”

King Orrin laced his fingers together underneath his chin and gazed at a fold in his robes. “I have said more than I intended.… So, for all those reasons, and others besides, I agree with Nasuada. You were right to stay your hand when you discovered this Sloan in Helgrind. As inconvenient as this episode has been, it would have been far worse, and for you as well, if you had killed to please yourself and not in self-defense or in service to others.”

Nasuada nodded. “That was well spoken.”

Throughout, Arya listened with an inscrutable expression. Whatever her own thoughts on the matter were, she did not divulge them.

Orrin and Nasuada pressed Eragon with a number of questions about the oaths he had laid upon Sloan, as well as queries about the remainder of his trip. The interrogation continued for so long, Nasuada had a tray of cooled cider, fruit, and meat pies brought into the pavilion, along with the haunch of a steer for Saphira. Nasuada and Orrin had ample opportunity to eat between questions; however, they kept Eragon so busy talking, he managed to consume only two bites of fruit and a few sips of cider to wet his throat.

At long last King Orrin bade them farewell and departed to review the status of his cavalry. Arya left a minute later, explaining that she needed to report to Queen Islanzadí and to, as she said, “heat a tub of water, wash the sand from my skin, and return my features to their usual shape. I do not feel myself, with the tips of my ears missing, my eyes round and level, and the bones of my face in the wrong places.”

When she was alone with Eragon and Saphira, Nasuada sighed and leaned her head against the back of the chair. Eragon was shocked by how tired she appeared. Gone were her previous vitality and strength of presence. Gone was the fire from her eyes. She had, he realized, been pretending to be stronger than she was in order to avoid tempting her enemies and demoralizing the Varden with the spectacle of her weakness.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

She nodded toward her arms. "Not exactly. It's taking me longer to recuperate than I had anticipated.… Some days are worse than others."

"If you want, I can—"

"No. Thank you, but no. Do not tempt me. One rule of the Trial of the Long Knives is that you must allow your wounds to heal at their own pace, without magic. Otherwise, the contestants will not have endured the full measure of pain from their cuts."

"That's barbaric!"

A slow smile touched her lips. "Maybe so, but it is what it is, and I would not fail so late in the trial merely because I could not withstand a bit of an ache."

"What if your wounds fester?"

"Then they fester, and I shall pay the price for my mistake. But I doubt they will while Angela ministers to me. She has an amazing storehouse of knowledge where medicinal plants are concerned. I half believe she could tell you the true name of every species of grass on the plains east of here merely by feeling their leaves."

Saphira, who had been so still she appeared asleep, now yawned—nearly touching the floor and the ceiling with the tips of her open jaws—and shook her head and neck, sending the flecks of light reflected by her scales spinning about the tent with dizzying speed.

Straightening in her seat, Nasuada said, "Ah, I am sorry. I know this has been tedious. You have both been very patient. Thank you."

Eragon knelt and placed his right hand over hers. "You do not need to worry about me, Nasuada. I know my duty. I have never aspired to rule; that is not my destiny. And if ever I am offered the chance to sit upon a throne, I shall refuse and see that it goes to someone who is better suited than I to lead our race."

"You are a good person, Eragon," murmured Nasuada, and pressed his hand between hers. Then she chuckled. "What with you, Roran, and Murtagh, I seem to spend most of my time worrying about members of your family."

Eragon bridled at the statement. "Murtagh is no family of mine."

"Of course. Forgive me. But still, you must admit it's startling how much bother the three of you have caused both the Empire *and* the

Varden."

"It's a talent of ours," joked Eragon.

It runs in their blood, said Saphira. *Wherever they go, they get themselves entangled in the worst danger possible*. She nudged Eragon in the arm. *Especially this one. What else can you expect of people from Palancar Valley? Descendants all of a mad king*.

"But not mad themselves," said Nasuada. "At least I don't think so. It's hard to tell at times." She laughed. "If you, Roran, and Murtagh were locked in the same cell, I'm not sure who would survive."

Eragon laughed as well. "Roran. He's not about to let a little thing like death stand between him and Katrina."

Nasuada's smile became slightly strained. "No, I suppose he wouldn't at that." For a score of heartbeats, she was silent, then: "Goodness me, how selfish I am. The day is almost done, and here I am detaining you merely so I can enjoy a minute or two of idle conversation."

"The pleasure is mine."

"Yes, but there are better places than this for talk among friends. After what you have been through, I expect you would like a wash, a change, and a hearty meal, no? You must be famished!" Eragon glanced at the apple he still held and regretfully concluded it would be impolite to continue eating it when his audience with Nasuada was drawing to a close. Nasuada caught his look and said, "Your face answers for you, Shadeslayer. You have the guise of a winter-starved wolf. Well, I shall not torment you any longer. Go and bathe and garb yourself in your finest tunic. When you are presentable, I would be most pleased if you would consent to join me for my evening meal. Understand, you would not be my only guest, for the affairs of the Varden demand my constant attention, but you would brighten the proceedings considerably for me if you chose to attend."

Eragon fought back a grimace at the thought of having to spend hours more parrying verbal thrusts from those who sought to use him for their own advantage or to satisfy their curiosity about Riders and dragons. Still, Nasuada was not to be denied, so he bowed and agreed to her request.

A Feast with Friends

Eragon and Saphira left Nasuada's crimson pavilion with the contingent of elves ranged about them and walked to the small tent that had been assigned to him when they had joined the Varden at the Burning Plains. There he found a hogs-head of boiling water waiting for him, the coils of steam opalescent in the oblique light from the large evening sun. Ignoring it for the moment, he ducked inside the tent.

After checking to ensure that none of his few possessions had been disturbed during his absence, Eragon unburdened himself of his pack and carefully removed his armor, storing it beneath his cot. It needed to be wiped and oiled, but that was a task that would have to wait. Then he reached even farther underneath the cot, his fingers scraping the fabric wall beyond, and groped in the darkness until his hand came into contact with a long, hard object. Grasping it, he lay the heavy cloth-wrapped bundle across his knees. He picked apart the knots in the wrapping, and then, starting at the thickest end of the bundle, began to unwind the coarse strips of canvas.

Inch by inch, the scuffed leather hilt of Murtagh's hand-and-a-half sword came into view. Eragon stopped when he had exposed the hilt, the crossguard, and a fair expanse of the gleaming blade, which was as jagged as a saw from where Murtagh had blocked Eragon's blows with Zar'roc.

Eragon sat and stared at the weapon, conflicted. He did not know what had prompted him, but the day after the battle, he had returned to the plateau and retrieved the sword from the morass of trampled dirt where Murtagh had dropped it. Even after only a single night exposed to the elements, the steel had acquired a mottled veil of rust. With a word, he had dispelled the scrim of corrosion. Perhaps it was because Murtagh had stolen his own sword that Eragon felt compelled to take up Murtagh's, as if the exchange, unequal and involuntary though it was, minimized his loss. Perhaps it was because he wished to claim a memento of that bloody conflict. And perhaps it was because he still harbored a sense of latent affection for Murtagh, despite the grim circumstances that had turned them against each other. No matter how much Eragon abhorred what Murtagh had become, and pitied him for it too, he could not deny the connection that existed between them. Theirs was a shared fate. If not for an accident of birth, he would have been raised in Urû'baen, and Murtagh in Palancar Valley, and then their current positions might

well have been reversed. Their lives were inexorably intertwined.

As he gazed at the silver steel, Eragon composed a spell that would smooth the wrinkles from the blade, close the wedge-shaped gaps along the edges, and restore the strength of the temper. He wondered, however, if he ought to. The scar that Durza had given him he had kept as a reminder of their encounter, at least until the dragons erased it during the Agaetí Blödhren. Should he keep this scar as well, then? Would it be healthy for him to carry such a painful memory on his hip? And what sort of message would it send to the rest of the Varden if he chose to wield the blade of another betrayer? Zar'roc had been a gift from Brom; Eragon could not have refused to accept it, nor was he sorry he had. But he was under no such compulsion to claim as his own the nameless blade that rested upon his thighs.

I need a sword, he thought. *But not this sword.*

He wrapped the blade again in its shroud of canvas and slid it back under the cot. Then, with a fresh shirt and tunic tucked under his elbow, he left the tent and went to bathe.

When he was clean and garbed in the fine lámarae shirt and tunic, he set out to meet with Nasuada near the tents of the healers, as she had requested. Saphira flew, for as she said, *It is too cramped for me on the ground; I keep knocking over tents. Besides, if I walk with you, such a herd of people will gather around us, we will hardly be able to move*.

Nasuada was waiting for him by a row of three flagpoles, upon which a half-dozen gaudy pennants hung limp in the cooling air. She had changed since they had parted and now wore a light summer frock, the color of pale straw. Her dense, mosslike hair she had piled high on her head in an intricate mass of knots and braids. A single white ribbon held the arrangement in place.

She smiled at Eragon. He smiled in return and quickened his pace. As he drew close, his guards mingled with her guards with a conspicuous display of suspicion on the part of the Nighthawks and studied indifference on the part of the elves.

Nasuada took his arm and, while they spoke in comfortable tones, guided his steps as they ambled through the sea of tents. Above, Saphira circled the camp, content to wait until they arrived at their destination before she went to the effort of landing. Eragon and Nasuada spoke of many things. Little of consequence passed between their lips, but her wit, her gaiety, and the thoughtfulness of her remarks charmed him. It was easy for him to talk to her and easier to listen, and that very ease caused him to realize how much he cared for her. Her hold on him far exceeded that of a liegelord over her vassal. It was a new feeling for him, their bond. Aside from his aunt Marian, of whom he had but faint memories, he had grown up in a world of men and boys, and he had never had the opportunity to be friends

with a woman. His inexperience made him uncertain, and his uncertainty made him awkward, but Nasuada did not seem to notice.

She stopped him before a tent that glowed from within with the light of many candles and that hummed with a multitude of unintelligible voices. "Now we must dive into the swamp of politics again. Prepare yourself."

She swept back the entrance flap to the tent, and Eragon jumped as a host of people shouted, "Surprise!" A wide trestle table laden with food dominated the center of the tent, and at the table were sitting Roran and Katrina, twenty or so of the villagers from Carvahall—including Horst and his family—Angela the herbalist, Jeod and his wife, Helen, and several people Eragon did not recognize but who had the look of sailors. A half-dozen children had been playing on the ground next to the table; they paused in their games and stared at Nasuada and Eragon with open mouths, seemingly unable to decide which of these two strange figures deserved more of their attention.

Eragon grinned, overwhelmed. Before he could think of what to say, Angela raised her flagon and piped, "Well, don't just stand there gaping! Come in, sit down. I'm hungry!"

As everyone laughed, Nasuada pulled Eragon toward the two empty chairs next to Roran. Eragon helped Nasuada to her seat, and as she sank into the chair, he asked, "Did *you* arrange this?"

"Roran suggested whom you might want to attend, but yes, the original idea was mine. And I made a few additions of my own to the table, as you can see."

"Thank you," said Eragon, humbled. "Thank you so much."

He saw Elva sitting cross-legged in the far-left corner of the tent, a platter of food on her lap. The other children shunned her—Eragon could not imagine they had much in common—and none of the adults, save Angela, seemed comfortable in her presence. The small, narrow-shouldered girl gazed up at him from under her black bangs with her horrible violet eyes and mouthed what he guessed was "Greetings, Shadeslayer."

"Greetings, Farseer," he mouthed in return. Her small pink lips parted in what would have been a charming smile if not for the fell orbs that burned above them.

Eragon gripped the arms of his chair as the table shook, the dishes rattled, and the walls of the tent flapped. Then the back of the tent bulged and parted as Saphira pushed her head inside. *Meat!* she said. *I smell meat!*

For the next few hours, Eragon lost himself in a blur of food, drink, and the pleasure of good company. It was like returning home. The wine flowed like water, and after they had drained their cups once or twice, the villagers forgot their deference and treated him as one of

their own, which was the greatest gift they could give. They were equally generous with Nasuada, although they refrained from making jokes at her expense, as they sometimes did with Eragon. Pale smoke filled the tent as the candles consumed themselves. Beside him, Eragon heard the boom of Roran's laughter ring forth again and again, and across the table the even deeper boom of Horst's laugh. Muttering an incantation, Angela set to dancing a small man she had fashioned from a crust of sourdough bread, much to everyone's amusement. The children gradually overcame their fear of Saphira and dared to walk up to her and pet her snout. Soon they were clambering over her neck, hanging from her spikes, and tugging at the crests above her eyes. Eragon laughed as he watched. Jeod entertained the crowd with a song he had learned from a book long ago. Tara danced a jig. Nasuada's teeth flashed as she tossed her head back. And Eragon, by popular request, recounted several of his adventures, including a detailed description of his flight from Carvahall with Brom, which was of special interest to his listeners.

"To think," said Gertrude, the round-faced healer tugging on her shawl, "we had a dragon in our valley and we never even knew it." With a pair of knitting needles produced from within her sleeves, she pointed at Eragon. "To think I nursed you when your legs had been scraped from flying on Saphira and I never suspected the cause." Shaking her head and clucking her tongue, she cast on with brown wool yarn and began to knit with speed born of decades of practice.

Elain was the first to leave the party, pleading exhaustion brought on by her advanced stage of pregnancy; one of her sons, Baldor, went with her. Half an hour later, Nasuada also made to leave, explaining that the demands of her position prevented her from staying as long as she would like but that she wished them health and happiness and hoped they would continue to support her in her fight against the Empire.

As she moved away from the table, Nasuada beckoned to Eragon. He joined her by the entrance. Turning her shoulder to the rest of the tent, she said, "Eragon, I know that you need time to recover from your journey and that you have affairs of your own that you must tend to. Therefore, tomorrow and the day after are yours to spend as you will. But on the morning of the third day, present yourself at my pavilion and we shall talk about your future. I have a most important mission for you."

"My Lady." Then he said, "You keep Elva close at hand wherever you go, do you not?"

"Aye, she is my safeguard against any danger that might slip past the Nighthawks. Also, her ability to divine what it is that pains people has proved enormously helpful. It is so much easier to obtain

someone's cooperation when you are privy to all of their secret hurts."

"Are you willing to give that up?"

She studied him with a piercing gaze. "You intend to remove your curse from Elva?"

"I intend to try. Remember, I promised her I would."

"Yes, I was there." The crash of a falling chair distracted her for an instant, then she said, "Your promises will be the death of us.… Elva is irreplaceable; no one else has her skill. And the service she provides, as I just testified, is worth more than a mountain of gold. I have even thought that, of all of us, she alone might be able to defeat Galbatorix. She would be able to anticipate his every attack, and your spell would show her how to counter them, and as long as countering them did not require her to sacrifice her life, she would prevail.… For the good of the Varden, Eragon, for the good of everyone in Alagaësia, couldn't you feign your attempt to cure Elva?"

"No," he said, biting off the word as if it offended him. "I would not do it even if I could. It would be wrong. If we force Elva to remain as she is, she will turn against us, and I do not want her as an enemy." He paused, then at Nasuada's expression added, "Besides, there is a good chance I may not succeed. Removing such a vaguely worded spell is a difficult prospect at best.… If I may make a suggestion?"

"What?"

"Be honest with Elva. Explain to her what she means to the Varden, and ask her if she will continue to carry her burden for the sake of all free people. She may refuse; she has every right to, but if she does, her character is not one we would want to rely upon anyway. And if she accepts, then it shall be of her own free will."

With a slight frown, Nasuada nodded. "I shall speak with her tomorrow. You should be present as well, to help me persuade her and to lift your curse if we fail. Be at my pavilion three hours after dawn." And with that, she swept into the torch-lit night outside.

Much later, when the candles guttered in their sockets and the villagers began to disperse in twos and threes, Roran grasped Eragon's arm by the elbow and drew him through the back of the tent to stand by Saphira's side, where the others could not hear. "What you said earlier about Helgrind, was that all of it?" asked Roran. His grip was like a pair of iron pincers clamped around Eragon's flesh. His eyes were hard and questioning, and also unusually vulnerable.

Eragon held his gaze. "If you trust me, Roran, never ask me that question again. It's not something you want to know." Even as he spoke, Eragon felt a deep sense of unease over having to conceal Sloan's existence from Roran and Katrina. He knew the deception was necessary, but it still made him uncomfortable to lie to his family. For a moment, Eragon considered telling Roran the truth, but then he

remembered all the reasons he had decided not to and held his tongue.

Roran hesitated, his face troubled, then he set his jaw and released Eragon. “I trust you. That’s what family is for, after all, eh? Trust.”

“That and killing each other.”

Roran laughed and rubbed his nose with a thumb. “That too.” He rolled his thick, round shoulders and reached up to massage his right one, a habit he had fallen into since the Ra’zac had bitten him. “I have another question.”

“Oh?”

“It is a boon … a favor I seek of you.” A wry smile touched his lips, and he shrugged. “I never thought I would speak to you of this. You’re younger than I, you’ve barely reached your manhood, and you’re my cousin to boot.”

“Speak of what? Stop beating around the bush.”

“Of marriage,” said Roran, and lifted his chin. “Will you marry Katrina and me? It would please me if you would, and while I have refrained from mentioning it to her until I had your answer, I know Katrina would be honored and delighted if you would consent to join us as man and wife.”

Astonished, Eragon was at a loss for words. At last he managed to stammer, “Me?” Then he hastened to say, “I would be happy to do it, of course, but … *me*? Is that really what you want? I’m sure Nasuada would agree to marry the two of you.… You could have King Orrin, a real king! He would leap at the chance to preside over the ceremony if it would help him earn my favor.”

“I want you, Eragon,” said Roran, and clapped him on the shoulder. “You are a Rider, and you are the only other living person who shares my blood; Murtagh does not count. I cannot think of anyone else I would rather have tie the knot around my wrist and hers.”

“Then,” said Eragon, “I shall.” The air whooshed out of him as Roran embraced him and squeezed with all of his prodigious strength. He gasped slightly when Roran released him and then, once his breath had returned, said, “When? Nasuada has a mission planned for me. I don’t know what it is yet, but I’m guessing it will keep me busy for some time. So … maybe early next month, if events allow?”

Roran’s shoulders bunched and knotted. He shook his head like a bull sweeping its horns through a clump of brambles. “What about the day after tomorrow?”

“So soon? Isn’t that rushing it a bit? There would hardly be any time to prepare. People will think it’s unseemly.”

Roran’s shoulders rose, and the veins on his hands bulged as he opened and closed his fists. “It can’t wait. If we’re not married and quick, the old women will have something far more interesting to

gossip about than my impatience. Do you understand?"

It took Eragon a moment to grasp Roran's meaning, but once he did, Eragon could not stop a broad smile from spreading across his face. *Roran's going to be a father!* he thought. Still smiling, he said, "I think so. The day after tomorrow it is." Eragon grunted as Roran hugged him again, pounding him on the back. With some difficulty, he freed himself.

Grinning, Roran said, "I'm in your debt. Thank you. Now I must go share the news with Katrina, and we must do what we can to ready a wedding feast. I will let you know the exact hour once we decide on it."

"That sounds fine."

Roran began walking toward the tent, then he spun around and threw his arms out in the air as if he would gather the entire world to his breast. "Eragon, I'm going to be married!"

With a laugh, Eragon waved his hand. "Go on, you fool. She's waiting for you."

Eragon climbed onto Saphira as the flaps of the tent closed over Roran. "Blödhgarm?" he called. Quiet as a shadow, the elf glided into the light, his yellow eyes glowing like coals. "Saphira and I are going to fly for a little while. We will meet you at my tent."

"Shadeslayer," said Blödhgarm, and tilted his head.

Then Saphira raised her massive wings, ran forward three steps, and launched herself over the rows of tents, battering them with wind as she flapped hard and fast. The movements of her body beneath him shook Eragon, and he gripped the spike in front of him for support. Saphira spiraled upward above the twinkling camp until it was an inconsequential patch of light dwarfed by the dark landscape that surrounded it. There she remained, floating between the heavens and the earth, and all was silent.

Eragon lay his head on her neck and stared up at the glittering band of dust that spanned the sky.

Rest if you want, little one, said Saphira. *I shall not let you fall.*

And he rested, and visions beset him of a circular stone city that stood in the center of an endless plain and of a small girl who wandered among the narrow, winding alleys within and who sang a haunting melody.

And the night wore on toward morning.

It was just after dawn and Eragon was sitting on his cot, oiling his mail hauberk, when one of the Varden's archers came to him and begged him to heal his wife, who was suffering from a malignant tumor. Even though he was supposed to be at Nasuada's pavilion in less than an hour, Eragon agreed and accompanied the man to his tent. Eragon found his wife much weakened from the growth, and it took all of his skill to extract the insidious tendrils from her flesh. The effort left him tired, but he was pleased that he was able to save the woman from a long and painful death.

Afterward, Eragon rejoined Saphira outside of the archer's tent and stood with her for a few minutes, rubbing the muscles near the base of her neck. Humming, Saphira flicked her sinuous tail and twisted her head and shoulders so that he had better access to her smooth plated underside. She said, *While you were occupied in there, other petitioners came to seek an audience with you, but Blödhgarm and his ilk turned them away, for their requests were not urgent.*

Is that so? He dug his fingers under the edge of one of her large neck scales, scratching even harder. *Perhaps I should emulate Nasuada.*

How so?

On the sixth day of every week, from morning until noon, she grants an audience to everyone who wishes to bring requests or disputes before her. I could do the same.

I like the idea, said Saphira. *Only, you will have to be careful that you do not expend too much of your energy on people's demands. We must be ready to fight the Empire at a moment's notice.* She pushed her neck against his hand, humming even louder.

I need a sword, Eragon said.

Then get one.

Mmh….

Eragon continued to scratch her until she pulled away and said, *You will be late for Nasuada unless you hurry.*

Together, they started toward the center of the camp and Nasuada's pavilion. It was less than a quarter of a mile away, so Saphira walked with him instead of soaring among the clouds, as she had before.

About a hundred feet from the pavilion, they chanced upon Angela the herbalist. She was kneeling between two tents, pointing at a square of leather draped across a low, flat rock. On the leather lay a jumbled pile of finger-length bones branded with a different symbol on each facet: the knucklebones of a dragon, with which she had read

Eragon's future in Teirm.

Opposite Angela sat a tall woman with broad shoulders; tanned, weather-beaten skin; black hair braided in a long, thick rope down her back; and a face that was still handsome despite the hard lines that the years had carved around her mouth. She wore a russet dress that had been made for a shorter woman; her wrists stuck out several inches from the ends of her sleeves. She had tied a strip of dark cloth around each wrist, but the strip on the left had loosened and slipped toward her elbow. Eragon saw thick layers of scars where it had been. They were the sort of scars one could only get from the constant chafing of manacles. At some point, he realized, she had been captured by her enemies, and she had fought—fought until she had torn open her wrists to the bone, if her scars were anything to judge by. He wondered whether she had been a criminal or a slave, and he felt his countenance darken as he considered the thought of someone being so cruel as to allow such harm to befall a prisoner under his control, even if it was self-inflicted.

Next to the woman was a serious-looking teenage girl just entering into the full bloom of her adult beauty. The muscles of her forearms were unusually large, as if she had been an apprentice to a smith or a swordsman, which was highly improbable for a girl, no matter how strong she might be.

Angela had just finished saying something to the woman and her companion when Eragon and Saphira halted behind the curly-haired witch. With a single motion, Angela gathered up the knucklebones in the leather square and tucked them under the yellow sash at her waist. Standing, she flashed Eragon and Saphira a brilliant smile. "My, you both have the most impeccable sense of timing. You always seem to turn up whenever the drop spindle of fate begins to spin."

"The drop spindle of fate?" questioned Eragon.

She shrugged. "What? You can't expect brilliance all the time, not even from me." She gestured at the two strangers, who had also stood, and said, "Eragon, will you consent to give them your blessing? They have endured many dangers, and a hard road yet lies before them. I am sure they would appreciate whatever protection the benediction of a Dragon Rider may convey."

Eragon hesitated. He knew that Angela rarely cast the dragon bones for the people who sought her services—usually only for those whom Solembum deigned to speak with—as such a prognostication was no false act of magic but rather a true foretelling that could reveal the mysteries of the future. That Angela had chosen to do this for the handsome woman with the scars on her wrists and the teenage girl with the forearms of a swordfighter told him they were people of note, people who had had, and would have, important roles in shaping the

Alagaësia to be. As if to confirm his suspicions, he spotted Solembum in his usual form of a cat with large, tufted ears lurking behind the corner of a nearby tent, watching the proceedings with enigmatic yellow eyes. And yet Eragon still hesitated, haunted by the memory of the first and last blessing he had bestowed—how, because of his relative unfamiliarity with the ancient language, he had distorted the life of an innocent child.

Saphira? he asked.

Her tail whipped through the air. *Do not be so reluctant. You have learned from your mistake, and you shall not make it again. Why, then, should you withhold your blessing from those who may benefit from it? Bless them, I say, and do it properly this time*.

"What are your names?" he asked.

"If it please you, Shadeslayer," said the tall, black-haired woman, with a hint of an accent he could not place, "names have power, and we would prefer ours remain unknown." She kept her gaze angled slightly downward, but her tone was firm and unyielding. The girl uttered a small gasp, as if shocked by the woman's effrontery.

Eragon nodded, neither upset nor surprised, although the woman's reticence had piqued his curiosity even more. He would have liked to know their names, but they were not essential for what he was about to do. Pulling the glove off his right hand, he placed his palm on the middle of the woman's warm forehead. She flinched at the contact but did not retreat. Her nostrils flared, the corners of her mouth thinned, a crease appeared between her eyebrows, and he felt her tremble, as if his touch pained her and she were fighting the urge to knock aside his arm. In the background, Eragon was vaguely aware of Blödhgarm stalking closer, ready to pounce on the woman should she prove to be hostile.

Disconcerted by her reaction, Eragon broached the barrier in his mind, immersed himself in the flow of magic, and, with the full power of the ancient language, said, "Atra guliä un ilian tauthr ono un atra ono waíse sköliro fra rauthr." By imbuing the phrase with energy, as he would the words of a spell, he ensured that it would shape the course of events and thereby improve the woman's lot in life. He was careful to limit the amount of energy he transferred into the blessing, for unless he put checks on it, a spell of that sort would feed off his body until it absorbed all of his vitality, leaving him an empty husk. Despite his caution, the drop in his strength was more than he expected; his vision dimmed and his legs wobbled and threatened to collapse underneath him.

A moment later, he recovered.

It was with a sense of relief that he lifted his hand from the woman's brow, a sentiment that she seemed to share, for she stepped

back and rubbed her arms. She looked to him like a person trying to cleanse herself of some foul substance.

Moving on, Eragon repeated the procedure with the teenage girl. Her face widened as he released the spell, as if she could feel it becoming part of her body. She curtsied. “Thank you, Shadeslayer. We are in your debt. I hope that you succeed in defeating Galbatorix and the Empire.”

She turned to leave but stopped when Saphira snorted and snaked her head past Eragon and Angela, so she loomed above the two women. Bending her neck, Saphira breathed first upon the face of the older woman and then upon the face of the younger, and projecting her thoughts with such force as to overwhelm all but the thickest defenses—for she and Eragon had noticed that the black-haired woman had a well-armored mind—she said, *Good hunting, O Wild Ones. May the wind rise under your wings, may the sun always be at your backs, and may you catch your prey napping. And, Wolf-Eyes, I hope that when you find the one who left your paws in his traps, you do not kill him too quickly*.

Both women stiffened when Saphira began to speak. Afterward, the elder clapped her fists against her chest and said, “That I shall not, O Beautiful Huntress.” Then she bowed to Angela, saying, “Train hard, strike first, Seer.”

“Bladesinger.”

With a swirl of skirts, she and the teenager strode away and soon were lost from sight in the maze of identical gray tents.

What, no marks upon their foreheads? Eragon asked Saphira.

Elva was unique. I shall not brand anyone else in a like manner. What happened in Farthen Dûr just … happened. Instinct drove me. Beyond that, I cannot explain.

As the three of them walked toward Nasuada’s pavilion, Eragon glanced at Angela. “Who were they?”

Her lips quirked. “Pilgrims on their own quest.”

“That is hardly an answer,” he complained.

“It is not my habit to hand out secrets like candied nuts on winter solstice. Especially not when they belong to others.”

He was silent for a few paces. Then: “When someone refuses to tell me a certain piece of information, it only makes me that much more determined to find out the truth. I hate being ignorant. For me, a question unanswered is like a thorn in my side that pains me every time I move until I can pluck it out.”

“You have my sympathy.”

“Why is that?”

“Because if that is so, you must spend every waking hour in mortal agony, for life is full of unanswerable questions.”

Sixty feet from Nasuada's pavilion, a contingent of pikemen marching through camp blocked their way. While they waited for the warriors to file past, Eragon shivered and blew on his hands. "I wish we had time for a meal."

Quick as ever, Angela said, "It's the magic, isn't it? It has worn you down." He nodded. Sticking a hand into one of the pouches that hung from her sash, Angela pulled out a hard brown lump flecked with shiny flaxseeds. "Here, this will hold you until lunch."

"What is it?"

She thrust it at him, insistent. "Eat it. You'll like it. Trust me." As he took the oily lump from between her fingers, she grasped his wrist with her other hand and held him in place while she inspected the half-inch-high calluses on his knuckles. "How very clever of you," she said. "They are as ugly as the warts on a toad, but who cares if they help keep your skin intact, eh? I like this. I like this quite a lot. Were you inspired by the dwarves' Ascûdgamln?"

"Nothing escapes you, does it?" he asked.

"Let it escape. I only concern myself with things that exist." Eragon blinked, thrown as he often was by her verbal trickery. She tapped a callus with the tip of one of her short fingernails. "I would do this myself, except that it would catch on the wool when I'm spinning or knitting."

"You knit with your own yarn?" he said, surprised that she would engage in anything so ordinary.

"Of course! It's a wonderful way to relax. Besides, if I didn't, where would I get a sweater with Dvalar's ward against mad rabbits knit in the Liduen Kvaedhí across the inside of the chest, or a snood that was dyed yellow, green, and bright pink?"

"Mad rabbits—"

She tossed her thick curls. "You would be amazed how many magicians have died after being bitten by mad rabbits. It's far more common than you might think."

Eragon stared at her. *Do you think she's jesting?* he asked Saphira.

Ask her and find out.

She would only answer with another riddle.

The pikemen having gone, Eragon, Saphira, and Angela continued toward the pavilion, accompanied by Solembum, who had joined them without Eragon noticing. Picking her way around piles of dung left by the horses of King Orrin's cavalry, Angela said, "So tell me: aside from your fight with the Ra'zac, did anything terribly interesting happen to you during your trip? You know how I love to hear about *interesting* things."

Eragon smiled, thinking of the spirits that had visited him and Arya. However, he did not want to discuss them, so instead he said, "Since

you ask, quite a few interesting things happened. For example, I met a hermit named Tenga living in the ruins of an elf tower. He possessed the most amazing library. In it were seven—"

Angela stopped so abruptly, Eragon kept walking another three paces before he caught himself and turned back. The witch seemed stunned, as if she had taken a hard knock to her head. Padding toward her, Solembum leaned against her legs and gazed upward. Angela wet her lips, then said, "Are …" She coughed once. "Are you sure his name was Tenga?"

"Have you met him?"

Solembum hissed, and the hair on his back stood straight out. Eragon edged away from the werecat, eager to escape the reach of his claws.

"Met him?" With a bitter laugh, Angela planted her hands on her hips. "Met him? Why, I did better than that! I was his apprentice for … for an unfortunate number of years."

Eragon had never expected Angela to willingly reveal anything about her past. Eager to learn more, he asked, "When did you meet him? And where?"

"Long ago and far away. However, we parted badly, and I have not seen him for many, many years." Angela frowned. "In fact, I thought he was already dead."

Saphira spoke then, saying, *Since you were Tenga's apprentice, do you know what question he's trying to answer?*

"I have not the slightest idea. Tenga always had a question he was trying to answer. If he succeeded, he immediately chose another one, and so on. He may have answered a hundred questions since I last saw him, or he may still be gnashing his teeth over the same conundrum as when I left him."

Which was?

"Whether the phases of the moon influence the number and quality of the opals that form in the roots of the Beor Mountains, as is commonly held among the dwarves."

"But how could you prove that?" objected Eragon.

Angela shrugged. "If anyone could, it would be Tenga. He may be deranged, but his brilliance is none the less for it."

He is a man who kicks at cats, said Solembum, as if that summed up Tenga's entire character.

Then Angela clapped her hands together and said, "No more! Eat your sweet, Eragon, and let us go to Nasuada."

MAKING AMENDS

"You are late," said Nasuada as Eragon and Angela found seats in the row of chairs arranged in a semicircle before Nasuada's high-backed throne. Also seated in the semicircle were Elva and her caretaker, Greta, the old woman who had pleaded with Eragon in Farthen Dûr to bless her charge. As before, Saphira lay outside the pavilion and stuck her head through an opening at one end so that she could participate in the meeting. Solembum had curled up in a ball next to her head. He appeared to be sound asleep, except for occasional flicks of his tail.

Along with Angela, Eragon made his apologies for their tardiness, and then he listened as Nasuada explained to Elva the value of her abilities to the Varden—*As if she doesn't already know*, Eragon commented to Saphira—and entreated her to release Eragon from his promise to try to undo the effects of his blessing. She said she understood that what she was asking of Elva was difficult, but the fate of the entire land was at stake, and was it not worth sacrificing one's own comfort to help rescue Alagaësia from Galbatorix's evil clutches? It was a magnificent speech: eloquent, impassioned, and full of arguments intended to appeal to Elva's more noble sentiments.

Elva, who had been resting her small, pointed chin on her fists, raised her head and said, "No." Shocked silence pervaded the pavilion. Transferring her unblinking gaze from one person to the next, she elaborated: "Eragon, Angela, you both know what it is like to share someone's thoughts and emotions as they die. You know how horrible, how wrenching it is, how it feels as if part of yourself has vanished forever. And that is only from the death of one person. Neither of you has to endure the experience unless you want to, whereas I … I have no choice but to share them all. I feel every death around me. Even now I can feel the life ebbing out of Sefton, one of your swordsmen, Nasuada, who was wounded on the Burning Plains, and I know what words I could say to him that would lessen his terror of obliteration. His fear is so great, oh, it makes me tremble!" With an incoherent cry, she cast up her arms before her face, as if to ward off a blow. Then: "Ah, he has gone. But there are others. There are always others. The line of dead never ends." The bitter mocking quality of her voice intensified, a travesty of a child's normal speech. "Do you truly understand, Nasuada, Lady Nightstalker … She Who Would Be Queen of the World? Do you truly understand? I am privy to all of the agony around me, whether physical or mental. I feel it as if it were my own, and Eragon's magic drives me to alleviate the discomfort of those who

suffer, regardless of the cost to myself. And if I resist the urge, as I am this very moment, my body rebels against me: my stomach turns acid, my head throbs as if a dwarf is hammering on it, and I find it hard to move, much less think. Is this what you would wish on me, Nasuada?

"Night and day I have no respite from the pain of the world. Since Eragon *blessed* me, I have known nothing but hurt and fear, never happiness or pleasure. The lighter side of life, the things that make this existence bearable, these are denied me. Never do I see them. Never do I share in them. Only darkness. Only the combined misery of all the men, women, and children within a mile, battering at me like a midnight storm. This *blessing* has deprived me of the opportunity to be like other children. It has forced my body to mature faster than normal, and my mind even faster still. Eragon may be able to remove this ghastly ability of mine and the compulsion that accompanies it, but he cannot return me to what I was, nor what I should be, not without destroying who I have become. I am a freak, neither a child nor an adult, forever doomed to stand apart. I am not blind, you know. I see how you recoil when you hear me speak." She shook her head. "No, this is too much to ask of me. I will not continue like this for the sake of you, Nasuada, nor the Varden, nor the whole of Alagaësia, nor even for my dear mother, were she still alive today. It is not worth it, not for anything. I could go live by myself, so that I would be free of other people's afflictions, but I do not want to live like that. No, the only solution is for Eragon to attempt to correct his mistake." Her lips curved in a sly smile. "And if you disagree with me, if you think I am being stupid and selfish, why, then, you would do well to remember that I am hardly more than a swaddling babe and have yet to celebrate my second birthday. Only fools expect an infant to martyr herself for the greater good. But infant or not, I have made my decision, and nothing you can say will convince me otherwise. In this, I am as iron."

Nasuada reasoned with her further, but as Elva had promised, it proved to be a futile prospect. At last Nasuada asked Angela, Eragon, and Saphira to intervene. Angela refused on the grounds that she could not improve on Nasuada's words and that she believed Elva's choice was a personal one and therefore the girl ought to be able to do as she wished without being harried like an eagle by a flock of jays. Eragon was of a similar opinion, but he consented to say, "Elva, I cannot tell you what you should do—only you can determine that—but do not reject Nasuada's request out of hand. She is trying to save us all from Galbatorix, and she needs our support if we are to have any chance of success. The future is hidden to me, but I believe that your ability might be the perfect weapon against Galbatorix. You could predict his every attack. You could tell us exactly how to

counteract his wards. And above all else, you would be able to sense where Galbatorix is vulnerable, where he is most weak, and what we could do to hurt him."

"You will have to do better than that, Rider, if you want to change my mind."

"I don't want to change your mind," said Eragon. "I only want to make sure you have given due consideration to the implications of your decision and that you are not being overly hasty."

The girl shifted but did not respond.

Then Saphira asked: *What is in your heart, O Shining Brow?*

Elva answered in a soft tone, with no trace of malice. "I have spoken my heart, Saphira. Any other words would be redundant."

If Nasuada was frustrated by Elva's obstinacy, she did not allow it to show, although her expression was stern, as befitted the discussion. She said, "I do not agree with your choice, Elva, but we will abide by it, for it is obvious that we cannot sway you. I suppose I cannot fault you, as I have no experience with the suffering you are exposed to on a daily basis, and if I were in your position, it is possible I would act no differently. Eragon, if you will …"

At her bidding, Eragon knelt in front of Elva. Her lustrous violet eyes bored into him as he placed her small hands between his larger ones. Her flesh burned against his as if she had a fever.

"Will it hurt, Shadeslayer?" Greta asked, the old woman's voice quavering.

"It shouldn't, but I do not know for sure. Removing spells is a much more inexact art than casting them. Magicians rarely if ever attempt it because of the challenges it poses."

The wrinkles on her face contorted with worry, Greta patted Elva on the head, saying, "Oh, be brave, my plum. Be brave." She did not seem to notice the look of irritation Elva directed at her.

Eragon ignored the interruption. "Elva, listen to me. There are two different methods for breaking an enchantment. One is for the magician who originally cast the spell to open himself to the energy that fuels our magic—"

"That's the part I always had difficulty with," said Angela. "It's why I rely more upon potions and plants and objects that are magical in and of themselves than upon incantations."

"*If* you don't mind …"

Her cheeks dimpling, Angela said, "I'm sorry. Proceed."

"Right," growled Eragon. "One is for the original magician to open himself—"

"Or herself," Angela interjected.

"Will you please let me finish?"

"Sorry."

Eragon saw Nasuada fight back a smile. “He opens himself to the flow of energy within his body and, speaking in the ancient language, recants not only the words of his spell but also the intention behind it. This can be quite difficult, as you might imagine. Unless the magician has the right intent, he will end up altering the original spell instead of lifting it. And then he would have to unsay *two* intertwined spells.

“The other method is to cast a spell that directly counteracts the effects of the original spell. It does not eliminate the original spell, but if done properly, it renders it harmless. With your permission, this is the method I intend to use.”

“A most elegant solution,” Angela proclaimed, “but who, pray tell, provides the continuous stream of energy needed to maintain this counterspell? And since someone must ask, what can go wrong with this particular method?”

Eragon kept his gaze fixed on Elva. “The energy will have to come from you,” he told her, pressing her hands with his. “It won’t be much, but it will still reduce your stamina by a certain amount. If I do this, you will never be able to run as far or lift as many pieces of firewood as someone who does not have a similar incantation leeching off them.”

“Why can’t you provide the energy?” asked Elva, arching an eyebrow. “You are the one who is responsible for my predicament, after all.”

“I would, but the farther away I got from you, the harder it would be to send the energy to you. And if I went too far—a mile, say, or maybe a bit more—the effort would kill me. As for what can go wrong, the only risk is that I will word the counterspell improperly and it won’t block all of my blessing. If that happens, I will simply cast another counterspell.”

“And if that falls short as well?”

He paused. “Then I can always resort to the first method I explained. I would prefer to avoid that, however. It is the only way to completely do away with a spell, but if the attempt were to go amiss, and it very well might, you could end up worse off than you are now.”

Elva nodded. “I understand.”

“Have I your permission to proceed, then?”

When she dipped her chin again, Eragon took a deep breath, readying himself. His eyes half closed from the strength of his concentration, he began to speak in the ancient language. Each word fell from his tongue with the weight of a hammer blow. He was careful to enunciate every syllable, every sound that was foreign to his own language, so as to avoid a potentially tragic mishap. The counterspell was burned into his memory. He had spent many hours during his trip from Helgrind inventing it, agonizing over it,

challenging himself to devise better alternatives, all in anticipation of the day he would attempt to atone for the harm he had caused Elva. As he spoke, Saphira channeled her strength into him, and he felt her supporting him and watching closely, ready to intervene if she saw in his mind that he was about to mangle the incantation. The counterspell was very long and very complicated, for he had sought to address every reasonable interpretation of his blessing. As a result, a full five minutes passed before Eragon uttered the last sentence, word, and then syllable.

In the silence that followed, Elva's face clouded with disappointment. "I can still sense them," she said.

Nasuada leaned forward in her seat. "Who?"

"You, him, her, everyone who's in pain. They haven't gone away! The urge to help them, that's gone, but this agony still courses through me."

Nasuada leaned forward in her throne. "Eragon?"

He frowned. "I must have missed something. Give me a little while to think, and I'll put together another spell that may do the trick. There are a few other possibilities I considered, but …" He trailed off, troubled by the fact that the counterspell had not performed as expected. Moreover, deploying a spell specifically to block the pain Elva was feeling would be far more difficult than trying to undo the blessing as a whole. One wrong word, one poorly constructed phrase, and he might destroy her sense of empathy, or preclude her from ever learning how to communicate with her mind, or inhibit her own sense of pain, so she would not immediately notice when she was injured.

Eragon was in the midst of consulting with Saphira when Elva said, "No!"

Puzzled, he looked at her.

An ecstatic glow seemed to emanate from Elva. Her round, pearl-like teeth gleamed as she smiled, her eyes flashing with triumphant joy. "No, don't try again."

"But, Elva, why would—"

"Because I don't want any more spells feeding off me. And because I just realized *I can ignore them*!" She gripped the arms of her chair, trembling with excitement. "Without the urge to aid everyone who is suffering, I can ignore their troubles, and it doesn't make me sick! I can ignore the man with the amputated leg, I can ignore the woman who just scalded her hand, I can ignore them all, and I feel no worse for it! It's true I can't block them perfectly, not yet at least, but oh, what a relief! Silence. Blessed silence! No more cuts, scrapes, bruises, or broken bones. No more petty worries of air-headed youths. No more anguish of abandoned wives or cuckolded husbands. No more the thousands of unbearable injuries of an entire war. No more the

gut-wrenching panic that precedes the final darkness." With tears starting down her cheeks, she laughed, a husky warble that set Eragon's scalp atingle.

What madness is this? asked Saphira. *Even if you can put it out of your mind, why remain shackled to the pain of others when Eragon may yet be able to free you of it?*

Elva's eyes glowed with unsavory glee. "I will never be like ordinary people. If I must be different, then let me keep that which sets me apart. As long as I can control this power, as it seems I now can, I have no objection to carrying this burden, for it shall be by my choice and not forced upon me by your magic, Eragon. Ha! From now on, I shall answer to no one and no thing. If I help anyone, it will be because I want to. If I serve the Varden, it will be because my conscience tells me I should and not because you ask me to, Nasuada, or because I'll throw up if I don't. I will do as I please, and woe unto those who oppose me, for I know all their fears and shall not hesitate to play upon them in order to fulfill my wishes."

"Elva!" exclaimed Greta. "Do not say such terrible things! You cannot mean them!"

The girl turned toward her so sharply, her hair fanned out behind her. "Ah yes, I had forgotten about you, my nursemaid. Ever faithful. Always fussing. I am grateful to you for adopting me after my mother died, and for the care you've given me since Farthen Dûr, but I do not require your assistance anymore. I will live alone, tend to myself, and be beholden to no one." Cowed, the old woman covered her mouth with the hem of a sleeve and shrank back.

What Elva said appalled Eragon. He decided that he could not allow her to retain her ability if she was going to abuse it. With Saphira's assistance, for she agreed with him, he picked the most promising of the new counterspells he had been contemplating earlier and opened his mouth to deliver the lines.

Quick as a snake, Elva clamped a hand over his lips, preventing him from speaking. The pavilion shook as Saphira snarled, nearly deafening Eragon, with his enhanced hearing. As everyone reeled, save for Elva, who kept her hand pressed against Eragon's face, Saphira said, *Let him go, hatchling!*

Drawn by Saphira's snarl, Nasuada's six guards charged inside, brandishing their weapons, while Blödhgarm and the other elves ran up to Saphira and stationed themselves on either side of her shoulders, pulling back the wall of the tent so they could all see what was happening. Nasuada gestured, and the Nighthawks lowered their weapons, but the elves remained poised for action. Their blades gleamed like ice.

Neither the commotion she had engendered nor the swords leveled

at her seemed to perturb Elva. She cocked her head and gazed at Eragon as if he were an unusual beetle she had found crawling along the edge of her chair, and then she smiled with such a sweet, innocent expression, he wondered why he did not have greater faith in her character. In a voice like warm honey, she said, “Eragon, cease. If you cast that spell, you will hurt me as you hurt me once before. You do not want that. Every night when you lay yourself down to sleep, you will think of me, and the memory of the wrong you have committed will torment you. What you were about to do was evil, Eragon. Are you the judge of the world? Will you condemn me in the absence of wrongdoing merely because you do not approve of me? That way lies the depraved pleasure of controlling others for your own satisfaction. Galbatorix would approve.”

She released him then, but Eragon was too troubled to move. She had struck at his very core, and he had no counterarguments with which to defend himself, for her questions and observations were the very ones he directed at himself. Her understanding of him sent a chill crawling down his spine. “I am grateful to you also, Eragon, for coming here today to correct your mistake. Not everyone is as willing to acknowledge and confront their shortcomings. However, you have earned no favor with me today. You have righted the scales as best you could, but that is only what any decent person ought to have done. You have not compensated me for what I have endured, nor can you. So when next we cross paths, Eragon Shadeslayer, count me not as a friend or foe. I am ambivalent toward you, Rider; I am just as prepared to hate you as I am to love you. The outcome is yours alone to decide.… Saphira, you gave me the star upon my brow, and you have always been kind to me. I am and shall always remain your faithful servant.”

Lifting her chin to maximize her three-and-a-half-foot height, Elva surveyed the interior of the pavilion. “Eragon, Saphira, Nasuada … Angela. Good day.” And with that, she swept off toward the entrance. The Nighthawks parted ranks as she passed between them and went outside.

Eragon stood, feeling unsteady. “What sort of monster have I created?” The two Urgal Nighthawks touched the tip of each of their horns, which he knew was how they warded off evil. To Nasuada, he said, “I’m sorry. I seem to have only made things worse for you—for all of us.”

Calm as a mountain lake, Nasuada arranged her robes before answering: “No matter. The game has gotten a little more complicated, that is all. It is to be expected the closer we get to Urû’baen and Galbatorix.”

A moment later, Eragon heard the sound of an object rushing

through the air toward him. He flinched, but fast as he was, he was too slow to avoid a stinging slap that knocked his head to one side and sent him staggering against a chair. He rolled across the seat of the chair and sprang upright, his left arm lifted to ward off an oncoming blow, his right arm pulled back, ready to stab with the hunting knife he had snatched from his belt during the maneuver. To his astonishment, he saw that it was Angela who had struck him. The elves were gathered inches behind the fortuneteller, ready to subdue her if she should attack him again or to escort her away should Eragon order it. Solembum was at her feet, teeth and claws bared, and his hair standing on end.

Right then, Eragon could care less about the elves. "What did you do that for?" he demanded. He winced as his split lower lip stretched, tearing the flesh farther apart. Warm, metallic-tasting blood trickled down his throat.

Angela tossed her head. "Now I'm going to have to spend the next ten years teaching Elva how to behave! That's *not* what I had in mind for the next decade!"

"Teach her?" exclaimed Eragon. "She won't let you. She'll stop you as easily as she stopped me."

"Humph. Not likely. She doesn't know what bothers me, nor what might be about to hurt me. I saw to that the day she and I first met."

"Would you share this spell with us?" Nasuada asked. "After how this has turned out, it seems prudent for us to have a means of protecting ourselves from Elva."

"No, I don't think I will," said Angela. Then she too marched out of the pavilion, and Solembum stalked after her, waving his tail ever so gracefully.

The elves sheathed their blades and retreated to a discreet distance from the tent.

Nasuada rubbed her temples with a circular motion. "Magic," she cursed.

"Magic," agreed Eragon.

The pair of them started as Greta cast herself upon the ground and began to weep and wail while pulling at her thin hair, beating herself on the face, and ripping at her bodice. "Oh, my poor dear! I've lost my lamb! Lost! What will become of her, all alone? Oh, woe is me, my own little blossom rejecting me. It's a shameful reward it is for the work I've done, bending my back like a slave I have. What a cruel, hard world, always stealing your happiness from you." She groaned. "My plum. My rose. My pretty sweet pea. Gone! And no one to look after her.… Shadeslayer! Will you watch over her?"

Eragon grasped her by the arm and helped her to her feet, consoling her with assurances that he and Saphira would keep a close eye on

Elva. *If only*, as Saphira said to Eragon, *because she might attempt to slip a knife between our ribs*.

Eragon stood next to Saphira, fifty yards from Nasuada's crimson pavilion. Glad to be free of all the commotion that had surrounded Elva, he gazed up at the clear azure sky and rolled his shoulders, already tired from the events of the day. Saphira intended to fly out to the Jiet River and bathe herself in its deep, slow-moving water, but his own intentions were less definite. He still needed to finish oiling his armor, prepare for Roran and Katrina's wedding, visit with Jeod, locate a proper sword for himself, and also … He scratched his chin.

How long will you be gone? he asked.

Saphira unfurled her wings in preparation for flight. *A few hours. I'm hungry. Once I am clean, I am going to catch two or three of those plump deer I've seen nibbling the grass on the western bank of the river. The Varden have shot so many of them, though, I may have to fly a half-dozen leagues toward the Spine before I find any game worth hunting.*

Don't go too far, he cautioned, *else you might encounter the Empire.*

I won't, but if I happen upon a lone group of soldiers … She licked her chops. *I would enjoy a quick fight. Besides, humans taste just as good as deer.*

Saphira, you wouldn't!

Her eyes sparkled. *Maybe, maybe not. It depends on whether they are wearing armor. I hate biting through metal, and scooping my food out of a shell is just as annoying.*

I see. He glanced over at the nearest elf, a tall, silver-haired woman. *The elves won't want you to go alone. Will you allow a couple of them to ride on you? Otherwise, it will be impossible for them to keep pace.*

Not today. Today, I hunt alone! With a sweep of her wings, she took off, soaring high overhead. As she turned west, toward the Jiet River, her voice sounded in his mind, fainter than before because of the distance between them. *When I return, we will fly together, won't we, Eragon?*

Yes, when you return, we will fly together, just the two of us. Her pleasure at that caused him to smile as he watched her arrow away toward the west.

Eragon lowered his gaze as Blödhgarm ran up to him, lithe as a forest cat. The elf asked where Saphira was going and seemed displeased with Eragon's explanation, but if he had any objections, he kept them to himself.

"Right," Eragon said to himself as Blödhgarm rejoined his companions. "First things first."

He strode through the camp until he found a large square of open space where thirty-some Varden were practicing with a wide assortment of weapons. To his relief, they were too busy training to notice his presence. Crouching, he lay his right hand palm-upward on the trampled earth. He chose the words he would need from the ancient language, then murmured, "Kuldr, rïsa lam iet un malthinae unin böllr."

The soil beside his hand appeared unchanged, although he could feel the spell sifting through the dirt for hundreds of feet in every direction. Not more than five seconds later, the surface of the earth began to boil like a pot of water left to sit for too long over a high flame, and it acquired a bright yellow sheen. Eragon had learned from Oromis that wherever one went, the land was sure to contain minute particles of nearly every element, and while they would be too small and scattered to mine with traditional methods, a knowledgeable magician could, with great effort, extract them.

From the center of the yellow patch, a fountain of sparkling dust arched up and over, landing in the middle of Eragon's palm. There each glittering mote melded into the next, until three spheres of pure gold, each the size of a large hazelnut, rested on his hand.

"Letta," said Eragon, and released the magic. He sat back on his heels and braced himself against the ground as a wave of weariness washed over him. His head drooped forward, and his eyelids descended halfway as his vision flickered and dimmed. Taking a deep breath, he admired the mirror-smooth orbs in his hand while he waited for his strength to return. *So pretty*, he thought. *If only I could have done this when we were living in Palancar Valley.… It would almost be easier to mine the gold, though. A spell hasn't taken so much out of me since I carried Sloan down from the top of Helgrind*.

He pocketed the gold and set out again through the camp. He found a cook tent and ate a large lunch, which he needed after casting so many arduous spells, then headed toward the area where the villagers from Carvahall were staying. As he approached, he heard the ring of metal striking metal. Curious, he turned in that direction.

Eragon stepped around a line of three wagons parked across the mouth of the lane and saw Horst standing in a thirty-foot gap between the tents, holding one end of a five-foot-long bar of steel. The other end of the bar was bright cherry red and rested on the face of a massive two-hundred-pound anvil that was staked to the top of a low, wide stump. On either side of the anvil, Horst's burly sons, Albriech and Baldor, alternated striking the steel with sledgehammers, which they swung over their heads in huge circular blows. A makeshift forge glowed several feet behind the anvil.

The hammering was so loud, Eragon kept his distance until Albriech

and Baldor had finished spreading the steel and Horst had returned the bar to the forge. Waving his free arm, Horst said, “Ho, Eragon!” Then he held up a finger, forestalling Eragon’s reply, and pulled a plug of felted wool out of his left ear. “Ah, now I can hear again. What brings you about, Eragon?” While he spoke, his sons scooped more charcoal into the forge from a bucket and set about tidying up the tongs, hammers, dies, and other tools that lay on the ground. All three men gleamed with sweat.

“I wanted to know what was causing such a commotion,” said Eragon. “I should have guessed it was you. No one else can create as big an uproar as someone from Carvahall.”

Horst laughed, his thick, spade-shaped beard pointed up toward the sky until his mirth was exhausted. “Ah, that tickles my pride, it does. And aren’t you the living truth of it, eh?”

“We all are,” Eragon replied. “You, me, Roran, everyone from Carvahall. Alagaësia will never be the same once the lot of us are done.” He gestured at the forge and the other equipment. “Why are you here? I thought that all the smiths were—”

“So they are, Eragon. So they are. However, I convinced the captain who’s in charge of this part of the camp to let me work closer to our tent.” Horst tugged at the end of his beard. “It’s on account of Elain, you know. This child, it goes hard with her, and no wonder, considering what we went through to get here. She’s always been delicate, and now I worry that … well …” He shook himself like a bear ridding itself of flies. “Maybe you could look in on her when you get a chance and see if you can ease her discomfort.”

“I’ll do that,” Eragon promised.

With a satisfied grunt, Horst lifted the bar partway out of the coals to better judge the color of the steel. Plunging the bar back into the center of the fire, he jerked his beard toward Albriech. “Here now, give it some air. It’s almost ready.” As Albriech began to pump the leather bellows, Horst grinned at Eragon. “When I told the Varden I was a smith, they were so happy, you would have thought I was another Dragon Rider. They don’t have enough metalworkers, you see. And they gave me what tools I was missing, including that anvil. When we left Carvahall, I wept at the prospect that I would not have the opportunity to practice my craft again. I am no swordsmith, but here, ah, here there is enough work to keep Albriech, Baldor, and me busy for the next fifty years. It doesn’t pay very well, but at least we’re not stretched out on a rack in Galbatorix’s dungeons.”

“Or the Ra’zac could be nibbling on our bones,” observed Baldor.

“Aye, that too.” Horst motioned for his sons to take up the sledgehammers again and then, holding the felt plug beside his left ear, said, “Is there anything else you wish of us, Eragon? The steel is

ready, and I cannot leave it in the fire any longer without weakening it."

"Do you know where Gedric is?"

"Gedric?" The furrow between Horst's eyebrows deepened. "He should be practicing the sword and spear along with the rest of the men, thataway about a quarter of a mile." Horst pointed with a thumb.

Eragon thanked him and departed in the direction Horst had indicated. The repetitive ring of metal striking metal resumed, clear as the peals of a bell and as sharp and piercing as a glass needle stabbing the air. Eragon covered his ears and smiled. It comforted him that Horst had retained his strength of purpose and that, despite the loss of his wealth and home, he was still the same person he had been in Carvahall. Somehow the smith's consistency and resiliency renewed Eragon's faith that if only they could overthrow Galbatorix, everything would be all right in the end, and his life and those of the villagers from Carvahall would regain a semblance of normalcy.

Eragon soon arrived at the field where the men of Carvahall were drilling with their new weapons. Gedric was there, as Horst had suggested he would be, sparring with Fisk, Darmmen, and Morn. A quick word on the part of Eragon with the one-armed veteran who was leading the drills was sufficient to secure Gedric's temporary release.

The tanner ran over to Eragon and stood before him, his gaze lowered. He was short and swarthy, with a jaw like a mastiff's, heavy eyebrows, and arms thick and gnarled from stirring the foul-smelling vats where he had cured his hides. Although he was far from handsome, Eragon knew him to be a kind and honest man.

"What can I do for you, Shadeslayer?" Gedric mumbled.

"You have already done it. And I have come here to thank and repay you."

"I? How have I helped you, Shadeslayer?" He spoke slowly, cautiously, as if afraid Eragon were setting a trap for him.

"Soon after I ran away from Carvahall, you discovered that someone had stolen three ox hides from the drying hut by the vats. Am I right?"

Gedric's face darkened with embarrassment, and he shuffled his feet. "Ah, well now, I didn't lock that hut, you know. Anyone might have snuck in and carried those hides off. Besides, given what's happened since, I can't see as it's much important. I destroyed most of my stock before we trooped into the Spine, to keep the Empire and those filthy Ra'zac from getting their claws on anything of use. Whoever took those hides saved me from having to destroy three more. So let bygones be bygones, I say."

"Perhaps," said Eragon, "but I still feel honor-bound to tell you that

it was I who stole your hides."

Gedric met his gaze then, looking at him as if he were an ordinary person, without fear, awe, or undue respect, as if the tanner were reevaluating his opinion of Eragon.

"I stole them, and I'm not proud of it, but I needed the hides. Without them, I doubt I would have survived long enough to reach the elves in Du Weldenvarden. I always preferred to think that I had borrowed the hides, but the truth is, I stole them, for I had no intention of returning them. Therefore, you have my apologies. And since I am keeping the hides, or what is left of them, it seems only right to pay you for them." From within his belt, Eragon removed one of the spheres of gold—hard, round, and warm from the heat of his flesh—and handed it to Gedric.

Gedric stared at the shiny metal pearl, his massive jaw clamped shut, the lines around his thin-lipped mouth harsh and unyielding. He did not insult Eragon by weighing the gold in his hand, nor by biting it, but when he spoke, he said, "I cannot accept this, Eragon. I was a good tanner, but the leather I made was not worth this much. Your generosity does you credit, but it would bother me to keep this gold. I would feel as if I hadn't earned it."

Unsurprised, Eragon said, "You would not deny another man the opportunity to haggle for a fair price, would you?"

"No."

"Good. Then you cannot deny me this. Most people haggle downward. In this case, I have chosen to haggle upward, but I will still haggle as fiercely as if I were trying to save myself a handful of coins. To me, the hides are worth every ounce of that gold, and I would not pay you a copper less, not even if you held a knife to my throat."

Gedric's thick fingers closed around the gold orb. "Since you insist, I will not be so churlish as to keep refusing you. No one can say that Gedric Ostvensson allowed good fortune to pass him by because he was too busy protesting his own unworthiness. My thanks, Shadeslayer." He placed the orb in a pouch on his belt, wrapping the gold in a patch of wool cloth to protect it from scratches. "Garrow did right by you, Eragon. He did right by both you and Roran. He may have been sharp as vinegar and as hard and dry as a winter rutabaga, but he raised the two of you well. He would be proud of you, I think."

Unexpected emotion clogged Eragon's chest.

As Gedric turned to rejoin the other villagers, he paused. "If I may ask, Eragon, why were those hides worth so much to you? What did you use them for?"

Eragon chuckled. "Use them for? Why, with Brom's help, I made a saddle for Saphira out of them. She doesn't wear it as often as she

used to—not since the elves gave us a proper dragon's saddle—but it served us well through many a scrape and fight, and even the Battle of Farthen Dûr."

Astonishment raised Gedric's eyebrows, exposing pale skin that normally lay hidden in deep folds. Like a split in blue-gray granite, a wide grin spread across his jaw, transforming his features. "A saddle!" he breathed. "Imagine, me tanning the leather for a Rider's saddle! And without a hint of what I was doing at the time, no less! No, not *a* Rider, *the* Rider. He who will finally cast down the black tyrant himself! If only my father could see me now!" Kicking up his heels, Gedric danced an impromptu jig. With his grin undiminished, he bowed to Eragon and trotted back to his place among the villagers, where he began to relate his tale to everyone within earshot.

Eager to escape before the lot of them could descend upon him, Eragon slipped away between the rows of tents, pleased with what he had accomplished. *It might take me a while*, he thought, *but I always settle my debts*.

Before long, he arrived at another tent, close to the eastern edge of the camp. He knocked on the pole between the two front flaps.

With a sharp sound, the entrance was yanked aside to reveal Jeod's wife, Helen, standing in the opening. She regarded Eragon with a cold expression. "You've come to talk with *him*, I suppose."

"If he's here." Which Eragon knew perfectly well he was, for he could sense Jeod's mind as clearly as Helen's.

For a moment, Eragon thought Helen might deny the presence of her husband, but then she shrugged and moved aside. "You might as well come in, then."

Eragon found Jeod sitting on a stool, poring over an assortment of scrolls, books, and sheaves of loose papers that were piled high on a cot bare of blankets. A thin shock of hair hung across Jeod's forehead, mimicking the curve of the scar that stretched from his scalp to his left temple.

"Eragon!" he cried as he saw him, the lines of concentration on his face clearing. "Welcome, welcome!" He shook Eragon's hand and then offered him the stool. "Here, I shall sit on the corner of the bed. No, please, you are our guest. Would you care for some food or drink? Nasuada gives us an extra ration, so do not restrain yourself for fear that we will go hungry on your account. It is poor fare compared with what we served you in Teirm, but then no one should go to war and expect to eat well, not even a king."

"A cup of tea would be nice," said Eragon.

"Tea and biscuits it is." Jeod glanced at Helen.

Snatching the kettle off the ground, Helen braced it against her hip, fit the nipple of a waterskin in the end of the spout, and squeezed. The

kettle reverberated with a dull roar as a stream of water struck the bottom. Helen's fingers tightened around the neck of the waterskin, restricting the flow to a languorous trickle. She remained thus, with the detached look of a person performing an unpleasant task, while the water droplets drummed out a maddening beat against the inside of the kettle.

An apologetic smile flickered across Jeod's face. He stared at a scrap of paper beside his knee as he waited for Helen to finish. Eragon studied a wrinkle in the side of the tent.

The bombastic trickle continued for over three minutes.

When the kettle was finally full, Helen removed the deflated waterskin from the spout, hung it on a hook on the center pole of the tent, and stormed out.

Eragon raised an eyebrow at Jeod.

Jeod spread his hands. "My position with the Varden is not as prominent as she had hoped, and she blames me for the fact. She agreed to flee Teirm with me, expecting, or so I believe, that Nasuada would vault me into the inner circle of her advisers, or grant me lands and riches fit for a lord, or some other extravagant reward for my help stealing Saphira's egg those many years ago. What Helen did not bargain on was the unglamorous life of a common swordsman: sleeping in a tent, fixing her own food, washing her own clothes, and so on. It's not that wealth and status are her only concerns, but you have to understand, she was born into one of the richest shipping families of Teirm, and for most of our marriage, I was not unsuccessful in my own ventures. She is unused to such privations as these, and she has yet to reconcile herself to them." His shoulders rose and fell a fraction of an inch. "My own hope was that this adventure—if it deserves such a romantic term—would narrow the rifts that have opened between us in recent years, but as always, nothing is ever as simple as it seems."

"Do *you* feel that the Varden ought to show you greater consideration?" asked Eragon.

"For myself, no. For Helen …" Jeod hesitated. "I want her to be happy. My reward was in escaping from Gil'ead with my life when Brom and I were attacked by Morzan, his dragon, and his men; in the satisfaction of knowing that I had helped strike a crippling blow against Galbatorix; in being able to return to my previous life and yet still help further the Varden's cause; and in being able to marry Helen. Those were my rewards, and I am more than content with them. Any doubts I had vanished the instant I saw Saphira fly out of the smoke of the Burning Plains. I do not know what to do about Helen, though. But I forget myself. These are not your troubles, and I should not lay them upon you."

Eragon touched a scroll with the tip of his index finger. “Then tell me, why so many papers? Have you become a copyist?”

The question amused Jeod. “Hardly, although the work is often as tedious. Since it was I who discovered the hidden passageway into Galbatorix’s castle, in Urû’baen, and I was able to bring with me some of the rare books from my library in Teirm, Nasuada has set me to searching for similar weaknesses in the other cities of the Empire. If I could find mention of a tunnel that led underneath the walls of Dras-Leona, for example, it might save us a great deal of bloodshed.”

“Where are you looking?”

“Everywhere I can.” Jeod brushed back the lock of hair that was hanging over his forehead. “Histories; myths; legends; poems; songs; religious tracts; the writings of Riders, magicians, wanderers, madmen, obscure potentates, various generals, anyone who might have knowledge of a hidden door or a secret mechanism or something of that ilk that we might turn to our advantage. The amount of material I have to sift through is immense, for all of the cities have stood for hundreds of years, and some antedate the arrival of humans in Alagaësia.”

“Is it likely you will actually find anything?”

“No, not likely. It is never likely that you will succeed in ferreting out the secrets of the past. But I may still prevail, given enough time. I have no doubt that what I am searching for exists in each of the cities; they are too old *not* to contain surreptitious ways in and out through their walls. However, it is another question entirely whether *records* of those ways exist and whether we possess those records. People who know about concealed trapdoors and the like usually want to keep the information to themselves.” Jeod grasped a handful of the papers next to him on the cot and brought them closer to his face, then snorted and tossed the papers away. “I’m trying to solve riddles invented by people who didn’t want them to be solved.”

He and Eragon continued talking about other, less important matters until Helen reappeared, carrying three mugs of steaming-hot red-clover tea. As Eragon accepted his mug, he noted that her earlier anger seemed to have subsided, and he wondered if she had been listening outside to what Jeod had said about her. She handed Jeod his mug and, from somewhere behind Eragon, procured a tin plate laden with flat biscuits and a small clay pot of honey. Then she withdrew a few feet and stood leaning against the center pole, blowing on her own mug.

As was polite, Jeod waited until Eragon had taken a biscuit from the plate and consumed a bite of it before saying, “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, Eragon? Unless I am mistaken, this is no idle visit.”

Eragon sipped his tea. “After the Battle of the Burning Plains, I promised I would tell you how Brom died. That is why I have come.”

A gray pallor replaced the color in Jeod’s cheeks. “Oh.”

“I don’t have to, if that’s not what you want,” Eragon quickly pointed out.

With an effort, Jeod shook his head. “No, I do. You merely caught me by surprise.”

When Jeod did not ask Helen to leave, Eragon was uncertain whether he should continue, but then he decided that it did not matter if Helen or anyone else heard his story. In a slow, deliberate voice, Eragon began to recount the events that had transpired since he and Brom had left Jeod’s house. He described their encounter with the band of Urgals, their search for the Ra’zac in Dras-Leona, how the Ra’zac had ambushed them outside the city, and how the Ra’zac had stabbed Brom as they fled from Murtagh’s attack.

Eragon’s throat constricted as he spoke of Brom’s last hours, of the cool sandstone cave where he had lain, of the feelings of helplessness that had assailed Eragon as he watched Brom slipping away, of the smell of death that had pervaded the dry air, of Brom’s final words, of the sandstone tomb Eragon had made with magic, and of how Saphira had transformed it into pure diamond.

“If only I had known what I know now,” Eragon said, “then I could have saved him. Instead …” Unable to summon words past the tightness in his throat, he wiped his eyes and gulped at his tea. He wished it were something stronger.

A sigh escaped Jeod. “And so ended Brom. Alas, we are all far worse off without him. If he could have chosen the means of his death, though, I think he would have chosen to die like this, in the service of the Varden, defending the last free Dragon Rider.”

“Were you aware that he had been a Rider himself?”

Jeod nodded. “The Varden told me before I met him.”

“He seemed as if he was a man who revealed little about himself,” observed Helen.

Jeod and Eragon laughed. “That he was,” said Jeod. “I still have not recovered from the shock of seeing him and you, Eragon, standing on our doorstep. Brom always kept his own counsel, but we became close friends when we were traveling together, and I cannot understand why he let me believe he was dead for what, sixteen, seventeen years? Too long. What’s more, since it was Brom who delivered Saphira’s egg to the Varden after he slew Morzan in Gil’ead, the Varden couldn’t very well tell me they had her egg without revealing that Brom was still alive. So I’ve spent the better part of two decades convinced that the one great adventure of my life had ended in failure and that, as a result, we had lost our only hope of having a Dragon Rider to help us

overthrow Galbatorix. The knowledge was no easy burden, I can assure you.…"

With one hand, Jeod rubbed his brow. "When I opened our front door and realized whom I was looking at, I thought that the ghosts of my past had come to haunt me. Brom said he kept himself hidden to ensure that he would still be alive to train the new Rider when he or she should appear, but his explanation has never entirely satisfied me. Why was it necessary for him to cut himself off from nearly everyone he knew or cared about? What was he afraid of? What was he protecting?"

Jeod fingered the handle of his mug. "I cannot prove it, but it seems to me that Brom must have discovered something in Gil'ead when he was fighting Morzan and his dragon, something so momentous, it moved Brom to abandon everything that was his life up until then. It's a fanciful conjecture, I admit, but I cannot account for Brom's actions except by postulating that there was a piece of information he never shared with me nor another living soul."

Again Jeod sighed, and he drew a hand down his long face. "After so many years apart, I had hoped Brom and I might ride together once more, but fate had other ideas, it seems. And then to lose him a second time but a few weeks after discovering he was still alive was a cruel joke for the world to play." Helen swept past Eragon and went to stand by Jeod, touching him on the shoulder. He offered her a wan smile and wrapped an arm around her narrow waist. "I'm glad that you and Saphira gave Brom a tomb even a dwarf king might envy. He deserved that and more for all he did for Alagaësia. Although once people discover his grave, I have a horrible suspicion they will not hesitate to break it apart for the diamond."

"If they do, they will regret it," muttered Eragon. He resolved to return to the site at the earliest opportunity and place wards around Brom's tomb to protect it from grave robbers. "Besides, they will be too busy hunting gold lilies to bother Brom."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's not important." The three of them sipped their tea. Helen nibbled on a biscuit. Then Eragon asked, "You met Morzan, didn't you?"

"They were not the friendliest of occasions, but yes, I met him."

"What was he like?"

"As a person? I really couldn't say, although I'm well acquainted with tales of his atrocities. Every time Brom and I crossed paths with him, he was trying to kill us. Or rather, capture, torture, and *then* kill us, none of which are conducive to establishing a close relationship." Eragon was too intent to respond to Jeod's humor. Jeod shifted on the bed. "As a warrior, Morzan was terrifying. We spent a great deal of

time running away from him, I seem to remember—him and his dragon, that is. Few things are as frightening as having an enraged dragon chasing you."

"How did he look?"

"You seem inordinately interested in him."

Eragon blinked once. "I'm curious. He was the last of the Forsworn to die, and Brom was the one who slew him. And now Morzan's son is my mortal enemy."

"Let me see, then," said Jeod. "He was tall, he had broad shoulders, his hair was dark like a raven's feathers, and his eyes were different colors. One was blue and one was black. His chin was bare, and he was missing the tip of one of his fingers; I forget which. Handsome he was, in a cruel, haughty manner, and when he spoke, he was most charismatic. His armor was always polished bright, whether mail or a breastplate, as if he had no fear of being spotted by his enemies, which I suppose he hadn't. When he laughed, it sounded as if he were in pain."

"What of his companion, the woman Selena? Did you meet her as well?"

Jeod laughed. "If I had, I would not be here today. Morzan may have been a fearsome swordsman, a formidable magician, and a murderous traitor, but it was that woman of his who inspired the most terror in people. Morzan only used her for missions that were so repugnant, difficult, or secretive that no one else would agree to undertake them. She was his Black Hand, and her presence always signaled imminent death, torture, betrayal, or some other horror." Eragon felt sick hearing his mother described thusly. "She was utterly ruthless, devoid of either pity or compassion. It was said that when she asked Morzan to enter his service, he tested her by teaching her the word for *heal* in the ancient language—for she was a spellcaster as well as a common fighter—and then pitting her against twelve of his finest swordsmen."

"How did she defeat them?"

"She healed them of their fear and their hate and all the things that drive a man to kill. And then while they stood grinning at each other like idiot sheep, she went up to the men and cut their throats.… Are you feeling well, Eragon? You are as pale as a corpse."

"I'm fine. What else do you remember?"

Jeod tapped the side of his mug. "Precious little concerning Selena. She was always somewhat of an enigma. No one besides Morzan even knew her real name until just a few months before Morzan's death. To the public at large, she has never been anything other than the Black Hand; the Black Hand we have now—the collection of spies, assassins, and magicians who carry out Galbatorix's low skulduggery—is

Galbatorix's attempt to re-create Selena's usefulness to Morzan. Even among the Varden, only a handful of people were privy to her name, and most of them are moldering in graves now. As I recall, it was Brom who discovered her true identity. Before I went to the Varden with the information concerning the secret passageway into Castle Ilirea—which the elves built millennia ago and which Galbatorix expanded upon to form the black citadel that now dominates Urû'baen—before I went to them, Brom had spent a rather significant length of time spying on Morzan's estate in the hope he might unearth a hitherto unsuspected weakness of Morzan's.… I believe Brom gained admittance to Morzan's hall by disguising himself as a member of the serving staff. It was then that he found out what he did about Selena. Still, we never did learn why she was so attached to Morzan. Perhaps she loved him. In any event, she was utterly loyal to him, even to the point of death. Soon after Brom killed Morzan, word reached the Varden that sickness had taken her. It is as if the trained hawk was so fond of her master, she could not live without him."

She was not entirely loyal, thought Eragon. *She defied Morzan when it came to me, even though she lost her life as a result. If only she could have rescued Murtagh as well.* As for Jeod's accounts of her misdeeds, Eragon chose to believe that Morzan had perverted her essentially good nature. For the sake of his own sanity, Eragon could not accept that both his parents had been evil.

"She loved him," he said, staring at the murky dregs at the bottom of his mug. "In the beginning, she loved him; maybe not so much later. Murtagh is her son."

Jeod raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? You have it from Murtagh himself, I suppose?" Eragon nodded. "Well, that explains a number of questions I always had. Murtagh's mother … I'm surprised that Brom didn't uncover that particular secret."

"Morzan did everything he could to conceal Murtagh's existence, even from the other members of the Forsworn."

"Knowing the history of those power-hungry, backstabbing knaves, he probably saved Murtagh's life. More's the pity too."

Silence crept among them then, like a shy animal ready to flee at the slightest motion. Eragon continued to gaze into his mug. A host of questions bedeviled him, but he knew that Jeod could not answer them and it was unlikely anyone else could either: Why had Brom hidden himself in Carvahall? To keep watch over Eragon, the son of his most hated foe? Had it been some cruel joke giving Eragon Zar'roc, his father's blade? And why had Brom not told him the truth about his parentage? He tightened his grip on the mug and, without meaning to, shattered the clay.

The three of them started at the unexpected noise.

“Here, let me help you with that,” said Helen, bustling forward and dabbing at his tunic with a rag. Embarrassed, Eragon apologized several times, to which both Jeod and Helen responded by assuring him it was a small mishap and not to worry himself about it.

While Helen picked up the shards of fire-hardened clay, Jeod began to dig through the layers of books, scrolls, and loose papers that covered the bed, saying, “Ah, it had nearly slipped my mind. I have something for you, Eragon, that might prove useful. If only I can find it here.…” With a pleased exclamation, he straightened, flourishing a book, which he handed to Eragon.

It was *Domia abr Wyrda*, the *Dominance of Fate*, a complete history of Alagaësia written by Heslant the Monk. Eragon had first seen it in Jeod’s library in Teirm. He had not expected that he would ever get a chance to examine it again. Savoring the feeling, he ran his hands over the carved leather on the front cover, which was shiny with age, then opened the book and admired the neat rows of runes within, lettered in glossy red ink. Awed by the size of the knowledge hoard he held, Eragon said, “You wish me to have this?”

“I do,” asserted Jeod. He moved out of the way as Helen retrieved a fragment of the mug from under the bed. “I think you might profit by it. You are engaged in historic events, Eragon, and the roots of the difficulties you face lie in happenings from decades, centuries, and millennia ago. If I were you, I would study at every opportunity the lessons history has to teach us, for they may help you with the problems of today. In my own life, reading the record of the past has often provided me with the courage and the insight to choose the correct path.”

Eragon longed to accept the gift, but still he hesitated. “Brom said that *Domia abr Wyrda* was the most valuable thing in your house. And rare as well.… Besides, what of your work? Don’t you need this for your research?”

“*Domia abr Wyrda* is valuable and it is rare,” said Jeod, “but only in the Empire, where Galbatorix burns every copy he finds and hangs their unfortunate owners. Here in the camp, I have already had six copies foisted upon me by members of King Orrin’s court, and this is hardly what one would call a great center of learning. However, I do not part with it lightly, and only because you can put it to better use than I can. Books should go where they will be most appreciated, and not sit unread, gathering dust on a forgotten shelf, don’t you agree?”

“I do.” Eragon closed *Domia abr Wyrda* and again traced the intricate patterns on the front with his fingers, fascinated by the swirling designs that had been chiseled into the leather. “Thank you. I shall treasure it for as long as it is mine to watch over.” Jeod dipped his head and leaned back against the wall of the tent, appearing

satisfied. Turning the book on its edge, Eragon examined the lettering on the spine. “What was Heslant a monk of?”

“A small, secretive sect called the Arcaena that originated in the area by Kuasta. Their order, which has endured for at least five hundred years, believes that all knowledge is sacred.” A hint of a smile lent Jeod’s features a mysterious cast. “They have dedicated themselves to collecting every piece of information in the world and preserving it against a time when they believe an unspecified catastrophe will destroy all the civilizations in Alagaësia.”

“It seems a strange religion,” Eragon said.

“Are not all religions strange to those who stand outside of them?” countered Jeod.

Eragon said, “I have a gift for you as well, or rather, for you, Helen.” She tilted her head, a quizzical frown on her face. “Your family was a merchant family, yes?” She jerked her chin in an affirmative. “Were you very familiar with the business yourself?”

Lightning sparked in Helen’s eyes. “If I had not married him”—she motioned with a shoulder—“I would have taken over the family affairs when my father died. I was an only child, and my father taught me everything he knew.”

That was what Eragon had hoped to hear. To Jeod, he said, “You claimed that you are content with your lot here with the Varden.”

“And so I am. Mostly.”

“I understand. However, you risked a great deal to help Brom and me, and you risked even more to help Roran and everyone else from Carvahall.”

“The Palancar Pirates.”

Eragon chuckled and continued. “Without your assistance, the Empire would surely have captured them. And because of your act of rebellion, you both lost all that was dear to you in Teirm.”

“We would have lost it anyway. I was bankrupt and the Twins had betrayed me to the Empire. It was only a matter of time before Lord Risthart had me arrested.”

“Maybe, but you still helped Roran. Who can blame you if you were protecting your own necks at the same time? The fact remains that you abandoned your lives in Teirm in order to steal the *Dragon Wing* along with Roran and the villagers. And for your sacrifice, I will always be grateful. So this is part of my thanks.…”

Sliding a finger underneath his belt, Eragon removed the second of the three gold orbs and presented it to Helen. She cradled it as gently as if it were a baby robin. While she gazed at it with wonder, and Jeod craned his neck to see over the edge of her hand, Eragon said, “It’s not a fortune, but if you are clever, you should be able to make it grow. What Nasuada did with lace taught me that there is a great deal

of opportunity for a person to prosper in war."

"Oh yes," breathed Helen. "War is a merchant's delight."

"For one, Nasuada mentioned to me last night at dinner that the dwarves are running low on mead, and as you might suspect, they have the means to buy as many casks as they want, even if the price were a thousandfold of what it was before the war. But then, that's just a suggestion. You may find others who are more desperate to trade if you look for yourself."

Eragon staggered back a step as Helen rushed at him and embraced him. Her hair tickled his chin. She released him, suddenly shy, then her excitement burst forth again and she lifted the honey-colored globe in front of her nose and said, "Thank you, Eragon! Oh, thank you!" She pointed at the gold. "This I can use. I know I can. With it, I'll build an empire even larger than my father's." The shiny orb disappeared within her clenched fist. "You believe my ambition exceeds my abilities? It shall be as I have said. I shall not fail!"

Eragon bowed to her. "I hope that you succeed and that your success benefits us all."

Eragon noticed that hard cords stood out in Helen's neck as she curtsied and said, "You are most generous, Shadeslayer. Again I thank you."

"Yes, thank you," said Jeod, rising from the bed. "I cannot think that we deserve this"—Helen shot him a furious look, which he ignored—"but it is most welcome nevertheless."

Improvising, Eragon added, "And for you, Jeod, your gift is not from me, but Saphira. She has agreed to let you fly on her when you both have a spare hour or two." It pained Eragon to share Saphira, and he knew that she would be upset he had not consulted her before volunteering her services, but after giving Helen the gold, he would have felt guilty about not giving Jeod something of equal value.

A film of tears glazed Jeod's eyes. He grasped Eragon's hand and shook it and, still holding it, said, "I cannot imagine a higher honor. Thank you. You don't know how much you have done for us."

Extricating himself from Jeod's grip, Eragon edged toward the entrance to the tent while excusing himself as gracefully as he could and making his farewells. Finally, after yet another round of thanks on their part and a self-deprecating "It was nothing," he managed to escape outdoors.

Eragon hefted *Domia abr Wyrda* and then glanced at the sun. It would not be long until Saphira returned, but he still had time to attend to one other thing. First, though, he would have to stop by his tent; he did not want to risk damaging *Domia abr Wyrda* by carrying it with him across the camp.

I own a book, he thought, delighted.

He set off at a trot, clasping the book against his chest, as Blödhgarm and the other elves followed close behind.

I NEED A SWORD!

Once *Domia abr Wyrda* was safely ensconced in his tent, Eragon went to the Varden's armory, a large open pavilion filled with racks of spears, swords, pikes, bows, and crossbows. Mounds of shields and leather armor filled slatted crates. The more expensive mail, tunics, coifs, and leggings hung on wooden stands. Hundreds of conical helmets gleamed like polished silver. Bales of arrows lined the pavilion, and among them sat a score or more fletchers, busy refurbishing arrows whose feathers had been damaged during the Battle of the Burning Plains. A constant stream of men rushed in and out of the pavilion: some bringing weapons and armor to be repaired, others new recruits coming to be outfitted, and still others ferrying equipment to different parts of the camp. Everyone seemed to be shouting at the top of their lungs. And in the center of the commotion stood the man Eragon had hoped to see: Fredric, the Varden's weapon master.

Blödhgarm accompanied Eragon as he strode into the pavilion toward Fredric. As soon as they stepped underneath the cloth roof, the men inside fell silent, their eyes fixed on the two of them. Then they resumed their activities, albeit with quicker steps and quieter voices.

Raising an arm in welcome, Fredric hurried to meet them. As always, he wore his suit of hairy oxhide armor—which smelled nearly as offensive as the animal must have in its original form—as well as a massive two-handed sword hung crosswise over his back, the hilt projecting above his right shoulder. "Shadeslayer!" he rumbled. "How can I help you this fine afternoon?"

"I need a sword."

Fredric's smile broke through his beard. "Ah, I wondered if you'd be visiting me about that. When you set out for Helgrind without a blade in hand, I thought, well, maybe you're beyond such things now. Maybe you can do all your fighting with magic."

"No, not yet."

"Well, I can't say as I'm sorry. Everyone needs a good sword, no matter how skilled they may be with conjuring. In the end, it always comes down to steel against steel. Just you watch, that's how this fight with the Empire will be resolved, with the point of a sword being driven through Galbatorix's accursed heart. Heh, I'd wager a year's wages that even Galbatorix has a sword of his own and that he *uses* it too, despite him being able to gut you like a fish with a flick of his finger. Nothing can quite compare to the feel of fine steel in your fist."

While he spoke, Fredric led them toward a rack of swords that stood apart from the others. “What kind of sword are you looking for?” he asked. “That Zar’roc you had was a one-handed sword, if I remember rightly. With a blade about two thumbs wide—two of my thumbs, in any case—and of a shape equally suited for both the cut and thrust, yes?” Eragon indicated that was so, and the weapon master grunted and began to pull swords off the rack and swing them through the air, only to replace them with seeming dissatisfaction. “Elf blades tend to be thinner and lighter than ours or the dwarves’, on account of the enchantments they forge into the steel. If we made ours as delicate as theirs, the swords wouldn’t last more than a minute in a battle before bending, breaking, or chipping so badly, you couldn’t cut soft cheese with them.” His eyes darted toward Blödhgarm. “Isn’t that so, elf?”

“Even as you say, human,” responded Blödhgarm in a perfectly modulated voice.

Fredric nodded and examined the edge of another sword, then snorted and dropped it back on the rack. “Which means whatever sword you choose will probably be heavier than you’re used to. That shouldn’t pose much difficulty for you, Shadeslayer, but the extra weight may still upset the timing of your blows.”

“I appreciate the warning,” said Eragon.

“Not at all,” said Fredric. “That’s what I’m here for: to keep as many of the Varden from getting killed as I can and to help them kill as many of Galbatorix’s blasted soldiers as I can. It’s a good job.” Leaving the rack, he lumbered over to another one, hidden behind a pile of rectangular shields. “Finding the right sword for someone is an art unto itself. A sword should feel like an extension of your arm, as if it had grown out of your very flesh. You shouldn’t have to think about how you want it to move; you should simply move it as instinctively as an egret his beak or a dragon her claws. The perfect sword is intent incarnate: what you want, so it does.”

“You sound like a poet.”

With a modest expression, Fredric half shrugged. “I’ve been picking weapons for men who are about to march into combat for twenty-six years. It seeps into your bones after a while, turns your mind to thoughts of fate and destiny and whether that young fellow I sent off with a billed pike would still be alive if I had given him a mace instead.” Fredric paused with a hand hovering over the middle sword on the rack and looked at Eragon. “Do you prefer to fight with or without a shield?”

“With,” Eragon said. “But I can’t carry one around with me all the time. And there never seems to be one handy when I’m attacked.”

Fredric tapped the hilt of the sword and gnawed on the edge of his beard. “Humph. So you need a sword you can use by itself but that’s

not too long to use with every kind of shield from a buckler to a wall shield. That means a sword of medium length, easy to wield with one arm. It has to be a blade you can wear at all occasions, elegant enough for a coronation and tough enough to fend off a band of Kull." He grimaced. "It's not natural, what Nasuada's done, allying us with those monsters. It can't last. The likes of us and them were never meant to mix…." He shook himself. "It's a pity you only want a single sword. Or am I mistaken?"

"No. Saphira and I travel far too much to be lugging around a half-dozen blades."

"I suppose you're right. Besides, a warrior like you isn't expected to have more than one weapon. The curse of the named blade, I call it."

"What's that?"

"Every great warrior," said Fredric, "wields a sword—it's usually a sword—that has a name. Either he names it himself or, once he proves his prowess with some extraordinary feat, the bards name it for him. Thereafter, he *has* to use that sword. It's expected of him. If he shows up to a battle without it, his fellow warriors will ask where it is, and they will wonder if he is ashamed of his success and if he is insulting them by rejecting the acclaim they have bestowed upon him, and even his enemies may insist upon waiting to fight until he fetches his famed blade. Just you watch; as soon as you fight Murtagh or do anything else memorable with your new sword, the Varden will insist upon giving it a title. And they will look to see it on your hip from then on." He continued speaking while he proceeded to a third rack: "I never thought I would be fortunate enough to help a Rider choose his weapon. What an opportunity! It feels as if this is a culmination of my work with the Varden."

Plucking a sword from the rack, Fredric handed it to Eragon. Eragon tilted the tip of the sword up and down, then shook his head; the shape of the hilt was wrong for his hand. The weapon master did not seem disappointed. To the contrary, Eragon's rejection seemed to invigorate him, as if he relished the challenge Eragon posed. He presented another sword to Eragon, and again Eragon shook his head; the balance was too far forward for his liking.

"What worries me," Fredric said, returning to the rack, "is that any sword I give you will have to withstand impacts that would destroy an ordinary blade. What you need is dwarf-work. Their smiths are the finest besides the elves', and sometimes they even exceed them." Fredric peered at Eragon. "Hold now, I've been asking the wrong questions! How was it you were taught to block and parry? Was it edge on edge? I seem to recall you doing something of the kind when you dueled Arya in Farthen Dûr."

Eragon frowned. "What of it?"

“What of it?” Fredric guffawed. “Not to be disrespectful, Shadeslayer, but if you hit the edge of a sword against that of another, you will cause grave damage to both. That might not have been a problem with an enchanted blade like Zar’roc, but you can’t do it with any of the swords I have here, not unless you want to replace your sword after every battle.”

An image flashed in Eragon’s mind of the chipped edges of Murtagh’s sword, and he felt irritated with himself for having forgotten something so obvious. He had become accustomed to Zar’roc, which never dulled, never showed signs of wear, and, so far as he knew, was impervious to most spells. He was not even sure it was possible to destroy a Rider’s sword. “You need not worry about that; I will protect the sword with magic. Must I wait all day for a weapon?”

“One more question, Shadeslayer. Will your magic last forever?”

Eragon’s frown deepened. “Since you ask, no. Only one elf understands the making of a Rider’s sword, and she has not shared her secrets with me. What I *can* do is transfer a certain amount of energy into a sword. The energy will keep it from getting damaged until the blows that *would* have damaged the sword exhaust the store of energy, at which point the sword will revert to its original state and, odds are, shatter in my grip the next time I close with my opponent.”

Fredric scratched his beard. “I’ll take your word for it, Shadeslayer. The point being, if you hammer on soldiers long enough, you’ll wear out your spells, and the harder you hammer, the sooner the spells will vanish. Eh?”

“Exactly.”

“Then you should still avoid going edge on edge, as it will wear out your spells faster than most any other move.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Eragon snapped, his impatience overflowing. “I don’t have the time to learn a completely different way of fighting. The Empire might attack at any moment. I have to concentrate on practicing what I *do* know, not trying to master a whole new set of forms.”

Fredric clapped his hands. “I know just the thing for you, then!” Going to a crate filled with arms, he began digging through it, talking to himself as he did. “First *this*, then *that*, and then we’ll see where we stand.” From the bottom of the crate, he pulled out a large black mace with a flanged head.

Fredric rapped a knuckle against the mace. “You can break swords with this. You can split mail and batter in helms, and you won’t do it the slightest bit of harm, no matter what you hit.”

“It’s a club,” Eragon protested. “A metal club.”

“What of it? With your strength, you can swing it as if it were light

as a reed. You'll be a terror on the battlefield with this, you will."

Eragon shook his head. "No. Smashing things isn't how I prefer to fight. Besides, I would never have been able to kill Durza by stabbing him through the heart if I had been carrying a mace instead of a sword."

"Then I have only one more suggestion, unless you insist upon a traditional blade." From another part of the pavilion, Fredric brought Eragon a weapon he identified as a falchion. It was a sword, but not a type of sword Eragon was accustomed to, although he had seen them among the Varden before. The falchion had a polished, disk-shaped pommel, bright as a silver coin; a short grip made of wood covered with black leather; a curved crossguard carved with a line of dwarf runes; and a single-edged blade that was as long as his outstretched arm and had a thin fuller on either side, close to the spine. The falchion was straight until about six inches from the end, where the back of the blade flared upward in a small peak before gently curving down to the needle-sharp tip. This widening of the blade reduced the likelihood that the point would bend or snap when driven through armor and lent the end of the falchion a fanglike appearance. Unlike a double-edged sword, the falchion was made to be held with the blade and crossguard perpendicular to the ground. The most curious aspect of the falchion, though, was the bottom half inch of the blade, including the edge, which was pearly gray and substantially darker than the mirror-smooth steel above. The boundary between the two areas was wavy, like a silk scarf rippling in the wind.

Eragon pointed at the gray band. "I've not seen that before. What is it?"

"The thriknzdal," said Fredric. "The dwarves invented it. They temper the edge and the spine separately. The edge they make hard, harder than we dare with the whole of our blades. The middle of the blade and the spine they anneal so that the back of the falchion is softer than the edge, soft enough to bend and flex and survive the stress of battle without fracturing like a frost-ridden file."

"Do the dwarves treat all their blades thusly?"

Fredric shook his head. "Only their single-edged swords and the finest of their double-edged swords." He hesitated, and uncertainty crept into his gaze. "You understand why I chose this for you, Shadeslayer, yes?"

Eragon understood. With the blade of the falchion at right angles to the ground, unless he deliberately tilted his wrist, any blows he caught on the sword would strike the flat of the blade, saving the edge for attacks of his own. Wielding the falchion would require only a small adjustment to his fighting style.

Striding out of the pavilion, he assumed a ready position with the

falchion. Swinging it over his head, he brought it down upon the head of an imaginary foe, then twisted and lunged, beat aside an invisible spear, sprang six yards to his left, and, in a brilliant but impractical move, spun the blade behind his back, passing it from one hand to the next as he did so. His breathing and heartbeat calm as ever, he returned to where Fredric and Blödhgarm were waiting. The speed and balance of the falchion had impressed Eragon. It was not the equal of Zar'roc, but it was still a superb sword.

"You chose well," he said.

Fredric detected the reticence in his bearing, however, for he said, "And yet you are not entirely pleased, Shadeslayer."

Eragon twirled the falchion in a circle, then grimaced. "I just wish it didn't look so much like a big skinning knife. I feel rather ridiculous with it."

"Ah, pay no heed if your enemies laugh. They'll not be able to once you lop off their heads."

Amused, Eragon nodded. "I'll take it."

"One moment, then," said Fredric, and disappeared into the pavilion, returning with a black leather scabbard decorated with silver scrollwork. He handed the scabbard to Eragon and asked, "Did you ever learn how to sharpen a sword, Shadeslayer? You wouldn't have had need with Zar'roc, would you?"

"No," Eragon admitted, "but I am a fair hand with a whetstone. I can hone a knife until it is so keen, it will cut a thread draped over it. Besides, I can always true up the edge with magic if I have to."

Fredric groaned and slapped his thighs, knocking loose a dozen or so hairs from his oxhide leggings. "No, no, a razor-thin edge is just what you *don't* want on a sword. The bevel has to be thick, thick and strong. A warrior has to be able to maintain his equipment properly, and that includes knowing how to sharpen his sword!"

Fredric insisted, then, on procuring a new whetstone for Eragon and showing him exactly how to put a battle-ready edge on the falchion while they sat in the dirt beside the pavilion. Once he was satisfied that Eragon could grind an entirely new edge on the sword, he said, "You can fight with rusty armor. You can fight with a dented helmet. But if you want to see the sun rise again, never fight with a dull sword. If you've just survived a battle and you're tired as a man who has climbed one of the Beor Mountains and your sword isn't sharp as it is now, it doesn't matter how you feel, you plunk yourself down the first chance you get and pull out your whetstone and strop. Just as you would see to your horse, or to Saphira, before you attended to your own needs, so too you should care for your sword before yourself. Because without it, you're no more than helpless prey for your enemies."

They had been sitting out in the late-afternoon sun for over an hour by the time the weapon master finally finished his instructions. As he did, a cool shadow slid over them and Saphira landed close by.

You waited, said Eragon. *You deliberately waited! You could have rescued me ages ago, but instead you left me here to listen to Fredric go on about water stones, oil stones, and whether linseed oil is better than rendered fat for protecting metal from water*.

And is it?

Not really. It's just not as smelly. But that's irrelevant! Why did you leave me to this doom?

One of her thick eyelids drooped in a lazy wink. *Don't exaggerate. Doom? You and I have far worse dooms to look forward to if we are not properly prepared. What the man with the smelly clothes was saying seemed important for you to know*.

Well, perhaps it was, he conceded. She arched her neck and licked the claws on her right foreleg.

After thanking Fredric and bidding him farewell, and agreeing upon a meeting place with Blödhgarm, Eragon fastened the falchion to the belt of Beloth the Wise and clambered onto Saphira's back. He whooped and she roared as she raised her wings and surged up into the sky.

Giddy, Eragon clung to the spike in front of him and watched the people and tents below dwindle away into flat, miniature versions of themselves. From above, the camp was a grid of gray, triangular peaks, the eastern faces of which were deep in shadow, giving the whole region a checkered appearance. The fortifications that encircled the camp bristled like a hedgehog, the white tips of the distant poles bright in the slanted sunlight. King Orrin's cavalry was a mass of milling dots in the northwestern quadrant of the camp. To the east was the Urgals' camp, low and dark on the rolling plain.

They soared higher.

The cold, pure air stung Eragon's cheeks and burned in his lungs. He took only shallow breaths. Beside them floated a thick column of clouds, looking as solid as whipped cream. Saphira spiraled around it, her ragged shadow racing across the plume. A lone scrap of moisture struck Eragon, blinding him for a few seconds and filling his nose and mouth with frigid droplets. He gasped and wiped his face.

They rose above the clouds.

A red eagle screeched at them as it flew past.

Saphira's flapping became labored, and Eragon began to feel light-headed. Stilling her wings, Saphira glided from one thermal to the next, maintaining her altitude but ascending no farther.

Eragon looked down. They were so high, height had ceased to matter and things on the ground no longer seemed real. The Varden's

camp was an irregularly shaped playing board covered with tiny gray and black rectangles. The Jiet River was a silver rope fringed with green tassels. To the south, the sulfurous clouds rising from the Burning Plains formed a range of glowing orange mountains, home to shadowy monsters that flickered in and out of existence. Eragon quickly averted his gaze.

For perhaps half an hour, he and Saphira drifted with the wind, relaxing in the silent comfort of each other's company. An inaudible spell served to insulate Eragon from the chill. At last they were alone together, alone as they had been in Palancar Valley before the Empire had intruded upon their life.

Saphira was the first to speak. *We are the rulers of the sky*.

Here at the ceiling of the world. Eragon reached up, as if from where he sat he could brush the stars.

Banking to the left, Saphira caught a gust of warmer air from below, then leveled off again. *You will marry Roran and Katrina tomorrow*.

What a strange thought that is. Strange Roran should marry, and strange I should be the one to perform the ceremony.… Roran married. Thinking about it makes me feel older. Even we, who were boys but a short while ago, cannot escape the inexorable progress of time. So the generations pass, and soon it will be our turn to send our children out into the land to do the work that needs to be done.

But not unless we can survive the next few months.

Aye, there is that.

Saphira wobbled as turbulence buffeted them. Then she looked back at him and asked: *Ready?*

Go!

Tilting forward, she pulled her wings close against her sides and plummeted toward the ground, faster than a speeding arrow. Eragon laughed as the sensation of weightlessness overtook him. He tightened his legs around Saphira to keep himself from drifting away from her, then, overtaken by a surge of recklessness, released his grip and held his hands over his head. The disk of land below spun like a wheel as Saphira augered through the air. Slowing and then stopping her rotation, she rolled to the right until she was falling upside down.

"Saphira!" cried Eragon, and pounded her shoulder.

A ribbon of smoke streaming from her nostrils, she righted herself and again pointed herself at the fast-approaching ground. Eragon's ears popped, and he worked his jaw as the pressure increased. Less than a thousand feet above the Varden's camp, and only a few seconds from crashing into the tents and excavating a large and bloody crater, Saphira allowed the wind to catch her wings. The subsequent jolt threw Eragon forward, and the spike he had been holding nearly stabbed him in the eye.

With three powerful flaps, Saphira brought them to a complete halt. Locking her wings outstretched, she then began to gently circle downward.

Now that was fun! exclaimed Eragon.

There is no more exciting sport than flying, for if you lose, you die.

Ah, but I have complete confidence in your abilities; you would never run us into the ground. Her pleasure at his compliment radiated from her.

Angling toward his tent, she shook her head, jostling him, and said, *I ought to be accustomed to it by now, but every time I come out of a dive like that, it makes my chest and wing arms so sore, the next morning I can barely move.*

He patted her. *Well, you shouldn't have to fly tomorrow. The wedding is our only obligation, and you can walk to it.* She grunted and landed amid a billow of dust, knocking over an empty tent with her tail in the process.

Dismounting, Eragon left her grooming herself with six of the elves standing nearby, and with the other six, he trotted through the camp until he located the healer Gertrude. From her he learned the marriage rites he would need the following day, and he practiced them with her that he might avoid an embarrassing blunder when the moment arrived.

Then Eragon returned to his tent and washed his face and changed his clothes before going with Saphira to dine with King Orrin and his entourage, as promised.

Late that night, when the feast was finally over, Eragon and Saphira walked back to his tent, gazing at the stars and talking about what had been and what yet might be. And they were happy. When they arrived at their destination, Eragon paused and looked up at Saphira, and his heart was so full of love, he thought it might stop beating.

Good night, Saphira.

Good night, little one.

UNEXPECTED GUESTS

The next morning, Eragon went behind his tent, removed his heavy outer clothes, and began to glide through the poses of the second level of the Rimgar, the series of exercises the elves had invented. Soon his initial chill vanished. He began to pant from the effort, and sweat coated his limbs, which made it difficult for him to keep hold of his feet or his hands when contorted into a position that felt as if it were going to tear the muscles from his bones.

An hour later, he finished the Rimgar. Drying his palms on the corner of his tent, he drew the falchion and practiced his swordsmanship for another thirty minutes. He would have preferred to continue familiarizing himself with the sword for the rest of the day —for he knew his life might depend upon his skill with it—but Roran's wedding was fast approaching, and the villagers could use all the help they could get if they were to complete the preparations in time.

Refreshed, Eragon bathed in cold water and dressed, and then he and Saphira walked to where Elain was overseeing the cooking of Roran and Katrina's wedding feast. Blödhgarm and his companions followed a dozen or so yards behind, slipping between the tents with stealthy ease.

"Ah, good, Eragon," Elain said. "I had hoped you would come." She stood with both her hands pressed into the small of her back to relieve the weight of her pregnancy. Pointing with her chin past a row of spits and cauldrons suspended over a bed of coals, past a clump of men butchering a hog, past three makeshift ovens built of mud and stone, and past a pile of kegs toward a line of planks set on stumps that six women were using as a counter, she said, "There are still twenty loaves of bread dough that have to be kneaded. Will you see to it, please?" Then she frowned at the calluses on his knuckles. "And try not to get those in the dough, won't you?"

The six women standing at the planks, which included Felda and Birgit, fell silent when Eragon took his place among them. His few attempts to restart the conversation failed, but after a while, when he had given up on putting them at ease and was concentrating on his kneading, they resumed talking of their own accord. They spoke about Roran and Katrina and how lucky the two of them were and of the villagers' life in the camp and of their journey thence, and then without preamble, Felda looked over at Eragon and said, "Your dough looks a little sticky. Shouldn't you add some flour?"

Eragon checked the consistency. “You’re right. Thank you.” Felda smiled, and after that, the women included him in their conversation.

While Eragon worked the warm dough, Saphira lay basking on a nearby patch of grass. The children from Carvahall played on and around her; laughing shrieks punctuated the deeper thrum of the adults’ voices. When a pair of mangy dogs started barking at Saphira, she lifted her head off the ground and growled at them. They ran away yipping.

Everyone in the clearing was someone Eragon had known while growing up. Horst and Fisk were on the other side of the spits, constructing tables for the feast. Kiselt was wiping the hog’s blood off his forearms. Albriech, Baldor, Mandel, and several other of the younger men were carrying poles wound with ribbons toward the hill where Roran and Katrina wished to be married. The tavern-keeper Morn was off mixing the wedding drink, with his wife, Tara, holding three flagons and a cask for him. A few hundred feet away, Roran was shouting something at a mule-driver who was attempting to run his charges through the clearing. Loring, Delwin, and the boy Nolfavrell stood clustered nearby, watching. With a loud curse, Roran grabbed the lead mule’s harness and struggled to turn the animals around. The sight amused Eragon; he had never known Roran to get so flustered, nor to be so short-tempered.

“The mighty warrior is nervous ere his contest,” observed Isold, one of the six women next to Eragon. The group laughed.

“Perhaps,” Birgit said, stirring water into flour, “he is worried his sword may bend in the battle.” Gales of merriment swept the women. Eragon’s cheeks flushed. He kept his gaze fixed on the dough in front of him and increased the speed of his kneading. Bawdy jokes were common at weddings, and he had enjoyed his share before, but hearing them directed at his cousin disconcerted him.

The people who would not be able to attend the wedding were as much on Eragon’s mind as those who could. He thought of Byrd, Quimby, Parr, Hida, young Elmund, Kelby, and the others who had died because of the Empire. But most of all, he thought of Garrow and wished his uncle were still alive to see his only son acclaimed a hero by the villagers and the Varden alike and to see him take Katrina’s hand and finally become a man in full.

Closing his eyes, Eragon turned his face toward the noonday sun and smiled up at the sky, content. The weather was pleasant. The aroma of yeast, flour, roasting meat, freshly poured wine, boiling soups, sweet pastries, and melted candies suffused the clearing. His friends and family were gathered around him for celebration and not for mourning. And for the moment, he was safe and Saphira was safe. *This is how life ought to be.*

A single horn rang out across the land, unnaturally loud.

Then again.

And again.

Everyone froze, uncertain what the three notes signified.

For a brief interval, the entire camp was silent, except for the animals, then the Varden's war-drums began to beat. Chaos erupted. Mothers ran for their children and cooks dampened their fires while the rest of the men and women scrambled after their weapons.

Eragon sprinted toward Saphira even as she surged to her feet. Reaching out with his mind, he found Blödhgarm and, once the elf lowered his defenses somewhat, said, *Meet us at the north entrance.*

We hear and obey, Shadeslayer.

Eragon flung himself onto Saphira. The instant he got a leg over her neck, she jumped four rows of tents, landed, and then jumped a second time, her wings half furled, not flying but rather bounding through the camp like a mountain cat crossing a fast-flowing river. The impact of each landing jarred Eragon's teeth and spine and threatened to knock him off his perch. As they rose and fell, frightened warriors dodging out of their path, Eragon contacted Trianna and the other members of Du Vrangr Gata, identifying the location of each spellcaster and organizing them for battle.

Someone who was not of Du Vrangr Gata touched his thoughts. He recoiled, slamming walls up around his consciousness, before he realized that it was Angela the herbalist and allowed the contact. She said, *I am with Nasuada and Elva. Nasuada wants you and Saphira to meet her at the north entrance—*

As soon as we can. Yes, yes, we're on our way. What of Elva? Does she sense anything?

Pain. Great pain. Yours. The Varden's. The others'. I'm sorry, she's not very coherent right now. It's too much for her to cope with. I'm going to put her to sleep until the violence is at an end. Angela severed the connection.

Like a carpenter laying out and examining his tools before beginning a new project, Eragon reviewed the wards he had placed around himself, Saphira, Nasuada, Arya, and Roran. They all seemed to be in order.

Saphira slid to a stop before his tent, furrowing the packed earth with her talons. He leaped off her back, rolling as he struck the ground. Bouncing upright, he dashed inside, undoing his sword belt as he went. He dropped the belt and the attached falchion into the dirt and, scrabbling under his cot, retrieved his armor. The cold, heavy rings of the mail hauberk slid over his head and settled on his shoulders with a sound like falling coins. He tied on his arming cap, placed the coif over it, and then jammed his head into his helm.

Snatching up the belt, he refastened it around his waist. With his greaves and his bracers in his left hand, he hooked his little finger through the arm strap of his shield, grabbed Saphira's heavy saddle with his right hand, and burst out of the tent.

Releasing his armor in a noisy clatter, he threw the saddle onto the mound of Saphira's shoulders and climbed after it. In his haste and excitement, and his apprehension, he had trouble buckling the straps.

Saphira shifted her stance. *Hurry. You're taking too long.*

Yes! I'm moving as fast as I can! It doesn't help you're so blasted big!

She growled.

The camp swarmed with activity, men and dwarves streaming in jangling rivers toward the north, rushing to answer the summons of the war-drums.

Eragon collected his abandoned armor off the ground, mounted Saphira, and settled into the saddle. With a flash of down-swept wings, a jolt of acceleration, a blast of swirling air, and the bitter complaint of bracers scraping against shield, Saphira took to the air. While they sped toward the northern edge of the camp, Eragon strapped the greaves to his shins, holding himself on Saphira merely with the strength of his legs. The bracers he wedged between his belly and the front of the saddle. The shield he hung from a neck spike. When the greaves were secure, he slid his legs through the row of leather loops on either side of the saddle, then tightened the slipknot on each loop.

Eragon's hand brushed against the belt of Beloth the Wise. He groaned, remembering that he had emptied the belt while healing Saphira in Helgrind. *Argh! I should have stored some energy in it.*

We'll be fine, said Saphira.

He was just fitting on the bracers when Saphira arched her wings, cupping the air with the translucent membranes, and reared, stalling to a standstill as she alighted upon the crest of one of the embankments that ringed the camp. Nasuada was already there, sitting upon her massive charger, Battle-storm. Beside her was Jörmundur, also mounted; Arya, on foot; and the current watch of the Nighthawks, led by Khagra, one of the Urgals Eragon had met on the Burning Plains. Blödhgarm and the other elves emerged from the forest of tents behind them and stationed themselves close to Eragon and Saphira. From a different part of the camp galloped King Orrin and his retinue, reining in their prancing steeds as they drew near Nasuada. Close upon their heels came Narheim, chief of the dwarves, and three of his warriors, the group of them riding ponies clad with leather and mail armor. Nar Garzhvog ran out of the fields to the east, the Kull's thudding footsteps preceding his arrival by several seconds. Nasuada shouted an order, and the guards at the north entrance

pulled aside the crude wooden gate to allow Garzhvog inside the camp, although if he had wanted, the Kull probably could have knocked open the gate by himself.

"Who challenges?" growled Garzhvog, scaling the embankment with four inhumanly long strides. The horses shied away from the gigantic Urgal.

"Look." Nasuada pointed.

Eragon was already studying their enemies. Roughly two miles away, five sleek boats, black as pitch, had landed upon the near bank of the Jiet River. From the boats there issued a swarm of men garbed in the livery of Galbatorix's army. The host glittered like wind-whipped water under a summer sun as swords, spears, shields, helmets, and mail ringlets caught and reflected the light.

Arya shaded her eyes with a hand and squinted at the soldiers. "I put their number between two hundred seventy and three hundred."

"Why so few?" wondered Jörmundur.

King Orrin scowled. "Galbatorix cannot be mad enough to believe he can destroy us with such a paltry force!" Orrin pulled off his helm, which was in the shape of a crown, and dabbed his brow with the corner of his tunic. "We could obliterate that entire group and not lose a man."

"Maybe," said Nasuada. "Maybe not."

Gnawing on the words, Garzhvog added, "The Dragon King is a false-tongued traitor, a rogue ram, but his mind is not feeble. He is cunning like a blood-hungry weasel."

The soldiers assembled themselves in orderly ranks and then began marching toward the Varden.

A messenger boy ran up to Nasuada. She bent in her saddle to listen, then dismissed him. "Nar Garzhvog, your people are safe within our camp. They are gathered near the east gate, ready for you to lead them."

Garzhvog grunted but remained where he was.

Looking back at the approaching soldiers, Nasuada said, "I can think of no reason to engage them in the open. We can pick them off with archers once they are within range. And when they reach our breastwork, they will break themselves against the trenches and the staves. Not a single one will escape alive," she concluded with evident satisfaction.

"When they have committed themselves," said Orrin, "my horsemen and I could ride out and attack them from the rear. They will be so surprised, they will not even have a chance to defend themselves."

"The tide of battle may—" Nasuada was replying when the brazen horn that had announced the arrival of the soldiers sounded once more, so loudly that Eragon, Arya, and the rest of the elves covered

their ears. Eragon winced with pain from the blast.

Where is that coming from? he asked Saphira.

A more important question, I think, is why the soldiers would want to warn us of their attack, if they are indeed responsible for this baying.

Maybe it's a diversion or—

Eragon forgot what he was going to say as he saw a stir of motion on the far side of the Jiet River, behind a veil of sorrowful willow trees. Red as a ruby dipped in blood, red as iron hot to forge, red as a burning ember of hate and anger, Thorn appeared above the languishing trees. And upon the back of the glittering dragon, there sat Murtagh in his bright steel armor, thrusting Zar'roc high over his head.

They have come for us, said Saphira. Eragon's gut twisted, and he felt Saphira's own dread like a current of bilious water running through his mind.

FIRE IN THE SKY

As Eragon watched Thorn and Murtagh rise high in the northern sky, he heard Narheim whisper, "Barzûl," and then curse Murtagh for killing Hrothgar, the king of the dwarves. Arya spun away from the sight. "Nasuada, Your Majesty," she said, her eyes flicking toward Orrin, "you have to stop the soldiers before they reach the camp. You cannot allow them to attack our defenses. If they do, they will sweep over these ramparts like a storm-driven wave and wreak untold havoc in our midst, among the tents, where we cannot maneuver effectively."

"Untold havoc?" Orrin scoffed. "Have you so little confidence in our prowess, Ambassador? Humans and dwarves may not be as gifted as elves, but we shall have no difficulty in disposing of these miserable wretches, I can assure you."

The lines of Arya's face tightened. "Your prowess is without compare, Your Majesty. I do not doubt it. But listen: this is a trap set for Eragon and Saphira. *They*"—she flung an arm toward the rising figures of Thorn and Murtagh—"have come to capture Eragon and Saphira and spirit them away to Urû'baen. Galbatorix would not have sent so few men unless he was confident they could keep the Varden occupied long enough for Murtagh to overwhelm Eragon. Galbatorix *must* have placed spells on those men, spells to aid them in their mission. What those enchantments might be, I do not know, but of this I am certain: the soldiers are more than they appear, and we must prevent them from entering this camp."

Emerging from his initial shock, Eragon said, "You don't want to let Thorn fly over the camp; he could set fire to half of it with a single pass."

Nasuada clasped her hands over the pommel of her saddle, seemingly oblivious to Murtagh and Thorn and to the soldiers, who were now less than a mile away. "But why not attack us while we were unawares?" she asked. "Why alert us to their presence?"

It was Narheim who answered. "Because they would not want Eragon and Saphira to get caught up in the fighting on the ground. No, unless I am mistaken, their plan is for Eragon and Saphira to meet Thorn and Murtagh in the air while the soldiers assail our position here."

"Is it wise, then, to accommodate their wishes, to willingly send Eragon and Saphira into this trap?" Nasuada raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," insisted Arya, "for we have an advantage they could not

suspect." She pointed at Blödhgarm. "This time Eragon shall not face Murtagh alone. He will have the combined strength of thirteen elves supporting him. Murtagh will not be expecting that. Stop the soldiers before they reach us, and you will have frustrated part of Galbatorix's design. Send Saphira and Eragon up with the mightiest spellcasters of my race bolstering their efforts, and you will disrupt the remainder of Galbatorix's scheme."

"You have convinced me," said Nasuada. "However, the soldiers are too close for us to intercept them any distance from the camp with men on foot. Orrin—"

Before she finished, the king had turned his horse around and was racing toward the north gate of the camp. One of his retinue winded a trumpet, a signal for the rest of Orrin's cavalry to assemble for a charge.

To Garzhvog, Nasuada said, "King Orrin will require assistance. Send your rams to join him."

"Lady Nightstalker." Throwing back his massive horned head, Garzhvog loosed a wild wailing bellow. The skin on the back of Eragon's arms and neck prickled as he listened to the Urgal's savage howl. With a snap of his jaws, Garzhvog ceased his belling and then grunted, "They will come." The Kull broke into an earth-shattering trot and ran toward the gate where King Orrin and his horsemen were gathered.

Four of the Varden dragged open the gate. King Orrin raised his sword, shouted, and galloped out of the camp, leading his men toward the soldiers in their gold-stitched tunics. A plume of cream-colored dust billowed out from underneath the hooves of the horses, obscuring the arrowhead-shaped formation from view.

"Jörmundur," said Nasuada.

"Yes, my Lady?"

"Order two hundred swordsmen and a hundred spearmen after them. And have fifty archers station themselves seventy to eighty yards away from the fighting. I want these soldiers crushed, Jörmundur, obliterated, ground out of existence. The men are to understand that no quarter is to be given or accepted."

Jörmundur bowed.

"And tell them that although I cannot join them in this battle, on account of my arms, my spirit marches with them."

"My Lady."

As Jörmundur hurried off, Narheim urged his pony closer to Nasuada. "What of mine own people, Nasuada? What role shall we play?"

Nasuada frowned at the thick, choking dust that drifted across the rolling expanse of grass. "You can help guard our perimeter. If the

soldiers should somehow win free of—" She was forced to pause as four hundred Urgals—more had arrived since the Battle of the Burning Plains—pounded out of the center of the camp, through the gate, and onto the field beyond, roaring incomprehensible war-cries the whole while. As they vanished into the dust, Nasuada resumed speaking: "If the soldiers should win free, your axes will be most welcome in the lines."

The wind gusted toward them, carrying with it the screams of dying men and horses, the shivery sound of metal sliding over metal, the clink of swords glancing off helmets, the dull impact of spears on shields, and, underlying it all, a horrible humorless laughter that issued from a multitude of throats and continued without pause throughout the mayhem. It was, Eragon thought, the laughter of the insane.

Narheim pounded his fist against his hip. "By Morgothal, we are not ones to stand by idly when there is a fight to be had! Release us, Nasuada, and let us hew a few necks for you!"

"No!" exclaimed Nasuada. "No, no, and no! I have given you my orders, and I expect you to abide by them. This is a battle of horses and men and Urgals and perhaps even dragons. It is not a fit place for dwarves. You would be trampled like children." At Narheim's outraged oath, she raised a hand. "I am well aware you are fearsome warriors. No one knows that better than I, who fought beside you in Farthen Dûr. However, not to put too fine a point on it, you are short by our standards, and I would rather not risk your warriors in a fray such as this, where your stature might be your undoing. Better to wait here, on the high ground, where you stand taller than anyone who tries to climb this berm, and let the soldiers come to you. If any soldiers do reach us, they shall be warriors of such tremendous skill, I want you and your people there to repel them, for one might as well try to uproot a mountain as defeat a dwarf."

Still displeased, Narheim grumbled some response, but whatever he said was lost as the Varden Nasuada had deployed filed through the cleft in the embankment where the gate had been. The noise of tramping feet and clattering equipment faded as the men drew away from the camp. Then the wind stiffened into a steady breeze, and from the direction of the fighting, the grim giggle again wafted toward them.

A moment later, a mental shout of incredible strength overwhelmed Eragon's defenses and tore through his consciousness, filling him with agony as he heard a man say, *Ah, no, help me! They won't die! Angvard take them, they won't die!* The link between their minds vanished then, and Eragon swallowed hard as he realized that the man had been killed.

Nasuada shifted in her saddle, her expression strained. “Who was that?”

“You heard him too?”

“It seems we all did,” said Arya.

“I think it was Barden, one of the spellcasters who rides with King Orrin, but—”

“Eragon!”

Thorn had been circling higher and higher while King Orrin and his men engaged the soldiers, but now the dragon hung motionless in the sky, halfway between the soldiers and the camp, and Murtagh’s voice, augmented with magic, echoed forth across the land: “*Eragon!* I see you there, hiding behind Nasuada’s skirts. Come fight me, Eragon! It is your destiny. Or are you a coward, *Shadeslayer*?”

Saphira answered for Eragon by lifting her head and roaring even louder than Murtagh’s thunderous speech, then discharging a twenty-foot-long jet of crackling blue fire. The horses close to Saphira, including Nasuada’s, bolted away, leaving Saphira and Eragon alone on the embankment with the elves.

Walking over to Saphira, Arya placed a hand on Eragon’s left leg and looked up at him with her slanted green eyes. “Accept this from me, Shur’tugal,” she said. And he felt a surge of energy flow into him.

“Eka elrun ono,” he murmured to her.

Also in the ancient language, she said, “Be careful, Eragon. I would not want to see you broken by Murtagh. I …” It seemed as if she were going to say more, but she hesitated, then removed her hand from his leg and retreated to stand by Blödhgarm.

“Fly well, Bjartskular!” the elves sang out as Saphira launched herself off the embankment.

As Saphira winged her way toward Thorn, Eragon joined his mind first with her and then with Arya and, through Arya, with Blödhgarm and the eleven other elves. By having Arya serve as the focal point for the elves, Eragon was able to concentrate on the thoughts of Arya and Saphira; he knew them so well that their reactions would not distract him in the middle of a fight.

Eragon grasped the shield with his left hand and unsheathed his falchion, holding it upraised so he would not accidentally stab Saphira’s wings as she flapped, nor slash her shoulders nor her neck, which were in constant motion. *I’m glad I took the time last night to reinforce the falchion with magic*, he said to Saphira and Arya.

Let us hope your spells hold, Saphira answered.

Remember, said Arya, *remain as close to us as you can. The more distance you place between us, the harder it is for us to maintain this bond with you.*

Thorn did not dive at Saphira or otherwise attack her as she neared

him, but rather slid away on rigid wings, allowing her to rise to his level unmolested. The two dragons balanced upon the thermals, facing each other across a gap of fifty yards, the tips of their barbed tails twitching, both of their muzzles wrinkled with ferocious snarls.

He's bigger, observed Saphira. *It's not been two weeks since we last fought and he has grown another four feet, if not more*.

She was right. Thorn was longer from head to tail, and deeper in the chest, than he had been when they first clashed over the Burning Plains. He was barely older than a hatchling, but he was already nearly as large as Saphira.

Eragon reluctantly shifted his gaze from the dragon to the Rider.

Murtagh was bareheaded, and his long black hair billowed behind him like a sleek mane. His face was hard, harder than Eragon had ever seen before, and Eragon knew that this time Murtagh would not, could not, show him mercy. The volume of his voice substantially reduced, but still louder than normal, Murtagh said, "You and Saphira have caused us a great deal of pain, Eragon. Galbatorix was furious with us for letting you go. And after the two of you killed the Ra'zac, he was so angry, he slew five of his servants and then turned his wrath upon Thorn and me. We have both suffered horribly on account of you. We shall not do so again." He drew back his arm, as if Thorn were about to lunge forward and Murtagh were preparing to slash at Eragon and Saphira.

"Wait!" cried Eragon. "I know of a way you can both free yourselves of your oaths to Galbatorix."

An expression of desperate longing transformed Murtagh's features, and he lowered Zar'roc a few inches. Then he scowled and spat toward the ground and shouted, "I don't believe you! It's not possible!"

"It is! Just let me explain."

Murtagh seemed to be struggling with himself, and for a while Eragon thought he might refuse. Swinging his head around, Thorn looked back at Murtagh, and something passed between them. "Blast you, Eragon," said Murtagh, and lay Zar'roc across the front of his saddle. "Blast you for baiting us with this. We had already made peace with our lot, and you have to tantalize us with the specter of a hope we had abandoned. If this proves to be a false hope, *brother*, I swear I'll cut off your right hand before we present you to Galbatorix.… You won't need it for what you will be doing in Urû'baen."

A threat of his own occurred to Eragon, but he suppressed it. Lowering the falchion, he said, "Galbatorix would not have told you, but when I was among the elves—"

Eragon, do not reveal anything more about us! exclaimed Arya.

"—I learned that if your personality changes, so does your true

name in the ancient language. Who you are isn't cast in iron, Murtagh! If you and Thorn can change something about yourselves, your oaths will no longer bind you, and Galbatorix will lose his hold on you."

Thorn drifted several yards closer to Saphira. "Why didn't you mention this before?" Murtagh demanded.

"I was too confused at the time."

A scant fifty feet separated Thorn and Saphira by then. The red dragon's snarl had subsided to a faint warning curl of his upper lip, and in his sparkling crimson eyes appeared a vast, puzzled sadness, as if he hoped Saphira or Eragon might know why he had been brought into the world merely so Galbatorix could enslave him, abuse him, and force him to destroy other beings' lives. The tip of Thorn's nose twitched as he sniffed at Saphira. She sniffed him in return, and her tongue darted out of her mouth as she tasted his scent. Pity for Thorn welled up inside Eragon and Saphira together, and they wished they could speak with him directly, but they dared not open their minds to him.

With so little distance between them, Eragon noticed the bundles of cords that ridged Murtagh's neck and the forked vein that pulsed in the middle of his forehead.

"I am not evil!" said Murtagh. "I've done the best I could under the circumstances. I doubt you would have survived as well as I did if our mother had seen fit to leave *you* in Urû'baen and hide *me* in Carvahall."

"Perhaps not."

Murtagh banged his breastplate with his fist. "Aha! Then how am I supposed to follow your advice? If I am already a good man, if I have already done as well as could be expected, how can I change? Must I become worse than I am? Must I embrace Galbatorix's darkness in order to free myself of it? That hardly seems like a reasonable solution. If I succeeded in so altering my identity, you would not like who I had become, and you would curse me as strongly as you curse Galbatorix now."

Frustrated, Eragon said, "Yes, but you do not have to become better or worse than you are now, only different. There are many kinds of people in the world and many ways to behave honorably. Look at someone whom you admire but who has chosen paths other than your own through life and model your actions upon his. It may take a while, but if you can shift your personality enough, you can leave Galbatorix, and you can leave the Empire, and you and Thorn could join us in the Varden, where you would be free to do as you wish."

What of your own oaths to avenge Hrothgar's death? Saphira asked. Eragon ignored her.

Murtagh sneered at him. "So you are asking me to be that which I

am not. If Thorn and I are to save ourselves, we must destroy our current identities. Your cure is worse than our affliction."

"I'm asking you to allow yourself to grow into something other than you are now. It's a difficult thing to do, I know, but people remake themselves all the time. Let go of your anger, for one, and you can turn your back on Galbatorix once and for all."

"Let go of my anger?" Murtagh laughed. "I'll let go of my anger when you forget yours over the Empire's role in the death of your uncle and the razing of your farm. Anger defines us, Eragon, and without it, you and I would be a feast for maggots. Still …" His eyes half lidded, Murtagh tapped Zar'roc's crossguard, the cords in his neck softening, although the vein that split his forehead remained swollen as ever. "The concept is intriguing, I admit. Perhaps we can work on it together when we are in Urû'baen. That is, if the king permits us to be alone with each other. Of course, he may decide to keep us permanently separated. I would if I were in his position."

Eragon tightened his fingers around the hilt of the falchion. "You seem to think we will accompany you to the capital."

"Oh, but you will, brother." A crooked smile stretched Murtagh's mouth. "Even if we wanted to, Thorn and I could not change who we are in an instant. Until such time as we may have that opportunity, we shall remain beholden to Galbatorix, and he has ordered us, in no uncertain terms, to bring him the two of you. Neither of us is willing to brave the king's displeasure again. We defeated you once before. It will be no great achievement to do so again."

A spurt of flame escaped from between Saphira's teeth, and Eragon had to stifle a similar response in words. If he lost control of his temper now, bloodshed would be unavoidable. "Please, Murtagh, Thorn, will you not at least try what I've suggested? Have you no desire to resist Galbatorix? You will never cast off your chains unless you are willing to defy him."

"You underestimate Galbatorix, Eragon," growled Murtagh. "He has been creating name-slaves for over a hundred years, ever since he recruited our father. Do you think he is unaware that a person's true name may vary over the course of his life? He is sure to have taken precautions against that eventuality. If my true name were to change this very moment, or Thorn's, most likely it would trigger a spell that would alert Galbatorix to the change and force us to return to him in Urû'baen so he could bind us to him again."

"But only if he could guess your new names."

"He is most adept at the practice." Murtagh raised Zar'roc off the saddle. "We may make use of your suggestion in the future, but only after careful study and preparation, so that Thorn and I do not regain our freedom only to have Galbatorix steal it back from us directly

afterward." He hefted Zar'roc, the sword's iridescent blade shimmering. "Therefore, we have no choice but to take you with us to Urû'baen. Will you go peacefully?"

Unable to contain himself any longer, Eragon said, "I would sooner tear out my own heart!"

"Better to tear out my hearts," Murtagh replied, then stabbed Zar'roc overhead and shouted a wild war cry.

Roaring in unison, Thorn flapped twice, fast, to climb above Saphira. He twisted in a half circle as he rose, so his head would be over Saphira's neck, where he could immobilize her with a single bite at the base of her skull.

Saphira did not wait for him. She tipped forward, rotating her wings in their shoulder sockets, so that, for the span of a heartbeat, she pointed straight down, her wings still parallel with the dust-smeared ground, supporting her entire unstable weight. Then she pulled in her right wing and swung her head to the left and her tail to the right, spinning in a clockwise direction. Her muscular tail struck Thorn across his left side just as he sailed over her, breaking his wing in five separate places. The jagged ends of Thorn's hollow flight bones pierced his hide and stuck out between his flashing scales. Globules of steaming dragon blood rained down upon Eragon and Saphira. A droplet splashed against the back of Eragon's coif and seeped through the mail to his bare skin. It burned like hot oil. He scrabbled at his neck, trying to wipe off the blood.

His roar converting into a whine of pain, Thorn tumbled past Saphira, unable to stay aloft.

"Well done!" Eragon shouted to Saphira as she righted herself.

Eragon watched from above as Murtagh removed a small round object from his belt and pressed it against Thorn's shoulder. Eragon sensed no surge of magic from Murtagh, but the object in his hand flared and Thorn's broken wing jerked as his bones snapped back in place and muscles and tendons rippled and the tears in them vanished. Lastly, the wounds in Thorn's hide sealed over.

How did he do that? Eragon exclaimed.

Arya answered, *He must have imbued the item with a spell of healing beforehand.*

We should have thought of that ourselves.

His injuries mended, Thorn halted his fall and began to ascend toward Saphira with prodigious speed, searing the air in front of him with a boiling spear of sullen red fire. Saphira dove at him, spiraling around the tower of flame. She snapped at Thorn's neck—causing him to shy away—and raked his shoulders and chest with her front claws and buffeted him with her huge wings. The edge of her right wing clipped Murtagh, knocking him sideways in his saddle. He recovered

quickly and slashed at Saphira, opening up a three-foot rent in the membrane of her wing.

Hissing, Saphira kicked Thorn away with her hind legs and released a jet of fire, which split and passed harmlessly on either side of Thorn.

Eragon felt through Saphira the throbbing of her wound. He stared at the bloody gash, thoughts racing. If they had been fighting any magician besides Murtagh, he would not dare to cast a spell while engaged in hostilities, for the magician would most likely believe he or she was about to die and would counter with a desperate, all-out magical attack.

It was different with Murtagh. Eragon knew Galbatorix had ordered Murtagh to capture, not kill, him and Saphira. *No matter what I do*, Eragon thought, *he will not attempt to slay me*. It was safe, then, Eragon decided, to heal Saphira. And, he belatedly realized, he could attack Murtagh with any spells he desired and Murtagh would not be able to respond with deadly force. But he wondered why Murtagh had used an enchanted object to cure Thorn's hurts instead of casting the spell himself.

Saphira said, *Perhaps he wants to preserve his strength. Or perhaps he wanted to avoid frightening you. It would not please Galbatorix if, by using magic, Murtagh caused you to panic and you killed yourself or Thorn or Murtagh as a result. Remember, the king's great ambition is to have all four of us under his command, not dead, where we are beyond his reach*.

That must be it, Eragon agreed.

As he prepared to mend Saphira's wing, Arya said, *Wait. Do not. What? Why? Can't you feel Saphira's pain?*

Let my brethren and I tend to her. It will confuse Murtagh, and this way, the effort shall not weaken you.

Aren't you too far away to work such a change?

Not when the lot of us pool our resources. And, Eragon? We recommend you refrain from striking at Murtagh with magic until he attacks with mind or magic himself. He may yet be stronger than you, even with the thirteen of us lending our strength. We do not know. It is better not to test yourself against him until there is no other alternative.

And if I cannot prevail?

All of Alagaësia will fall to Galbatorix.

Eragon sensed Arya concentrating, then the cut in Saphira's wing ceased weeping tears of blood and the raw edges of the delicate cerulean membrane flowed together without a scab or a scar. Saphira's relief was palpable. With a tinge of fatigue, Arya said, *Guard yourself better if you can. This was not easy*.

After Saphira had kicked him, Thorn flailed and lost altitude. He must have assumed that Saphira meant to harry him downward, where it would be harder for him to evade her attacks, because he fled

west a quarter of a mile. When he finally noticed that Saphira was not pursuing him, he circled up and around until he was a good thousand feet higher than she was.

Drawing in his wings, Thorn hurtled toward Saphira, flames flickering in his open maw, his ivory talons outstretched, Murtagh brandishing Zar'roc on his back.

Eragon nearly lost his grip on the falchion as Saphira folded one wing and flipped upside down with a dizzying wrench, then extended the wing again to slow her descent. If he craned his head backward, Eragon could see the ground below them. Or was it above them? He gritted his teeth and concentrated on maintaining his hold on the saddle.

Thorn and Saphira collided, and to Eragon, it was as if Saphira had crashed into the side of a mountain. The force of the impact drove him forward, and he banged his helmet against the neck spike in front of him, denting the thick steel. Dazed, he hung loose from the saddle and watched as the disks of the heavens and the earth reversed themselves, spinning without a discernible pattern. He felt Saphira shudder as Thorn battered her exposed belly. Eragon wished there had been time to dress her in the armor the dwarves had given her.

A glittering ruby leg appeared around Saphira's shoulder, mauling her with bloody claws. Without thinking, Eragon hacked at it, shattering a line of scales and severing a bundle of tendons. Three of the toes on the foot went limp. Eragon hacked again.

Snarling, Thorn disengaged from Saphira. He arched his neck, and Eragon heard an inrush of air as the stocky dragon filled his lungs. Eragon ducked, burying his face in the corner of his elbow. A ravening inferno engulfed Saphira. The heat of the fire could not harm them—Eragon's wards prevented that—but the torrent of incandescent flames was still blinding.

Saphira veered to the left, out of the churning fire. By then, Murtagh had repaired the damage to Thorn's leg, and Thorn again flung himself at Saphira, grappling with her as they plummeted in sickening lurches toward the gray tents of the Varden. Saphira managed to clamp her teeth on the horned crest that projected from the rear of Thorn's head, despite the points of bone that punctured her tongue. Thorn bellowed and thrashed like a hooked fish, trying to pull away, but he was no match for the iron muscles of Saphira's jaws. The two dragons drifted downward side by side, like a pair of interlocked leaves.

Eragon leaned over and slashed crosswise at Murtagh's right shoulder, not intending to kill him but rather to injure him severely enough to end the fight. Unlike during their clash over the Burning Plains, Eragon was well rested; with his arm as fast as an elf's, he was

confident Murtagh would be defenseless before him.

Murtagh lifted his shield and blocked the falchion.

His reaction was so unexpected, Eragon faltered, then barely had time to recoil and parry as Murtagh retaliated, swinging Zar'roc at him, the blade humming through the air with inordinate speed. The stroke jarred Eragon's shoulder. Pressing the attack, Murtagh struck at Eragon's wrist and then, when Eragon dashed aside Zar'roc, thrust underneath Eragon's shield and stabbed through the fringe of his mail hauberk and his tunic and the waist of his breeches and into his left hip. The tip of Zar'roc embedded itself in bone.

The pain shocked Eragon like a splash of frigid water, but it also lent his thoughts a preternatural clarity and sent a burst of uncommon strength coursing through his limbs.

As Murtagh withdrew Zar'roc, Eragon yelled and lunged at Murtagh, who, with a flip of his wrist, trapped the falchion beneath Zar'roc. Murtagh bared his teeth in a sinister smile. Without pause, Eragon yanked the falchion free, feinted toward Murtagh's right knee, then whipped the falchion in the opposite direction and sliced Murtagh across the cheek.

"You should have worn a helmet," said Eragon.

They were so close to the ground then—only a few hundred feet—that Saphira had to release Thorn, and the two dragons separated before Eragon and Murtagh could exchange any more blows.

As Saphira and Thorn spiraled upward, racing each other toward a pearl-white cloud gathering over the tents of the Varden, Eragon lifted his hauberk and tunic and examined his hip. A fist-sized patch of skin was discolored where Zar'roc had crushed the mail against his flesh. In the middle of the patch was a thin red line, two inches long, where Zar'roc had pierced him. Blood oozed from the wound, soaking the top of his breeches.

Being hurt by Zar'roc—a sword that had never failed him in moments of danger and that he still regarded as rightfully his—unsettled him. To have his own weapon turned against him was *wrong*. It was a warping of the world, and his every instinct rebelled against it.

Saphira wobbled as she flew through an eddy of air, and Eragon winced, renewed pain lancing up his side. It was fortunate, he concluded, that they were not fighting on foot, for he did not think his hip would bear his weight.

Arya, he said, *do you want to heal me, or shall I do it myself and let Murtagh stop me if he can?*

We shall attend to it for you, Arya said. *You may be able to catch Murtagh by surprise if he believes you are still wounded*.

Oh, wait.

Why?

I have to give you permission. Otherwise, my wards will block the spell. The phrase did not leap into Eragon's mind at first, but eventually he remembered the construction of the safeguard and, in the ancient language, whispered, "I agree to let Arya, daughter of Islanzadí, cast a spell on me."

We shall have to talk about your wards when you are not so distracted. What if you were unconscious? How could we minister to you then?

It seemed like a good idea after the Burning Plains. Murtagh immobilized us both with magic. I don't want him or anyone else to be able to cast spells on us without our consent.

Nor should they, but there are more elegant solutions than yours.

Eragon squirmed in the saddle as the elves' magic took effect and his hip began to tingle and itch as if covered with flea bites. When the itching ceased, he slid a hand under his tunic and was delighted to feel nothing but smooth skin.

Right, he said, rolling his shoulders. *Let us teach them to fear our names!*

The pearl-white cloud looming large before them, Saphira twisted to the left and then, while Thorn was struggling to turn, plunged into the heart of the cloud. Everything went cold and damp and white, then Saphira shot out of the far side, exiting only a few feet above and behind Thorn.

Roaring with triumph, Saphira dropped upon Thorn and seized him by the flanks, sinking her claws deep into his thighs and along his spine. She snaked her head forward, caught Thorn's left wing in her mouth, and clamped down with the *snick* of razor teeth cutting through meat.

Thorn writhed and screamed, a horrible sound Eragon had not suspected dragons were capable of producing.

I have him, said Saphira. *I can tear off his wing, but I would rather not. Whatever you are going to do, do it before we fall too far*.

His face pale beneath smeared gore, Murtagh pointed at Eragon with Zar'roc—the sword trembling in the air—and a mental ray of immense power invaded Eragon's consciousness. The foreign presence groped after his thoughts, seeking to grab ahold and subdue them and subject them to Murtagh's approval. As on the Burning Plains, Eragon noticed that Murtagh's mind felt as if it contained multitudes, as if a confused chorus of voices was murmuring beneath the turmoil of Murtagh's own thoughts.

Eragon wondered if Murtagh had a group of magicians assisting him, even as the elves were him.

Difficult as it was, Eragon emptied his mind of everything but an image of Zar'roc. He concentrated on the sword with all his might,

smoothing the plane of his consciousness into the calm of meditation so Murtagh would find no purchase with which to establish a foothold in Eragon's being. And when Thorn flailed underneath them and Murtagh's attention wavered for an instant, Eragon launched a furious counterattack, clutching at Murtagh's consciousness.

The two of them strove against each other in grim silence while they fell, wrestling back and forth in the confines of their minds. Sometimes Eragon seemed to gain the upper hand, sometimes Murtagh, but neither could defeat the other. Eragon glanced at the ground rushing up at them and realized that their contest would have to be decided by other means.

Lowering the falchion so it was level with Murtagh, Eragon shouted, "Letta!"—the same spell Murtagh had used on him during their previous confrontation. It was a simple piece of magic—it would do nothing more than hold Murtagh's arms and torso in place—but it would allow them to test themselves directly against one another and determine which of them had the most energy at their disposal.

Murtagh mouthed a counterspell, the words lost in Thorn's snarling and in the howling of the wind.

Eragon's pulse raced as the strength ebbed from his limbs. When he had nearly depleted his reserves and was faint from the effort, Saphira and the elves poured the energy from their bodies into his, maintaining the spell for him. Across from him, Murtagh had originally appeared smug and confident, but as Eragon continued to restrain him, Murtagh's scowl deepened, and he pulled back his lips, baring his teeth. And the whole while, they besieged each other's minds.

Eragon felt the energy Arya was funneling into him decrease once, then twice, and he assumed that two of the spellweavers under Blödhgarm's command had fainted. *Murtagh* can't *hold out much longer*, he thought, and then had to struggle to regain control of his mind, for his lapse of concentration had granted Murtagh entry.

The force from Arya and the other elves declined by half, and even Saphira began to shake with exhaustion. Just as Eragon became convinced Murtagh would prevail, Murtagh uttered an anguished shout, and a great weight seemed to lift off Eragon as Murtagh's resistance vanished. Murtagh appeared astonished by Eragon's success.

What now? Eragon asked Arya and Saphira. *Do we take them as hostages? Can we?*

Now, said Saphira, *I must fly*. She released Thorn and pushed herself away from him, raising her wings and laboriously flapping as she endeavored to keep them aloft. Eragon looked over her shoulder and had a brief impression of horses and sun-streaked grass hurtling

toward them; then it was as if a giant struck him from underneath and his sight went black.

The next thing Eragon saw was a swath of Saphira's neck scales an inch or two in front of his nose. The scales shone like cobalt-blue ice. Eragon was dimly aware of someone reaching out to his mind from across a great distance, their consciousness projecting an intense sense of urgency. As his faculties returned, he recognized the other person as Arya. She said: *End the spell, Eragon! It will kill us all if you keep it up. End it; Murtagh is too far away! Wake up, Eragon, or you will pass into the void.*

With a jolt, Eragon sat upright in the saddle, barely noticing that Saphira was crouched amid a circle of King Orrin's horsemen. Arya was nowhere to be seen. Now that he was alert again, Eragon could feel the spell he had cast on Murtagh still draining his strength, and in ever-increasing amounts. If not for the aid of Saphira and Arya and the other elves, he would have already died.

Eragon released the magic, then looked for Thorn and Murtagh on the ground.

There, said Saphira, and motioned with her snout. Low in the northwestern sky, Eragon saw Thorn's glittering shape, the dragon winging his way up the Jiet River, fleeing toward Galbatorix's army some miles distant.

How?

Murtagh healed Thorn again, and Thorn was lucky enough to land on the slope of a hill. He ran down it, then took off before you regained consciousness.

From across the rolling landscape, Murtagh's magnified voice boomed: "Do not think you have won, Eragon, Saphira. We shall meet again, I promise, and Thorn and I shall defeat you then, for we shall be even stronger than we are now!"

Eragon clenched his shield and his falchion so tightly, he bled from underneath his fingernails. *Do you think you can overtake him?*

I could, but the elves would not be able to help you from so far away, and I doubt we could prevail without their support.

We might be able—Eragon stopped and pounded his leg in frustration. *Blast it, I'm an idiot! I forgot about Aren. We could have used the energy in Brom's ring to help defeat them.*

You had other things on your mind. Anyone might have made the same mistake.

Maybe, but I still wish I had thought of Aren sooner. We could still use it to capture Thorn and Murtagh.

And then what? asked Saphira. *How could we keep them as prisoners? Would you drug them like Durza drugged you in Gil'ead? Or do you just*

want to kill them?

I don't know! We could help them to change their true names, to break their oaths to Galbatorix. Letting them wander around unchecked, though, is too dangerous.

Arya said, *In theory, you are right, Eragon, but you are tired, Saphira is tired, and I would rather Thorn and Murtagh escape than we lose the two of you because you were not at your best*.

But—

But we do not have the capabilities to safely detain a dragon and Rider for an extended period, and I do not think killing Thorn and Murtagh would be as easy as you assume, Eragon. Be grateful we have driven them off, and rest easy knowing we can do so again when next they dare to confront us. So saying, she withdrew from his mind.

Eragon watched until Thorn and Murtagh had vanished from sight, then he sighed and rubbed Saphira's neck. *I could sleep for a fortnight*.

As could I.

You should be proud; you outflew Thorn at nearly every turn.

Yes, I did, didn't I? She preened. *It was hardly a fair competition. Thorn does not have my experience*.

Nor your talent, I should think.

Twisting her neck, she licked the upper part of his right arm, the mail hauberk tinkling, and then gazed down at him with sparkling eyes.

He managed a ghost of a smile. *I suppose I should have expected it, but it still surprised me that Murtagh was as fast as me. More magic on the part of Galbatorix, no doubt*.

Why did your wards fail to deflect Zar'roc, though? They saved you from worse blows when we fought the Ra'zac.

I'm not sure. Murtagh or Galbatorix might have invented a spell I had not thought to guard against. Or it could just be that Zar'roc is a Rider's blade, and as Glaedr said—

—the swords Rhunön forged excel at—

—cutting through enchantments of every kind, and—

—it is only rarely they are—

—affected by magic. Exactly. Eragon stared at the streaks of dragon blood on the flat of the falchion, weary. *When will we be able to defeat our enemies on our own? I couldn't have killed Durza if Arya hadn't broken the star sapphire. And we were only able to prevail over Murtagh and Thorn with the help of Arya and twelve others*.

We must become more powerful.

Yes, but how? How has Galbatorix amassed his strength? Has he found a way to feed off the bodies of his slaves even when he is hundreds of miles away? Garr! I don't know.

A runnel of sweat coursed down Eragon's brow and into the corner

of his right eye. He wiped off the perspiration with the palm of his hand, then blinked and again noticed the horsemen gathered around him and Saphira. *What are they doing here?* Looking beyond, he realized Saphira had landed close to where King Orrin had intercepted the soldiers from the boats. Not far off to her left, hundreds of men, Urgals, and horses milled about in panic and confusion. Occasionally, the clatter of swords or the scream of a wounded man broke through the uproar, accompanied by snatches of demented laughter.

I think they are here to protect us, said Saphira.

Us! From what? Why haven't they killed the soldiers yet? Where— Eragon abandoned his question as Arya, Blödhgarm, and four other haggard-looking elves sprinted up to Saphira from the direction of the camp. Raising a hand in greeting, Eragon called, "Arya! What's happened? No one seems to be in command."

To Eragon's alarm, Arya was breathing so hard, she was unable to speak for a few moments. Then: "The soldiers proved more dangerous than we anticipated. We do not know how. Du Vrangr Gata has heard nothing but gibberish from Orrin's spellcasters." Regaining her breath, Arya started examining Saphira's cuts and bruises.

Before Eragon could ask more, a collection of excited cries from within the maelstrom of warriors drowned out the rest of the tumult, and he heard King Orrin shout, "Back, back, all of you! Archers, hold the line! Blast you, no one move, we have him!"

Saphira had the same thought as Eragon. Gathering her legs under her, she leaped over the ring of horsemen—startling the horses so they bucked and ran—and made her way across the corpse-strewn battlefield toward the sound of King Orrin's voice, brushing aside men and Urgals alike as if they were so many stalks of grass. The rest of the elves hurried to keep up, swords and bows in hand.

Saphira found Orrin sitting on his charger at the leading edge of the tightly packed warriors, staring at a lone man forty feet away. The king was flushed and wild-eyed, his armor besmirched with filth from combat. He had been wounded under his left arm, and the shaft of a spear protruded several inches from his right thigh. When Saphira's approach caught his attention, his face registered sudden relief.

"Good, good, you're here," he muttered as Saphira crawled abreast of his charger. "We needed you, Saphira, and you, Shadeslayer." One of the archers edged forward a few inches. Orrin waved his sword at him and yelled, "Back! I'll have the head of anyone who doesn't remain where he is, I swear by Angvard's crown!" Then Orrin resumed glaring at the lone man.

Eragon followed his gaze. The man was a soldier of medium height, with a purple birthmark on his neck and brown hair plastered flat by the helmet he had been wearing. His shield was a splintered ruin. His

sword was notched, bent, and broken, missing the last six inches. River mud caked his mail hose. Blood sheeted from a gash along his ribs. An arrow fletched with white swan feathers had impaled his right foot and pinned it to the ground, three-quarters of the shaft buried in the hard dirt. From the man's throat, a horrid gurgling laugh emanated. It rose and fell with a drunken cadence, pitching from note to note as if the man were about to begin shrieking with horror.

"What are you?" shouted King Orrin. When the soldier did not immediately respond, the king cursed and said, "Answer me, or I'll let my spellcasters at you. Be you man or beast or some ill-spawned demon? In what foul pit did Galbatorix find you and your brothers? Are you kin of the Ra'zac?"

The king's last question acted like a needle driven into Eragon; he straightened bolt upright, every sense tingling.

The laughter paused for a moment. "Man. I am a man."

"You are like no man I know."

"I wanted to assure the future of my family. Is that so foreign to you, Surdan?"

"Give me no riddles, you fork-tongued wretch! Tell me how you became as you are, and speak honestly, lest you convince me to pour boiling lead down your throat and see if *that* pains you."

The unbalanced chuckles intensified, then the soldier said, "You cannot hurt me, Surdan. No one can. The king himself made us impervious to pain. In return, our families will live in comfort for the rest of their lives. You can hide from us, but we will never stop pursuing you, even when ordinary men would drop dead from exhaustion. You can fight us, but we will continue killing you as long as we have an arm to swing. You cannot even surrender to us, for we take no prisoners. You can do nothing but die and return this land to peace."

With a gruesome grimace, the soldier wrapped his mangled shield hand around the arrow and, with the sound of tearing flesh, pulled the shaft out of his foot. Lumps of crimson meat clung to the arrowhead as it came free. The soldier shook the arrow at them, then threw the missile at one of the archers, wounding him in the hand. His laugh louder than ever, the soldier lurched forward, dragging his injured foot behind him. He raised his sword, as if he intended to attack.

"Shoot him!" shouted Orrin.

Bowstrings twanged like badly tuned lutes, then a score of spinning arrows leaped toward the soldier and, an instant later, struck him in the torso. Two of the arrows bounced off his gambeson; the remainder penetrated his rib cage. His laughter reduced to a wheezing chuckle as blood seeped into his lungs, the soldier continued moving forward, painting the grass underneath him bright scarlet. The archers shot

again, and arrows sprouted from the man's shoulders and arms, but he did not stop. Another volley of arrows followed close upon the last. The soldier stumbled and fell as an arrow split his left kneecap and others skewered his upper legs and one passed entirely through his neck—punching a hole in his birthmark—and whistled out across the field, trailing a spray of blood. And still the soldier refused to die. He began to crawl, dragging himself forward with his arms, grinning and giggling as if the whole world were an obscene joke that only he could appreciate.

A cold tingle shivered down Eragon's spine as he watched.

King Orrin swore violently, and Eragon detected a hint of hysteria in his voice. Jumping off his charger, Orrin threw his sword and his shield into the dirt and then pointed at the nearest Urgal. "Give me your ax." Startled, the gray-skinned Urgal hesitated, then surrendered his weapon.

King Orrin limped over to the soldier, raised the heavy ax with both hands, and, with a single blow, chopped off the soldier's head.

The giggling ceased.

The soldier's eyes rolled and his mouth worked for another few seconds, and then he was still.

Orrin grasped the head by the hair and lifted it so all could see. "They *can* be killed," he declared. "Spread the word that the only sure way of stopping these abominations is to behead them. That or bash in their skulls with a mace or shoot them in the eye from a safe distance. … Graytooth, where are you?" A stout, middle-aged horseman urged his mount forward. Orrin threw him the head, which he caught. "Mount that on a pole by the north gate of the camp. Mount *all* of their heads. Let them serve as a message to Galbatorix that we do not fear his underhanded tricks and we shall prevail in spite of them." Striding back to his charger, Orrin returned the ax to the Urgal, then picked up his own weapons.

A few yards away, Eragon spotted Nar Garzhvog standing among a cluster of Kull. Eragon spoke a few words to Saphira, and she sidled over to the Urgals. After exchanging nods, Eragon asked Garzhvog, "Were all the soldiers like that?" He gestured toward the arrow-riddled corpse.

"All men with no pain. You hit them and you think them dead, turn your back and they hamstring you." Garzhvog scowled. "I lost many rams today. We have fought droves of humans, Firesword, but never before these laughing ghouls. It is not natural. It makes us think they are possessed by hornless spirits, that maybe the gods themselves have turned against us."

"Nonsense," scoffed Eragon. "It is merely a spell by Galbatorix, and we shall soon have a way to protect ourselves against it."

Notwithstanding his outer confidence, the concept of fighting enemies who felt no pain unsettled him as much as it did the Urgals. Moreover, from what Garzhvog had said, he guessed that maintaining morale among the Varden was going to be even more difficult for Nasuada once everyone learned about the soldiers.

While the Varden and the Urgals set about collecting their fallen comrades, stripping the dead of useful equipment, and beheading the soldiers and dragging their truncated bodies into piles to burn, Eragon, Saphira, and King Orrin returned to the camp, accompanied by Arya and the other elves.

Along the way, Eragon offered to heal Orrin's leg, but the king refused, saying, "I have my own physicians, Shadeslayer."

Nasuada and Jörmundur were waiting for them by the north gate. Accosting Orrin, Nasuada said, "What went wrong?"

Eragon closed his eyes as Orrin explained how at first the attack on the soldiers had seemed to go well. The horsemen had swept through their ranks, dealing what they had thought were death-blows left and right, and had suffered only one casualty during their charge. When they had engaged the remaining soldiers, however, many of those they had struck down before rose up and rejoined the fight. Orrin shuddered. "We lost our nerve then. Any man would have. We did not know if the soldiers were invincible, or if they were even men at all. When you see an enemy coming at you with bone sticking out of his calf, a javelin through his belly, and half his face sheared away, and he *laughs* at you, it's a rare man who can stand his ground. My warriors panicked. They broke formation. It was utter confusion. Slaughter. When the Urgals and your warriors, Nasuada, reached us, they became caught up in the madness." He shook his head. "I've never seen the like of it, not even on the Burning Plains."

Nasuada's face had grown pale, even with her dark skin. She looked at Eragon and then Arya. "How could Galbatorix have done this?"

It was Arya who answered, "Block most, but not all, of a person's ability to feel pain. Leave just enough sensation so they know where they are and what they are doing, but not so much that pain can incapacitate them. The spell would require only a small amount of energy."

Nasuada wet her lips. Again speaking to Orrin, she said, "Do you know how many we lost?"

A tremor racked Orrin. He doubled over, pressed a hand against his leg, gritted his teeth, and growled, "Three hundred soldiers against … What was the size of the force you sent?"

"Two hundred swordsmen. A hundred spearmen. Fifty archers."

"Those, plus the Urgals, plus my cavalry … Say around a thousand strong. Against three hundred foot soldiers on an open field. We slew

every last one of the soldiers. What it cost us, though …" The king shook his head. "We won't know for sure until we count the dead, but it looked to me as if three-quarters of your swordsmen are gone. More of the spearmen. Some archers. Of my cavalry, few remain: fifty, seventy. Many of them were my friends. Perhaps a hundred, a hundred and fifty Urgals dead. Overall? Five or six hundred to bury, and the better part of the survivors wounded. I don't know … I don't know. I don't—" His jaw going slack, Orrin slumped to the side and would have fallen off his horse if Arya had not sprung forward and caught him.

Nasuada snapped her fingers, summoning two of the Varden from among the tents, and ordered them to take Orrin to his pavilion and then to fetch the king his healers.

"We have suffered a grievous defeat, no matter that we exterminated the soldiers," Nasuada murmured. She pressed her lips together, sorrow and despair mixed in equal portions in her expression. Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears. Stiffening her back, she fixed Eragon and Saphira with an iron gaze. "How fared it with the two of you?" She listened without moving while Eragon described their encounter with Murtagh and Thorn. Afterward, she nodded. "That you would be able to escape their clutches was all we dared hope. However, you accomplished more than that. You proved that Galbatorix has not made Murtagh so powerful that we have no hope of defeating him. With a few more spellcasters to help you, Murtagh would have been yours to do with as you pleased. For that reason, he will not dare confront Queen Islanzadí's army by himself, I think. If we can gather enough spellcasters around you, Eragon, I believe we can finally kill Murtagh and Thorn the next time they come to abduct the pair of you."

"Don't you want to capture them?" Eragon asked.

"I want a great number of things, but I doubt I shall receive very many of them. Murtagh and Thorn may not be trying to kill you, but if the opportunity presents itself, we must kill them without hesitation. Or do you see it otherwise?"

"… No."

Shifting her attention to Arya, Nasuada asked, "Did any of your spellweavers die during the contest?"

"Some fainted, but they have all recovered, thank you."

Nasuada took a deep breath and looked northward, her eyes focused on infinity. "Eragon, please inform Trianna that I want Du Vrangr Gata to figure out how to replicate Galbatorix's spell. Despicable as it is, we must imitate Galbatorix in this. We cannot afford not to. It won't be practical for all of us to be unable to feel pain—we would hurt ourselves far too easily—but we should have a few hundred

swordsmen, volunteers, who are immune to physical suffering."

"My Lady."

"So many dead," said Nasuada. She twisted her reins in her hands. "We have remained in one place for too long. It is time we force the Empire onto the defensive again." She spurred Battle-storm away from the carnage that lay before the camp, the stallion tossing his head and gnawing on his bit. "Your cousin, Eragon, begged me to allow him to take part in today's fighting. I refused, on account of his impending marriage, which pleased him not—although I suspect his betrothed feels otherwise. Would you do me the favor of notifying me if they still intend to proceed with the ceremony today? After so much bloodshed, it would hearten the Varden to attend a marriage."

"I will let you know as soon as I find out."

"Thank you. You may go now, Eragon."

The first thing Eragon and Saphira did upon leaving Nasuada was to visit the elves who had fainted during their battle with Murtagh and Thorn and thank them and their companions for their assistance. Then Eragon, Arya, and Blödhgarm attended to the hurts Thorn had dealt Saphira, mending her cuts and scratches and a few of her bruises. When they finished, Eragon located Trianna with his mind and conveyed Nasuada's instructions.

Only then did he and Saphira seek out Roran. Blödhgarm and his elves accompanied them; Arya left to attend to business of her own.

Roran and Katrina were arguing quietly and intensely when Eragon spotted them standing by the corner of Horst's tent. They fell silent as Eragon and Saphira drew near. Katrina crossed her arms and stared away from Roran, while Roran gripped the top of his hammer thrust through his belt and scuffed the heel of his boot against a rock.

Stopping in front of them, Eragon waited a few moments, hoping they would explain the reason for their quarrel, but instead Katrina said, "Are either of you injured?" Her eyes flicked from him to Saphira and back.

"We were, but no longer."

"That is so … strange. We heard tales of magic in Carvahall, but I never really believed them. They seemed so impossible. But here, there are magicians everywhere.… Did you wound Murtagh and Thorn badly? Is that why they fled?"

"We bested them, but we caused them no permanent harm." Eragon paused, and when neither Roran nor Katrina spoke, he asked if they still wanted to get married that day. "Nasuada suggested you proceed, but it might be better to wait. The dead have yet to be buried, and there is much that needs doing. Tomorrow would be more convenient … and more seemly."

“No,” said Roran, and ground the tip of his boot against the rock. “The Empire could attack again at any moment. Tomorrow might be too late. If … if somehow I died before we were wed, what would become of Katrina or our …” He faltered and his cheeks reddened.

Her expression softening, Katrina turned to Roran and took his hand. She said, “Besides, the food has been cooked, the decorations have been hung, and our friends have gathered for our marriage. It would be a pity if all those preparations were for nothing.” Reaching up, she stroked Roran’s beard, and he smiled at her and placed an arm around her.

I don’t understand half of what goes on between them, Eragon complained to Saphira. “When shall the ceremony take place, then?”

“In an hour,” said Roran.

Four hours later, Eragon stood on the crest of a low hill dotted with yellow wildflowers.

Surrounding the hill was a lush meadow that bordered the Jiet River, which rushed past a hundred feet to Eragon's right. The sky was bright and clear; sunshine bathed the land with a soft radiance. The air was cool and calm and smelled fresh, as if it had just rained.

Gathered in front of the hill were the villagers from Carvahall, none of whom had been injured during the fighting, and what seemed to be half of the men of the Varden. Many of the warriors held long spears mounted with embroidered pennants of every color. Various horses, including Snowfire, were picketed at the far end of the meadow. Despite Nasuada's best efforts, organizing the assembly had taken longer than anyone had reckoned.

Wind tousled Eragon's hair, which was still wet from washing, as Saphira glided over the congregation and alighted next to him, fanning her wings. He smiled and touched her on the shoulder.

Little one.

Under normal circumstances, Eragon would have been nervous about speaking in front of so many people and performing such a solemn and important ceremony, but after the earlier fighting, everything had assumed an air of unreality, as if it were no more than a particularly vivid dream.

At the base of the hill stood Nasuada, Arya, Narheim, Jörmundur, Angela, Elva, and others of importance. King Orrin was absent, as his wounds had proved to be more serious than they had first appeared and his healers were still laboring over him in his pavilion. The king's prime minister, Irwin, was attending in his stead.

The only Urgals present were the two in Nasuada's private guard. Eragon had been there when Nasuada had invited Nar Garzhvog to the event, and he had been relieved when Garzhvog had had the good sense to decline. The villagers would never have tolerated a large group of Urgals at the wedding. As it was, Nasuada had difficulty convincing them to allow her guards to remain.

With a rustle of cloth, the villagers and the Varden parted, forming a long, open path from the hill to the edge of the crowd. Then, joining their voices, the villagers began to sing the ancient wedding songs of Palancar Valley. The well-worn verses spoke of the cycle of the seasons, of the warm earth that gave birth to a new crop each year, of the spring calving, of nesting robins and spawning fish, and of how it

was the destiny of the young to replace the old. One of Blödhgarm's spellcasters, a female elf with silver hair, withdrew a small gold harp from a velvet case and accompanied the villagers with notes of her own, embellishing upon the simple themes of their melodies, lending the familiar music a wistful mood.

With slow, steady steps, Roran and Katrina emerged from either side of the crowd at the far end of the path, turned toward the hill, and, without touching, began to advance toward Eragon. Roran wore a new tunic he had borrowed from one of the Varden. His hair was brushed, his beard was trimmed, and his boots were clean. His face beamed with inexpressible joy. All in all, he seemed very handsome and distinguished to Eragon. However, it was Katrina who commanded Eragon's attention. Her dress was light blue, as befitted a bride at her first wedding, of a simple cut but with a lace train that was twenty feet long and carried by two girls. Against the pale fabric, her free-flowing locks glowed like polished copper. In her hands was a posy of wildflowers. She was proud, serene, and beautiful.

Eragon heard gasps from some of the women as they beheld Katrina's train. He resolved to thank Nasuada for having Du Vrangr Gata make the dress for Katrina, for he assumed it was she who was responsible for the gift.

Three paces behind Roran walked Horst. And at a similar distance behind Katrina walked Birgit, careful to avoid stepping on the train.

When Roran and Katrina were halfway to the hill, a pair of white doves flew out from the willow trees lining the Jiet River. The doves carried a circlet of yellow daffodils clutched in their feet. Katrina slowed and stopped as they approached her. The birds circled her three times, north to east, and then dipped down and laid the circlet upon the crown of her head before returning to the river.

"Did you arrange that?" Eragon murmured to Arya.

She smiled.

At the top of the hill, Roran and Katrina stood motionless before Eragon while they waited for the villagers to finish singing. As the final refrain faded into oblivion, Eragon raised his hands and said, "Welcome, one and all. Today we have come together to celebrate the union between the families of Roran Garrowsson and Katrina Ismirasdaughter. They are both of good reputation, and to the best of my knowledge, no one else has a claim upon their hands. If that not be the case, however, or if any other reason exists that they should not become man and wife, then make your objections known before these witnesses, that we may judge the merit of your arguments." Eragon paused for an appropriate interval, then continued. "Who here speaks for Roran Garrowsson?"

Horst stepped forward. "Roran has neither father nor uncle, so I,

Horst Ostrecsson, speak for him as my blood."

"And who here speaks for Katrina Ismirasdaughter?"

Birgit stepped forward. "Katrina has neither mother nor aunt, so I, Birgit Mardrasdaughter, speak for her as my blood." Despite her vendetta against Roran, by tradition it was Birgit's right and responsibility to represent Katrina, as she had been a close friend of Katrina's mother.

"It is right and proper. What, then, does Roran Garrowsson bring to this marriage, that both he and his wife may prosper?"

"He brings his name," said Horst. "He brings his hammer. He brings the strength of his hands. And he brings the promise of a farm in Carvahall, where they may both live in peace."

Astonishment rippled through the crowd as people realized what Roran was doing: he was declaring in the most public and binding way possible that the Empire would not stop him from returning home with Katrina and providing her with the life she would have had if not for Galbatorix's murderous interference. Roran was staking his honor, as a man and a husband, on the downfall of the Empire.

"Do you accept this offer, Birgit Mardrasdaughter?" Eragon asked.

Birgit nodded. "I do."

"And what does Katrina Ismirasdaughter bring to this marriage, that both she and her husband may prosper?"

"She brings her love and devotion, with which she shall serve Roran Garrowsson. She brings her skills at running a household. And she brings a dowry." Surprised, Eragon watched as Birgit motioned and two men who were standing next to Nasuada came forward, carrying a metal casket between them. Birgit undid the clasp to the casket, then lifted open the lid and showed Eragon the contents. He gaped as he beheld the mound of jewelry inside. "She brings with her a gold necklace studded with diamonds. She brings a brooch set with red coral from the Southern Sea and a pearl net to hold her hair. She brings five rings of gold and electrum. The first ring—" As Birgit described each item, she lifted it from the casket so all might see she spoke the truth.

Bewildered, Eragon glanced at Nasuada and noted the pleased smile she wore.

After Birgit had finished her litany and closed the casket and fastened the lock again, Eragon asked, "Do you accept this offer, Horst Ostrecsson?"

"I do."

"Thus your families become one, in accordance with the law of the land." Then, for the first time, Eragon addressed Roran and Katrina directly: "Those who speak for you have agreed upon the terms of your marriage. Roran, are you pleased with how Horst Ostrecsson has

negotiated on your behalf?"

"I am."

"And, Katrina, are you pleased with how Birgit Mardrasdaughter has negotiated on your behalf?"

"I am."

"Roran Stronghammer, son of Garrow, do you swear then, by your name and by your lineage, that you shall protect and provide for Katrina Ismirasdaughter while you both yet live?"

"I, Roran Stronghammer, son of Garrow, do swear, by my name and by my lineage, that I shall protect and provide for Katrina Ismirasdaughter while we both yet live."

"Do you swear to uphold her honor, to remain steadfast and faithful to her in the years to come, and to treat her with the proper respect, dignity, and gentleness?"

"I swear I shall uphold her honor, remain steadfast and faithful to her in the years to come, and treat her with the proper respect, dignity, and gentleness."

"And do you swear to give her the keys to your holdings, such as they may be, and to your strongbox where you keep your coin, by sunset tomorrow, so she may tend to your affairs as a wife should?"

Roran swore he would.

"Katrina, daughter of Ismira, do you swear, by your name and by your lineage, that you shall serve and provide for Roran Garrowsson while you both yet live?"

"I, Katrina, daughter of Ismira, do swear, by my name and by my lineage, that I shall serve and provide for Roran Garrowsson while we both yet live."

"Do you swear to uphold his honor, to remain steadfast and faithful to him in the years to come, to bear his children while you may, and to be a caring mother for them?"

"I swear I shall uphold his honor, remain steadfast and faithful to him in the years to come, bear his children while I may, and be a caring mother for them."

"And do you swear to assume charge of his wealth and his possessions, and to manage them responsibly, so he may concentrate upon those duties that are his alone?"

Katrina swore she would.

Smiling, Eragon drew a red ribbon from his sleeve and said, "Cross your wrists." Roran and Katrina extended their left and right arms, respectively, and did as he instructed. Laying the middle of the ribbon across their wrists, Eragon wound the strip of satin three times around and then tied the ends together with a bowknot. "As is my right as a Dragon Rider, I now declare you man and wife!"

The crowd erupted into cheers. Leaning toward each other, Roran

and Katrina kissed, and the crowd redoubled their cheering.

Saphira dipped her head toward the beaming couple and, as Roran and Katrina separated, she touched each of them on the brow with the tip of her snout. *Live long, and may your love deepen with every passing year*, she said.

Roran and Katrina turned toward the crowd and raised their joined arms skyward. “Let the feast begin!” Roran declared.

Eragon followed the pair as they descended from the hill and walked through the press of shouting people toward two chairs that had been set at the forefront of a row of tables. There Roran and Katrina sat, as the king and queen of their wedding.

Then the guests lined up to offer their congratulations and present gifts. Eragon was first. His grin as large as theirs, he shook Roran’s free hand and inclined his head toward Katrina.

“Thank you, Eragon,” Katrina said.

“Yes, thank you,” Roran added.

“The honor was mine.” He looked at both of them, then burst out laughing.

“What?” demanded Roran.

“You! The two of you are as happy as fools.”

Eyes sparkling, Katrina laughed and hugged Roran. “That we are!”

Growing sober, Eragon said, “You must know how fortunate you are to be here today, together. Roran, if you had not been able to rally everyone and travel to the Burning Plains, and if the Ra’zac had taken you, Katrina, to Urû’baen, neither of you would have—”

“Yes, but I did, and they didn’t,” interrupted Roran. “Let us not darken this day with unpleasant thoughts about what might have been.”

“That is not why I mention it.” Eragon glanced at the line of people waiting behind him, making sure they were not close enough to eavesdrop. “All three of us are enemies of the Empire. And as today has demonstrated, we are not safe, even here among the Varden. If Galbatorix can, he will strike at any one of us, including you, Katrina, in order to hurt the others. So I made these for you.” From the pouch at his belt, Eragon withdrew two plain gold rings, polished until they shone. The previous night, he had molded them out of the last of the gold orbs he had extracted from the earth. He handed the larger one to Roran and the smaller one to Katrina.

Roran turned his ring, examining it, then held it up against the sky, squinting at the glyphs in the ancient language carved into the inside of the band. “It’s very nice, but how can these help protect us?”

“I enchanted them to do three things,” said Eragon. “If you ever need my help, or Saphira’s, twist the ring once around your finger and say, ‘Help me, Shadeslayer; help me, Brightscales,’ and we will hear

you, and we will come as fast as we can. Also, if either of you is close to death, your ring will alert us and you, Roran, or you, Katrina, depending on who is in peril. And so long as the rings are touching your skin, you will always know how to find each other, no matter how far apart you may be." He hesitated, then added, "I hope you will agree to wear them."

"Of course we will," said Katrina.

Roran's chest swelled, and his voice became husky. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you. I wish we had had these before she and I were separated in Carvahall."

Since they only had one free hand apiece, Katrina slid Roran's ring on for him, placing it on the third finger of his right hand, and he slid Katrina's on for her, placing it on the third finger of her left hand.

"I have another gift for you as well," said Eragon. Turning, he whistled and waved. Pushing his way through the crowd, a groom hurried toward them, leading Snowfire by the bridle. The groom handed Eragon the reins to the stallion, then bowed and withdrew. Eragon said, "Roran, you will need a good steed. This is Snowfire. He was Brom's to begin with, then mine, and now I am giving him to you."

Roran ran his eyes over Snowfire. "He's a magnificent beast."

"The finest. Will you accept him?"

"With pleasure."

Eragon summoned back the groom and returned Snowfire to his care, instructing him that Roran was the stallion's new owner. As the man and horse left, Eragon looked at the people in line who were carrying presents for Roran and Katrina. Laughing, he said, "The two of you may have been poor this morning, but you'll be rich by this evening. If Saphira and I ever have a chance to settle down, we'll have to come live with you in the giant hall you will build for all of your children."

"Whatever we build, it will hardly be large enough for Saphira, I think," said Roran.

"But you will always be welcome with us," said Katrina. "Both of you."

After congratulating them once more, Eragon ensconced himself at the end of a table and amused himself by throwing scraps of roast chicken toward Saphira and watching her snap them out of the air. He remained there until Nasuada had spoken with Roran and Katrina, handing them something small he could not see. Then he intercepted Nasuada as she was departing the festivities.

"What is it, Eragon?" she asked. "I cannot linger."

"Was it you who gave Katrina her dress and her dowry?"

"Aye. Do you disapprove?"

"I am grateful you were so kind to my family, but I wonder …"

"Yes?"

"Isn't the Varden desperate for gold?"

"We are," Nasuada said, "but not so desperate as before. Since my scheme with the lace, and since I triumphed in the Trial of the Long Knives and the wandering tribes swore absolute fealty to me and granted me access to their riches, we are less likely to starve to death and more likely to die because we don't have a shield or a spear." Her lips twitched in a smile. "What I gave Katrina is insignificant compared with the vast sums this army requires to function. And I do not believe I have squandered my gold. Rather, I believe I have made a valuable purchase. I have purchased prestige and self-respect for Katrina, and by extension, I have purchased Roran's goodwill. I may be overly optimistic, but I suspect his loyalty will prove far more valuable than a hundred shields or a hundred spears."

"You are always seeking to improve the Varden's prospects, aren't you?" Eragon said.

"Always. As you should be." Nasuada started to walk away from him, then returned and said, "Sometime before sunset, come to my pavilion, and we will visit the men who were wounded today. There are many we cannot heal, you know. It will do them good to see that we care about their welfare and that we appreciate their sacrifice."

Eragon nodded. "I will be there."

"Good."

Hours passed as Eragon laughed and ate and drank and traded stories with old friends. Mead flowed like water, and the wedding feast became ever more boisterous. Clearing a space between the tables, the men tested their prowess against one another with feats of wrestling and archery and bouts with quarterstaves. Two of the elves, a man and a woman, demonstrated their skill with swordplay—awing the onlookers with the speed and grace of their dancing blades—and even Arya consented to perform a song, which sent shivers down Eragon's spine.

Throughout, Roran and Katrina said little, preferring to sit and gaze at each other, oblivious to their surroundings.

When the bottom of the orange sun touched the distant horizon, however, Eragon reluctantly excused himself. With Saphira by his side, he left the sounds of revelry behind and walked to Nasuada's pavilion, breathing deeply of the cool evening air to clear his head. Nasuada was waiting for him in front of her red command tent, the Nighthawks gathered close around. Without saying a word, she, Eragon, and Saphira made their way across the camp to the tents of the healers, where the injured warriors lay.

For over an hour, Nasuada and Eragon visited with the men who had lost their limbs or their eyes or had contracted an incurable infection in the course of fighting the Empire. Some of the warriors had been injured that morning. Others, as Eragon discovered, had been wounded on the Burning Plains and had yet to recover, despite all the herbs and spells lavished upon them. Before they had set forth among the rows of blanket-covered men, Nasuada had warned Eragon not to tire himself further by attempting to heal everyone he met, but he could not help muttering a spell here and there to ease pain or to drain an abscess or to reshape a broken bone or to remove an unsightly scar.

One of the men Eragon met had lost his left leg below the knee, as well as two fingers on his right hand. His beard was short and gray, and his eyes were covered with a strip of black cloth. When Eragon greeted him and asked how he fared, the man reached out and grasped Eragon by the elbow with the three fingers of his right hand. In a hoarse voice, the man said, "Ah, Shadeslayer. I knew you would come. I have been waiting for you ever since the light."

"What do you mean?"

"The light that illuminated the flesh of the world. In a single instant, I saw every living thing around me, from the largest to the smallest. I saw my bones shining through my arms. I saw the worms in the earth and the gore-crows in the sky and the mites on the wings of the crows. The gods have touched me, Shadeslayer. They gave me this vision for a reason. I saw you on the field of battle, you and your dragon, and you were like a blazing sun among a forest of dim candles. And I saw your brother, your brother and his dragon, and they too were like a sun."

The nape of Eragon's neck prickled as he listened. "I have no brother," he said.

The maimed swordsman cackled. "You cannot fool me, Shadeslayer. I know better. The world burns around me, and from the fire, I hear the whisper of minds, and I learn things from the whispers. You hide yourself from me now, but I can still see you, a man of yellow flame with twelve stars floating around your waist and another star, brighter than the others, upon your right hand."

Eragon pressed his palm against the belt of Beloth the Wise, checking that the twelve diamonds sewn within were still concealed. They were.

"Listen to me, Shadeslayer," whispered the man, pulling Eragon toward his lined face. "I saw your brother, and he burned. But he did not burn like you. Oh no. The light from his soul shone *through* him, as if it came from somewhere else. He, *he* was a void, a shape of a man. And through that shape came the brilliance that burned. Do you

understand? *Others* illuminated him."

"Where were these others? Did you see them as well?"

The warrior hesitated. "I could feel them close at hand, raging at the world as if they hated everything in it, but their bodies were hidden from my sight. They were there and not there. I cannot explain better than that.… I would not want to get any closer to those creatures, Shadeslayer. They aren't human, of that I'm sure, and their hate, it was like the largest thunderstorm you've ever seen crammed into a tiny glass bottle."

"And when the bottle breaks …," Eragon murmured.

"Exactly, Shadeslayer. Sometimes I wonder if Galbatorix has managed to capture the gods themselves and make them his slaves, but then I laugh and call myself a fool."

"Whose gods, though? The dwarves'? Those of the wandering tribes?"

"Does it matter, Shadeslayer? A god is a god, regardless of where he comes from."

Eragon grunted. "Perhaps you're right."

As he left the man's pallet, one of the healers pulled Eragon aside. She said, "Forgive him, my Lord. The shock of his wounds has driven him quite mad. He's always ranting about suns and stars and glowing lights he claims to see. Sometimes it seems as if he knows things he shouldn't, but don't you be deceived, he gets them from the other patients. They gossip all the time, you know. It's all they have to do, poor things."

"I am not a lord," Eragon said, "and he is not mad. I'm not sure what he is, but he has an uncommon ability. If he gets better or worse, please inform one of Du Vrangr Gata."

The healer curtsied. "As you wish, Shadeslayer. I'm sorry for my mistake, Shadeslayer."

"How was he hurt?"

"A soldier cut off his fingers when he tried to block a sword with his hand. Later, one of the missiles from the Empire's catapults landed upon his leg, crushing it beyond repair. We had to amputate. The men who were beside him said that when the missile struck, he immediately began screaming about the light, and when they picked him up, they noticed that his eyes had turned pure white. Even his pupils have disappeared."

"Ah. You have been most helpful. Thank you."

It was dark when Eragon and Nasuada finally left the healers' tents. Nasuada sighed and said, "Now I could use a mug of mead." Eragon nodded, staring down between his feet. They started back to her pavilion, and after a while, she asked, "What are you thinking,

Eragon?”

“That we live in a strange world, and I’ll be lucky if I ever understand more than a small portion of it.” Then he recounted his conversation with the man, which she found as interesting as he had.

“You should tell Arya about this,” said Nasuada. “She might know what these ‘others’ could be.”

They parted at her pavilion, Nasuada going inside to finish reading a report, while Eragon and Saphira continued on to Eragon’s tent. There Saphira curled up on the ground and prepared to sleep as Eragon sat next to her and gazed at the stars, a parade of wounded men marching before his eyes.

What many of them had told him continued to reverberate through his mind: *We fought for you, Shadeslayer*.

WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT

Roran opened his eyes and stared at the drooping canvas overhead.

A thin gray light pervaded the tent, leaching objects of their color, rendering everything a pale shadow of its daylight self. He shivered. The blankets had slid down to his waist, exposing his torso to the cold night air. As he pulled them back up, he noticed that Katrina was no longer by his side.

He saw her sitting by the entrance to the tent, staring up at the sky. She had a cloak wrapped over her shift. Her hair fell to the small of her back, a dark tangled bramble.

A lump formed in Roran's throat as he studied her. Dragging the blankets with him, he sat beside her. He placed an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned against him, her head and neck warm against his chest. He kissed her on the brow. For a long while, he contemplated the glimmering stars with her and listened to the regular pattern of her breathing, the only sound besides his own in the sleeping world.

Then she whispered, "The constellations are shaped differently here. Have you noticed?"

"Aye." He shifted his arm, fitting it against the curve of her waist and feeling the slight bulge of her growing belly. "What woke you?"

She shivered. "I was thinking."

"Oh."

Starlight gleamed in her eyes as she twisted in his arms and gazed at him. "I was thinking about you and us … and our future together."

"Those are heavy thoughts for so late at night."

"Now that we are married, how do you plan to care for me and for our child?"

"Is that what worries you?" He smiled. "You won't starve; we have gold enough to assure that. Besides, the Varden will always see to it that Eragon's cousins have food and shelter. Even if something were to happen to me, they would continue to provide for you and the baby."

"Yes, but what do you intend to *do*?"

Puzzled, he searched her face for the source of her agitation. "I am going to help Eragon end this war so we can return to Palancar Valley and settle down without fear of soldiers dragging us off to Urû'baen. What else would I do?"

"You will fight with the Varden, then?"

"You know I will."

"As you would have fought today if Nasuada had let you?"

"Yes."

"What of our baby, though? An army on the march is no place to raise a child."

"We cannot run away and hide from the Empire, Katrina. Unless the Varden win, Galbatorix will find and kill us, or he will find and kill our children, or our children's children. And I do not think the Varden will achieve victory unless everyone does their utmost to help them."

She placed a finger over his lips. "You are my only love. No other man shall ever capture my heart. I will do everything I can to lighten your burden. I will cook your meals, mend your clothes, and clean your armor.… But once I give birth, I will leave this army."

"Leave!" He went rigid. "That's nonsense! Where would you go?"

"Dauth, perhaps. Remember, Lady Alarice offered us sanctuary, and some of our people are still there. I would not be alone."

"If you think I'm going to let you and our newborn child go tramping across Alagaësia by yourselves, then—"

"You don't need to shout."

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are." Clasping his hand between hers and pressing it against her heart, she said, "It's not safe here. If it were only the two of us, I could accept the danger, but not when it is our baby who might die. I love you, Roran, I love you so much, but our child has to come before anything we want for ourselves. Otherwise, we do not deserve to be called parents." Tears shone in her eyes, and he felt his own eyes dampen. "It was you, after all, who convinced me to leave Carvahall and hide in the Spine when the soldiers attacked. This is no different."

The stars swam before Roran as his vision blurred. "I would rather lose an arm than be parted from you again."

Katrina began to cry then, her quiet sobs shaking his body. "I don't want to leave you either."

He tightened his embrace and rocked back and forth with her. When her weeping subsided, he whispered in her ear, "I would rather lose an arm than be parted from you, but I would rather die than allow anyone to hurt you … or our child. If you are going to leave, you should leave now, while it's still easy for you to travel."

She shook her head. "No. I want Gertrude as my midwife. She's the only one I trust. Besides, if I have any difficulty, I would rather be here, where there are magicians trained in healing."

"Nothing will go wrong," he said. "As soon as our child is born, you will go to Aberon, not Dauth; it is less likely to be attacked. And if Aberon becomes too dangerous, then you will go to the Beor Mountains and live with the dwarves. And if Galbatorix strikes at the dwarves, then you will go to the elves in Du Weldenvarden."

“And if Galbatorix attacks Du Weldenvarden, I will fly to the moon and raise our child among the spirits who inhabit the heavens.”

“And they will bow down to you and make you their queen, as you deserve.”

She snuggled closer to him.

Together, they sat and watched as, one by one, the stars vanished from the sky, obscured by the glow spreading in the east. When only the morning star remained, Roran said, “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What?”

“I’ll just have to ensure we kill every last one of Galbatorix’s soldiers, capture all the cities in the Empire, defeat Murtagh and Thorn, and behead Galbatorix and his turncoat dragon before your time comes. That way, there will be no need for you to go away.”

She was silent for a moment, then said, “If you could, I would be very happy.”

They were about to return to their cot when, out of the glimmering sky, there sailed a miniature ship, woven of dry strips of grass. The ship hovered in front of their tent, rocking upon invisible waves of air, and almost seemed to be looking at them with its dragon-head-shaped prow.

Roran froze, as did Katrina.

Like a living creature, the ship darted across the path before their tent, then it swooped up and around, chasing an errant moth. When the moth escaped, the ship glided back toward the tent, stopping only inches from Katrina’s face.

Before Roran could decide if he should snatch the ship out of the air, it turned and flew off toward the morning star, vanishing once more into the endless ocean of the sky, leaving them to gaze after it in wonder.

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ORDERS

Late that night, visions of death and violence gathered along the edges of Eragon's dreams, threatening to overwhelm him with panic. He stirred with unease, wanting to break free but unable to do so. Brief, disjointed images of stabbing swords and screaming men and Murtagh's angry face flashed before his eyes.

Then Eragon felt Saphira enter his mind. She swept through his dreams like a great wind, brushing aside his looming nightmare. In the silence that followed, she whispered, *All is well, little one. Rest easy; you are safe, and I am with you.… Rest easy*.

A sense of profound peace crept over Eragon. He rolled over and drifted off into happier memories, comforted by his awareness of Saphira's presence.

When Eragon opened his eyes, an hour before sunrise, he found himself lying underneath one of Saphira's vein-webbed wings. She had her tail wrapped around him, and her side was warm against his head. He smiled and crawled out from under her wing even as she lifted her head and yawned.

Good morning, he said.

She yawned again and stretched like a cat.

Eragon bathed, shaved with magic, cleaned the falchion's scabbard of dried blood from the previous day, and then dressed in one of his elf tunics.

Once he was satisfied he was presentable, and Saphira had finished her tongue bath, they walked to Nasuada's pavilion. All six of the current shift of Nighthawks were standing outside, their seamed faces set into their usual grim expressions. Eragon waited while a stocky dwarf announced them. Then he entered the tent, and Saphira crawled around to the open panel where she could insert her head and participate in the discussion.

Eragon bowed to Nasuada where she sat in her high-backed chair carved with blooming thistles. "My Lady, you asked me to come here to talk about my future; you said you had a most important mission for me."

"I did, and I do," said Nasuada. "Please, be seated." She indicated a folding chair next to Eragon. Tilting the sword at his waist so it would not catch, he settled into the chair. "As you know, Galbatorix has sent battalions to the cities of Aroughs, Feinster, and Belatona in an attempt to prevent us from taking them by siege or, failing that, to

slow our progress and force us to divide our own troops so we would be more vulnerable to the depredations of the soldiers who were camped north of us. After yesterday's battle, our scouts reported that the last of Galbatorix's men withdrew to parts unknown. I was going to strike at those soldiers days ago, but I had to refrain since you were absent. Without you, Murtagh and Thorn could have slaughtered our warriors with impunity, and we had no way of discovering whether the two of them were among the soldiers. Now that you are with us again, our position is somewhat improved, although not as much as I had hoped, given that we must now also contend with Galbatorix's latest artifice, these men without pain. Our only encouragement is that the two of you, along with Islanzadí's spellcasters, have proved you can fend off Murtagh and Thorn. Upon that hope depends our plan for victory."

That red runt is no match for me, said Saphira. *If he did not have Murtagh protecting him, I would trap him against the ground and shake him by the neck until he submitted to me and acknowledged me as leader of the hunt.*

"I am sure you would," said Nasuada, smiling.

Eragon asked, "What course of action have you decided upon, then?"

"I have decided upon several courses, and we must undertake them all simultaneously if any are to be successful. First, we cannot push farther into the Empire, leaving cities behind us that Galbatorix still controls. To do that would be to expose ourselves to attacks from both the front and the rear and to invite Galbatorix to invade and seize Surda while we were absent. So I have already ordered the Varden to march north, to the nearest place where we can safely cross the Jiet River. Once we are on the other side of the river, I will send warriors south to capture Aroughs while King Orrin and I continue with the remainder of our forces to Feinster, which, with your help and Saphira's, should fall before us without too much trouble.

"While we are engaged in the tedious business of tramping across the countryside, I have other responsibilities for you, Eragon." She leaned forward in her seat. "We need the full help of the dwarves. The elves are fighting for us in the north of Alagaësia, the Surdans have joined with us body and mind, and even the Urgals have allied themselves with us. But we need the dwarves. We cannot succeed without them. Especially now that we must contend with soldiers who cannot feel pain."

"Have the dwarves chosen a new king or queen yet?"

Nasuada grimaced. "Narheim assures me that the process is moving apace, but like the elves, dwarves take a longer view of time than we do. *Apace* for them might mean months of deliberations."

"Don't they realize the urgency of the situation?"

"Some do, but many oppose helping us in this war, and they seek to delay the proceedings as long as possible and to install one of their own upon the marble throne in Tronjheim. The dwarves have lived in hiding for so long, they have become dangerously suspicious of outsiders. If someone hostile to our aims wins the throne, we shall lose the dwarves. We cannot allow that to happen. Nor can we wait for the dwarves to resolve their differences at their usual pace. But"—she raised a finger—"from so far away, I cannot effectively intervene in their politics. Even if I were in Tronjheim, I could not ensure a favorable outcome; the dwarves do not take kindly to anyone who is not of their clans meddling in their government. So I want you, Eragon, to travel to Tronjheim in my stead and do what you can to ensure that the dwarves choose a new monarch in an expeditious manner—and that they choose a monarch who is sympathetic to our cause."

"Me! But—"

"King Hrothgar adopted you into Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. According to their laws and customs, you *are* a dwarf, Eragon. You have a legal right to participate in the hallmeets of the Ingeitum, and as Orik is set to become their chief, and as he is your foster brother and a friend of the Varden's, I am sure he will agree to let you accompany him into the secret councils of the thirteen clans where they elect their rulers."

Her proposal seemed preposterous to Eragon. "What about Murtagh and Thorn? When they return, as they surely will, Saphira and I are the only ones who can hold our own against them, albeit with some assistance. If we are not here, no one will be able to stop them from killing you or Arya or Orrin or the rest of the Varden."

The gap between Nasuada's eyebrows narrowed. "You dealt Murtagh a stinging defeat yesterday. Most likely, he and Thorn are winging their way back to Urû'baen even as we speak so Galbatorix may interrogate them about the battle and chastise them for their failure. He will not send them to attack us again until he is confident that they can overwhelm you. Murtagh is surely uncertain about the true limits of your strength now, so that unhappy event may yet be some while off. Between now and then, I believe you will have enough time to travel back and forth between Farthen Dûr."

"You could be wrong," argued Eragon. "Besides, how would you keep Galbatorix from learning about our absence and attacking while we are gone? I doubt you have found all of the spies he has seeded among us."

Nasuada tapped her fingers on the arms of her chair. "I said I wanted you to go to Farthen Dûr, Eragon. I did not say I wanted Saphira to go as well." Turning her head, Saphira released a small puff

of smoke that drifted toward the peak of the tent.

"I'm not about to—"

"Let me finish, please, Eragon."

He clamped shut his jaw and glared at her, his left hand tight around the pommel of the falchion.

"You are not beholden to me, Saphira, but my hope is that you will agree to stay here while Eragon journeys to the dwarves so that we can deceive the Empire and the Varden as to Eragon's whereabouts. If we can hide your departure"—she gestured at Eragon—"from the masses, no one will have any reason to suspect you are not still here. We will only have to devise a suitable excuse, then, to account for your sudden desire to remain in your tent during the day—perhaps that you and Saphira are flying sorties into enemy territory at night and so must rest while the sun is up.

"In order for the ruse to work, however, Blödhgarm and his companions will have to stay here as well, both to avoid arousing suspicion and for reasons of defense. If Murtagh and Thorn reappear while you are gone, Arya can take your place on Saphira. Between her, Blödhgarm's spellcasters, and the magicians of Du Vrangr Gata, we should have a fair chance of thwarting Murtagh."

In a harsh voice, Eragon said, "If Saphira doesn't fly me to Farthen Dûr, then how am I supposed to travel there in a timely fashion?"

"By running. You told me yourself you ran much of the distance from Helgrind. I expect that without having to hide from soldiers or peasants you can traverse many more leagues each day on the way to Farthen Dûr than you were able to in the Empire." Again Nasuada drummed the polished wood of her chair. "Of course, it would be foolish to go alone. Even a powerful magician can die of a simple accident in the far reaches of the wilderness if he has no one to help him. Shepherding you through the Beor Mountains would be a waste of Arya's talents, and people would notice if one of Blödhgarm's elves disappeared without explanation. Therefore, I have decided that a Kull should accompany you, as they are the only other creatures capable of matching your pace."

"A Kull!" exclaimed Eragon, unable to contain himself any longer. "You would send me among the dwarves with a Kull by my side? I cannot think of any race the dwarves hate more than the Urgals. They make bows out of their horns! If I walked into Farthen Dûr with an Urgal, the dwarves would not pay heed to anything I had to say."

"I am well aware of that," said Nasuada. "Which is why you will not go directly to Farthen Dûr. Instead, you will first stop at Bregan Hold on Mount Thardûr, which is the ancestral home of the Ingeitum. There you will find Orik, and there you can leave the Kull while you continue on to Farthen Dûr in Orik's company."

Staring somewhat beyond Nasuada, Eragon said, “And what if I do not agree with the path you have chosen? What if I believe there are other, safer ways to accomplish what you desire?”

“What ways would those be, pray tell?” asked Nasuada, her fingers pausing in midair.

“I would have to think about it, but I am sure they exist.”

“I *have* thought about it, Eragon, and at great length. Having you act as my emissary is our only hope of influencing the succession of the dwarves. I was raised among dwarves, remember, and I have a better understanding of them than most humans.”

“I still believe it’s a mistake,” he growled. “Send Jörmundur instead, or one of your other commanders. I won’t go, not while—”

“You won’t?” said Nasuada, her voice rising. “A vassal who disobeys his lord is no better than a warrior who ignores his captain on the field of battle and may be punished similarly. As your liegelord, then, Eragon, I order you to run to Farthen Dûr, whether you want to or not, and to oversee the choosing of the next ruler of the dwarves.”

Furious, Eragon breathed heavily through his nose, gripping and regripping the pommel of his falchion.

In a softer, although still guarded, tone, Nasuada said, “What will it be, Eragon? Will you do as I ask, or will you dispossess me and lead the Varden yourself? Those are your only options.”

Shocked, he said, “No, I can reason with you. I can convince you otherwise.”

“You cannot, because you cannot provide me with an alternative that is as likely to succeed.”

He met her gaze. “I could refuse your order and let you punish me however you deem fit.”

His suggestion startled her. Then she said, “To see you lashed to a whipping post would do irreparable harm to the Varden. And it would destroy my authority, for people would know you could defy me whenever you wanted, with the only consequence being a handful of stripes that you could heal an instant later, for we cannot execute you, as we would any other warrior who disobeyed a superior. I would rather abdicate my post and grant you command of the Varden than allow such a thing to occur. If you believe you are better suited for the task, then take my position, take my chair, and declare yourself master of this army! But so long as I speak for the Varden, I have the right to make these decisions. If they be mistakes, then that is my responsibility as well.”

“Will you listen to no advice?” Eragon asked, troubled. “Will you dictate the course of the Varden regardless of what those around you counsel?”

Nasuada’s middle fingernail clacked against the polished wood of

her chair. “I do listen to advice. I listen to a continuous stream of advice every waking hour of my life, but sometimes my conclusions do not match those of my underlings. Now, you must decide whether you will uphold your oath of fealty and abide by my decision, even though you may not agree with it, or if you will set yourself up as a mirror image of Galbatorix.”

“I only want what is best for the Varden,” he said.

“As do I.”

“You leave me no choice but one I dislike.”

“Sometimes it is harder to follow than it is to lead.”

“May I have a moment to think?”

“You may.”

Saphira? he asked.

Flecks of purple light danced around the interior of the pavilion as she twisted her neck and fixed her eyes upon Eragon’s. *Little one?*

Should I go?

I think you must.

He pressed his lips together in a rigid line. *And what of you?*

You know I hate to be separated from you, but Nasuada’s arguments are well reasoned. If I can help keep Murtagh and Thorn away by remaining with the Varden, then perhaps I should.

His emotions and hers washed between their minds, tidal surges in a shared pool of anger, anticipation, reluctance, and tenderness. From him flowed the anger and reluctance; from her other, gentler sentiments—as rich in scope as his own—that moderated his choleric passion and lent him perspectives he would not otherwise have. Nevertheless, he clung with stubborn insistence to his opposition to Nasuada’s scheme. *If you flew me to Farthen Dûr, I would not be gone for as long, meaning Galbatorix would have less of an opportunity to mount a new assault.*

But his spies would tell him the Varden were vulnerable the moment we left.

I do not want to part with you again so soon after Helgrind.

Our own desires cannot take precedence over the needs of the Varden, but no, I do not want to part with you either. Still, remember what Oromis said, that the prowess of a dragon and Rider is measured not only by how well they work together but also by how well they can function when apart. We are both mature enough to operate independently of each other, Eragon, however much we may dislike the prospect. You proved that yourself during your trip from Helgrind.

Would it bother you fighting with Arya on your back, as Nasuada mentioned?

Her I would mind least of all. We have fought together before, and it was she who ferried me across Alagaësia for nigh on twenty years when I was

in my egg. You know that, little one. Why pose this question? Are you jealous?

What if I am?

An amused twinkle lit her sapphire eyes. She flicked her tongue at him. *Then it is very sweet of you.… Would you I should stay or go?*

It is your choice to make, not mine.

But it affects us both.

Eragon dug at the ground with the tip of his boot. Then he said, *If we must participate in this mad scheme, we should do everything we can to help it succeed. Stay, and see if you can keep Nasuada from losing her head over this thrice-blasted plan of hers.*

Be of good cheer, little one. Run fast, and we shall be reunited in short order.

Eragon looked up at Nasuada. "Very well," he said, "I will go."

Nasuada's posture relaxed somewhat. "Thank you. And you, Saphira? Will you stay or go?"

Projecting her thoughts to include Nasuada as well as Eragon, Saphira said, *I will stay, Nightstalker.*

Nasuada inclined her head. "Thank you, Saphira. I am most grateful for your support."

"Have you spoken to Blödhgarm of this?" asked Eragon. "Has he agreed to it?"

"No, I assumed you would inform him of the details."

Eragon doubted the elves would be pleased by the prospect of him traveling to Farthen Dûr with only an Urgal for company. He said, "If I might make a suggestion?"

"You know I welcome your suggestions."

That stopped him for a moment. "A suggestion and a request, then." Nasuada lifted a finger, motioning for him to continue. "When the dwarves have chosen their new king or queen, Saphira should join me in Farthen Dûr, both to honor the dwarves' new ruler and to fulfill the promise she made to King Hrothgar after the battle for Tronjheim."

Nasuada's expression sharpened into that of a hunting wildcat. "What promise was this?" she asked. "You have not told me of this before."

"That Saphira would mend the star sapphire, Isidar Mithrim, as recompense for Arya breaking it."

Her eyes wide with astonishment, Nasuada looked at Saphira and said, "You are capable of such a feat?"

I am, but I do not know if I will be able to summon the magic I will need when I am standing before Isidar Mithrim. My ability to cast spells is not subject to my own desires. At times, it is as if I have gained a new sense and I can feel the pulse of energy within my own flesh, and by directing it with my will, I can reshape the world as I wish. The rest of my life,

however, I can no more cast a spell than a fish can fly. If I could mend Isidar Mithrim, though, it would go a long way toward earning us the goodwill of all the dwarves, not just a select few who have the breadth of knowledge to appreciate the importance of their cooperation with us.

"It would do more than you imagine," said Nasuada. "The star sapphire holds a special place in the hearts of dwarves. Every dwarf has a love of gemstones, but Isidar Mithrim they love and cherish above all others, because of its beauty, and most of all because of its immense size. Restore it to its previous glory and you will restore the pride of their race."

Eragon said, "Even if Saphira failed to repair Isidar Mithrim, she should be present for the coronation of the dwarves' new ruler. You could conceal her absence for a few days by letting it be known among the Varden that she and I have left on a brief trip to Aberon, or some such. By the time Galbatorix's spies realized you had deceived them, it would be too late for the Empire to organize an attack before we returned."

Nasuada nodded. "It is a good idea. Contact me as soon as the dwarves set a date for the coronation."

"I shall."

"You have made your suggestion, now out with your request. What is it you wish of me?"

"Since you insist I must make this trip, with your permission, I would like to fly with Saphira from Tronjheim to Ellesméra, after the coronation."

"For what purpose?"

"To consult with the ones who taught us during our last visit to Du Weldenvarden. We promised them that as soon as events allowed, we would return to Ellesméra to complete our training."

The line between Nasuada's eyebrows deepened. "There is not the time for you to spend weeks or months in Ellesméra continuing your education."

"No, but perhaps we have the time for a brief visit."

Nasuada leaned her head against the back of her carved chair and gazed down at Eragon from underneath heavy lids. "And who exactly are your teachers? I have noticed you always evade direct questions about them. Who was it that taught the two of you in Ellesméra, Eragon?"

Fingering his ring, Aren, Eragon said, "We swore an oath to Islanzadí that we would not reveal their identity without permission from her, Arya, or whoever may succeed Islanzadí to her throne."

"By all the demons above and below, how many oaths have you and Saphira sworn?" demanded Nasuada. "You seem to bind yourself to everyone you meet."

Feeling somewhat sheepish, Eragon shrugged and had opened his mouth to speak when Saphira said to Nasuada, *We do not seek them out, but how can we avoid pledging ourselves when we cannot topple Galbatorix and the Empire without the support of every race in Alagaësia? Oaths are the price we pay for winning the aid of those in power*.

"Mmh," said Nasuada. "So I must ask Arya for the truth of the matter?"

"Aye, but I doubt she will tell you; the elves consider the identity of our teachers to be one of their most precious secrets. They will not risk sharing it unless absolutely necessary, to keep word of it from reaching Galbatorix." Eragon stared at the royal-blue gemstone set in his ring, wondering how much more information his oath and his honor would allow him to divulge, then said, "Know this, though: we are not so alone as we once assumed."

Nasuada's expression sharpened. "I see. That is good to know, Eragon.… I only wish the elves were more forthcoming with me." After pursing her lips for a brief moment, Nasuada continued. "Why must you travel all the way to Ellesméra? Have you no means to communicate with your tutors directly?"

Eragon spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "If only we could. Alas, the spell has yet to be invented that can broach the wards that encircle Du Weldenvarden."

"The elves did not even leave an opening they themselves can exploit?"

"If they had, Arya would have contacted Queen Islanzadí as soon as she was revived in Farthen Dûr, rather than physically going to Du Weldenvarden."

"I suppose you are right. But then how was it you were able to consult Islanzadí about Sloan's fate? You implied that when you spoke with her, the elves' army was still situated within Du Weldenvarden."

"They were," he said, "but only in the fringe, beyond the protective measures of the wards."

The silence between them was palpable as Nasuada considered his request. Outside the tent, Eragon heard the Nighthawks arguing among themselves about whether a bill or a halberd was better suited for fighting large numbers of men on foot and, beyond them, the creak of a passing oxcart, the jangle of armor on men trotting in the opposite direction, and hundreds of other indistinct sounds that drifted through the camp.

When Nasuada spoke, she said, "What exactly do you hope to gain from such a visit?"

"I don't know!" growled Eragon. He struck the pommel of the falchion with his fist. "And that's the heart of the problem: we don't know enough. It might accomplish nothing, but on the other hand, we

might learn something that could help us vanquish Murtagh and Galbatorix once and for all. We barely won yesterday, Nasuada. Barely! And I fear that when we again face Thorn and Murtagh, Murtagh will be even stronger than before, and frost coats my bones when I consider the fact that Galbatorix's abilities far exceed Murtagh's, despite the vast amount of power he has already bestowed upon my *brother*. The elf who taught me, he …" Eragon hesitated, considering the wisdom of what he was about to say, then forged onward: "He hinted that he knows how it is Galbatorix's strength has been increasing every year, but he refused to reveal more at the time because we were not advanced enough in our training. Now, after our encounters with Thorn and Murtagh, I think he will share his knowledge with us. Moreover, there are entire branches of magic we have yet to explore, and any one of them might provide the means to defeat Galbatorix. If we are going to gamble upon this trip, Nasuada, then let us not gamble to maintain our current position; let us gamble to increase our standing and so win this game of chance."

Nasuada sat motionless for over a minute. "I cannot make this decision until after the dwarves hold their coronation. Whether you go to Du Weldenvarden will depend on the movements of the Empire then and on what our spies report about Murtagh and Thorn's activities."

Over the course of the next two hours, Nasuada instructed Eragon about the thirteen dwarf clans. She schooled him in their history and their politics; in the products upon which each clan based the majority of its trade; in the names, families, and personalities of the clan chiefs; in the list of important tunnels excavated and controlled by each clan; and in what she felt would be the best way to coax the dwarves to elect a king or queen friendly to the goals of the Varden.

"Ideally, Orik would be the one to take the throne," she said. "King Hrothgar was highly regarded by most of his subjects, and Dûrgrimst Ingeitum remains one of the richest and most influential of clans, all of which is to Orik's benefit. Orik is devoted to our cause. He has served as one of the Varden, you and I both count him as a friend, and he is your foster brother. I believe he has the skills to become an excellent king for the dwarves." Amusement kindled in her expression. "Small matter, that. However, he is young by the standards of the dwarves, and his association with us may prove to be an insurmountable barrier for the other clan chiefs. Another obstacle is that the other great clans—Dûrgrimst Feldûnost and Dûrgrimst Knurlcarathn, to name but two—are eager, after over a hundred years of rule by the Ingeitum, to see the crown go to a different clan. By all means, support Orik if it can help him onto the throne, but if it becomes obvious that his attempt is doomed and your backing could

guarantee the success of another clan chief who favors the Varden, then transfer your support, even if doing so will offend Orik. You cannot allow friendship to interfere with politics, not now."

When Nasuada finished her lecture on the dwarf clans, she, Eragon, and Saphira spent several minutes figuring out how Eragon could slip out of the camp without being noticed. After they had finally hammered out the details of the plan, Eragon and Saphira returned to their tent and told Blödhgarm what they had decided.

To Eragon's surprise, the fur-covered elf did not object. Curious, Eragon asked, "Do you approve?"

"It is not my place to say whether I approve or not," Blödhgarm replied, his voice a low purr. "But since Nasuada's stratagem does not seem to put either of you in unreasonable danger, and by means of this you may have the opportunity to further your learning in Ellesméra, neither I nor my brethren shall object." He inclined his head. "If you will excuse me, Bjartskular, Argetlam." Skirting Saphira, the elf exited the tent, allowing a bright flash of light to pierce the darkness inside as he pushed aside the entrance flap.

For a handful of minutes, Eragon and Saphira sat in silence, then Eragon put his hand on the top of her head. *Say what you will, I will miss you.*

And I you, little one.

Be careful. If anything happened to you, I would …

And you as well.

He sighed. *We've been together only a few days, and already we must part again. I find it hard to forgive Nasuada for that.*

Do not condemn her for doing what she must.

No, but it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

Move swiftly then, so I may soon join you in Farthen Dûr.

I wouldn't mind being so far away from you if only I could still touch your mind. That's the worst part of it: the horrible sense of emptiness. We dare not even speak to each other through the mirror in Nasuada's tent, for people would wonder why you kept visiting her without me.

Saphira blinked and flicked out her tongue, and he sensed a strange shift in her emotions.

What? he asked.

I … She blinked again. *I agree. I wish we could remain in mental contact when we were at great distances from each other. It would reduce our worry and trouble and would allow us to confound the Empire more easily.* She hummed with satisfaction as he sat next to her and began to scratch the small scales behind the corner of her jaw.

With a series of giddy leaps, Saphira carried Eragon through the camp to Roran and Katrina's tent. Outside the tent, Katrina was washing a shift in a bucket of soapy water, scrubbing the white fabric against a board of ridged wood. She lifted a hand to shield her eyes as a cloud of dust from Saphira's landing drifted over her.

Roran stepped out of the tent, buckling on his belt. He coughed and squinted in the dust. "What brings you here?" he asked as Eragon dismounted.

Speaking quickly, Eragon told them of his impending departure and impressed upon them the importance of keeping his absence a secret from the rest of the villagers. "No matter how slighted they feel because I supposedly refuse to see them, you cannot reveal the truth to them, not even to Horst or Elain. Let them think I have become a rude and ungrateful lout before you so much as utter a word about Nasuada's scheme. This I ask of you, for the sake of everyone who has pitted themselves against the Empire. Will you do it?"

"We would never betray you, Eragon," said Katrina. "Of that, you need have no doubts."

Then Roran said that he too was leaving.

"Where?" exclaimed Eragon.

"I just received my assignment a few minutes ago. We are going to raid the Empire's supply trains, somewhere well north of us, behind enemy lines."

Eragon gazed at the three of them in turn. First Roran, serious and determined, already tense with anticipation of battle; then Katrina, worried and trying to conceal it; and then Saphira, whose nostrils flickered with small tongues of flame, which sputtered as she breathed. "So we are all going our separate ways." What he did not say, but which hung over them like a shroud, was that they might never again see each other alive.

Grasping Eragon by the forearm, Roran pulled him close and hugged him for a moment. He released Eragon and stared deep into his eyes. "Guard your back, brother. Galbatorix isn't the only one who would like to slip a knife between your ribs when you aren't looking."

"Do the same yourself. And if you find yourself facing a spellcaster, run in the opposite direction. The wards I placed around you won't last forever."

Katrina hugged Eragon and whispered, "Don't take too long."

"I won't."

Together, Roran and Katrina went to Saphira and touched their foreheads to her long, bony snout. Her chest vibrated as she produced a pure bass note deep within her throat. *Remember, Roran*, she said, *do not make the mistake of leaving your enemies alive. And, Katrina? Do not dwell on that which you cannot change. It will only worsen your distress*. With a rustle of skin and scales, Saphira unfolded her wings and enveloped Roran, Katrina, and Eragon in a warm embrace, isolating them from the world.

As Saphira lifted her wings, Roran and Katrina stepped away while Eragon climbed onto her back. He waved at the newlywed couple, a lump in his throat, and continued waving even as Saphira took to the air. Blinking to clear his eyes, Eragon leaned against the spike behind him and gazed up at the tilting sky.

To the cook tents now? asked Saphira.

Aye.

Saphira climbed a few hundred feet before she aimed herself at the southwestern quadrant of the camp, where pillars of smoke drifted up from rows of ovens and large, wide pit fires. A thin stream of wind slipped past her and Eragon as she glided downward toward a clear patch of ground between two open-walled tents, each fifty feet long. Breakfast was over, so the tents were empty of men when Saphira landed with a loud thump.

Eragon hurried toward the fires beyond the plank tables, Saphira beside him. The many hundreds of men who were busy tending the fires, carving meat, cracking eggs, kneading dough, stirring cast-iron kettles full of mysterious liquids, scrubbing clean enormous piles of dirty pots and pans, and who were otherwise engaged in the enormous and never-ending task of preparing food for the Varden did not pause to gawk at Eragon and Saphira. For what importance was a dragon and Rider compared with the merciless demands of the ravenous many-mouthed creature whose hunger they were striving to sate?

A stout man with a close-cropped beard of white and black, who was almost short enough to pass for a dwarf trotted over to Eragon and Saphira and gave a curt bow. “I’m Quoth Merrinsson. How can I help you? If you want, Shadeslayer, we have some bread that just finished baking.” He gestured toward a double row of sourdough loaves resting on a platter on a nearby table.

“I might have half a loaf, if you can spare it,” said Eragon. “However, my hunger isn’t the reason for our visit. Saphira would like something to eat, and we haven’t time for her to hunt as she usually does.”

Quoth looked past him and eyed Saphira’s bulk, and his face grew pale. “How much does she normally … Ah, that is, how much do *you* normally eat, Saphira? I can have six sides of roast beef brought over

immediately, and another six will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Will that be enough, or …?" The knob in his throat jumped as he swallowed.

Saphira emitted a soft, rippling growl, which caused Quoth to squeak and hop backward. "She would prefer a live animal, if that's convenient," Eragon said.

In a high-pitched voice, Quoth said, "Convenient? Oh yes, it's convenient." He bobbed his head, twisting at his apron with his grease-stained hands. "Most convenient indeed, Shadeslayer, Dragon Saphira. King Orrin's table will not be lacking this afternoon, then, oh no."

And a barrel of mead, Saphira said to Eragon.

White circles appeared around Quoth's irises as Eragon repeated her request. "I—I am afraid that the dwarves have purchased most of our stocks of m-m-mead. We have only a few barrels left, and those are reserved for King—" Quoth flinched as a four-foot-long flame leaped out of Saphira's nostrils and singed the grass in front of him. Snarled lines of smoke drifted up from the blackened stalks. "I—I—I will have a barrel brought to you at once. If you will f-follow me, I will take y-you to the livestock, where you may have whatever beast you like."

Skirting the fires and tables and groups of harried men, the cook led them to a collection of large wooden pens, which contained pigs, cattle, geese, goats, sheep, rabbits, and a number of wild deer the Varden's foragers had captured during their forays into the surrounding wilderness. Close to the pens were coops full of chickens, ducks, doves, quail, grouse, and other birds. Their squawking, chirping, cooing, and crowing formed a cacophony so harsh, it made Eragon grit his teeth with annoyance. In order to avoid being overwhelmed by the thoughts and feelings of so many creatures, he was careful to keep his mind closed to all but Saphira.

The three of them stopped over a hundred feet from the pens so Saphira's presence would not panic the imprisoned animals. "Is there any here catches your fancy?" Quoth asked, gazing up at her and rubbing his hands with nervous dexterity.

As she surveyed the pens, Saphira sniffed and said to Eragon, *What pitiful prey.… I'm not really that hungry, you know. I went hunting only the day before yesterday, and I'm still digesting the bones of the deer I ate*.

You're still growing quickly. The food will do you good.

Not if I can't stomach it.

Pick something small, then. A pig, maybe.

That would hardly be of any help to you. No … I'll take that *one*. From Saphira, Eragon received the image of a cow of medium stature with a splattering of white splotches on her left flank.

After Eragon pointed out the cow, Quoth shouted at a line of men

idling by the pens. Two of them separated the cow from the rest of the herd, slipped a rope over its head, and pulled the reluctant animal toward Saphira. Thirty feet from Saphira, the cow balked and lowed with terror and tried to shake free of the rope and flee. Before the animal could escape, Saphira pounced, leaping across the distance separating them. The two men who were pulling on the rope threw themselves flat as Saphira rushed toward them, her jaws gaping.

Saphira struck the cow broadside as it turned to run, knocking the animal over and holding it in place with her splayed feet. It uttered a single, terrified bleat before Saphira's jaws closed over its neck. With a ferocious shake of her head, she snapped its spine. She paused then, crouched low over her kill, and looked expectantly at Eragon.

Closing his eyes, Eragon reached out with his mind toward the cow. The animal's consciousness had already faded into darkness, but its body was still alive, its flesh thrumming with motive energy, which was all the more intense for the fear that had coursed through it moments before. Repugnance for what he was about to do filled Eragon, but he ignored it and, placing a hand over the belt of Beloth the Wise, transferred what energy he could from the body of the cow into the twelve diamonds hidden around his waist. The process took only a few seconds.

He nodded to Saphira. *I'm done*.

Eragon thanked the men for their assistance, and then the two of them left him and Saphira alone.

While Saphira gorged herself, Eragon sat against the barrel of mead and watched the cooks go about their business. Every time they or one of their assistants beheaded a chicken or cut the throat of a pig or a goat or any other animal, he transferred the energy from the dying animal into the belt of Beloth the Wise. It was grim work, for most of the animals were still aware when he touched their consciousness and the howling storm of their fear and confusion and pain battered at him until his heart pounded and sweat beaded his brow and he wished nothing more than to heal the suffering creatures. However, he knew it was their doom to die, lest the Varden should starve. He had depleted his reserve of energy during the past few battles, and Eragon wanted to replenish it before setting out on a long and potentially hazardous journey. If Nasuada had allowed him to remain with the Varden for another week, he could have stocked the diamonds with energy from his own body and still had time to recuperate before running to Farthen Dûr, but he could not in the few hours he had. And even if he had done nothing but lie in bed and pour the fire from his limbs into the gems, he would not have been able to garner as much force as he did then from the multitude of animals.

The diamonds in the belt of Beloth the Wise seemed to be able to

absorb an almost unlimited amount of energy, so he stopped when he was unable to bear the prospect of immersing himself in the death throes of another animal. Shaking and dripping with sweat from head to toe, he leaned forward, his hands on his knees, and gazed at the ground between his feet, struggling not to be ill. Memories not his own intruded upon his thoughts, memories of Saphira soaring over Leona Lake with him on her back, of them plunging into the clear, cool water, a cloud of white bubbles swarming past them, of their shared delight in flying and swimming and playing together.

His breathing calmed, and he looked at Saphira where she sat among the remnants of her kill, chewing on the cow's skull. He smiled and sent her his gratitude for her help.

We can go now, he said.

Swallowing, she replied, *Take my strength as well. You may need it.*

No.

This is one argument you will not win. I insist.

And I insist otherwise. I won't leave you here weakened and unfit for battle. What if Murtagh and Thorn attack later today? We both need to be ready to fight at any moment. You'll be in more danger than I will because Galbatorix and the whole of the Empire will still believe I'm with you.

Yes, but you will be alone with a Kull in the middle of the wilderness.

I am as accustomed to the wilderness as you. Being away from civilization does not frighten me. As for a Kull, well, I don't know if I could beat one at a wrestling match, but my wards will protect me from any treachery.… I have enough energy, Saphira. You don't need to give me more.

She eyed him, considering his words, then lifted a paw and started licking it clean of blood. *Very well, I will keep myself … to myself?* The corners of her mouth seemed to lift with amusement. Lowering her paw, she said, *Would you be so kind as to roll that barrel over to me?* With a grunt, he got to his feet and did as she asked. She extended a single talon and punched two holes in the top of the barrel, which released the sweet smell of apple-honey mead. Arching her neck so her head was directly above the barrel, she grasped it between her massive jaws, then lifted it skyward and poured the gurgling contents down her gullet. The empty barrel shattered against the ground when she dropped it, and one of the iron hoops rolled several yards away. Her upper lip wrinkled, Saphira shook her head, then her breath hitched and she sneezed so hard that her nose struck the ground and a gout of fire erupted from both her mouth and her nostrils.

Eragon yelped with surprise and jumped sideways, batting at the smoking hem of his tunic. The right side of his face felt seared raw by the heat of the fire. *Saphira, be more careful!* he exclaimed.

Oops. She lowered her head and rubbed her dust-caked snout

against the edge of one foreleg, scratching at her nostrils. *The mead tickles*.

Really, you ought to know better by now, he grumbled as he climbed onto her back.

After rubbing her snout against her foreleg once more, Saphira leaped high into the air and, gliding over the Varden's camp, returned Eragon to his tent. He slid off her, then stood looking up at Saphira. For a time, they said nothing, allowing their shared emotions to speak for them.

Saphira blinked, and he thought her eyes glistened more than normal. *This is a test*, she said. *If we pass it, we shall be the stronger for it, as dragon and Rider*.

We must be able to function by ourselves if necessary, else we will forever be at a disadvantage compared with others.

Yes. She gouged the earth with her clenching claws. *Knowing that does nothing to ease my pain, however*. A shiver ran the length of her sinuous body. She shuffled her wings. *May the wind rise under your wings and the sun always be at your back. Travel well and travel fast, little one*.

Goodbye, he said.

Eragon felt that if he remained with her any longer, he would never leave, so he whirled around and, without a backward glance, plunged into the dark interior of his tent. The connection between them—which had become as integral to him as the structure of his own flesh—he severed completely. They would soon be too far apart to sense each other's minds anyway, and he had no desire to prolong the agony of their parting. He stood where he was for a moment, gripping the hilt of the falchion and swaying as if he were dizzy. Already the dull ache of loneliness suffused him, and he felt small and isolated without the comforting presence of Saphira's consciousness. *I did this before, and I can do this again*, he thought, and forced himself to square his shoulders and lift his chin.

From underneath his cot, he removed the pack he had made during his trip from Helgrind. Into it he placed the carved wooden tube wrapped in cloth that contained the scroll of the poem he had written for the Agaetí Blödhren, which Oromis had copied for him in his finest calligraphy; the flask of enchanted faelnirv and the small soapstone box of nalgask that were also gifts from Oromis; the thick book, *Domia abr Wyrda*, which was Jeod's present; his whetstone and his strop; and, after some hesitation, the many pieces of his armor, for he reasoned, *If the occasion arises where I need it, I will be more happy to have it than I will be miserable carrying it all the way to Farthen Dûr*. Or so he hoped. The book and the scroll he took because—after having done so much traveling—he had concluded that the best way to avoid

losing the objects he cared about was to keep them with him wherever he went.

The only extra clothes he decided to bring were a pair of gloves, which he stuffed inside his helmet, and his heavy woolen cloak, in case it got cold when they stopped nights. All the rest, he left rolled up in Saphira's saddlebags. *If I really am a member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum*, he thought, *they will clothe me properly when I arrive at Bregan Hold*.

Cinching off the pack, he lay his unstrung bow and quiver across the top and lashed them to the frame. He was about to do the same with the falchion when he realized that if he leaned to the side, the sword could slide out of the sheath. Therefore, he tied the sword flat against the rear of the pack, angling it so the hilt would ride between his neck and his right shoulder, where he could still draw it if need be.

Eragon donned the pack and then stabbed through the barrier in his mind, feeling the energy surging in his body and in the twelve diamonds mounted on the belt of Beloth the Wise. Tapping into that flow of force, he murmured the spell he had cast but once before: that which bent rays of light around him and rendered him invisible. A slight pall of fatigue weakened his limbs as he released the spell.

He glanced downward and had the disconcerting experience of looking through where he knew his torso and legs to be and seeing the imprint of his boots on the dirt below. *Now for the difficult part*, he thought.

Going to the rear of the tent, he slit the taut fabric with his hunting knife and slipped through the opening. Sleek as a well-fed cat, Blödhgarm was waiting for him outside. He inclined his head in the general direction of Eragon and murmured, "Shadeslayer," then devoted his attention to mending the hole, which he did with a half-dozen short words in the ancient language.

Eragon drifted down the path between two rows of tents, using his knowledge of woodcraft to make as little noise as possible. Whenever anyone approached, Eragon darted off the path and stood motionless, hoping they would not notice the footprints of shadow in the dirt or on the grass. He cursed the fact that the land was so dry; his boots tended to raise small puffs of dust no matter how gently he lowered them. To his surprise, being invisible degraded his sense of balance; without the ability to see where his hands or his feet were, he kept misjudging distances and bumping into things, almost as if he had consumed too much ale.

Despite his uncertain progress, he reached the edge of the camp in fairly good time and without arousing any suspicion. He paused behind a rain barrel, hiding his footprints in its thick shadow, and studied the packed-earth ramparts and ditches lined with sharpened

stakes that protected the Varden's eastern flank. If he had been trying to enter the camp, it would have been extremely difficult to escape detection by one of the many sentinels who patrolled the ramparts, even while invisible. But since the trenches and the ramparts had been designed to repel attackers and not imprison the defenders, crossing them from the opposite direction was a far easier task.

Eragon waited until the two closest sentinels had their backs turned toward him, and then he sprinted forward, pumping his arms with all his might. Within seconds, he traversed the hundred or so feet that separated the rain barrel from the slope of the rampart and dashed up the embankment so fast, he felt as if he were a stone skipping across water. At the crest of the embankment, he drove his legs into the ground and, arms flailing, leaped out over the lines of the Varden's defenses. For three silent heartbeats, he flew, then landed with a bone-jarring impact.

As soon as he regained his balance, Eragon pressed himself flat against the ground and held his breath. One of the sentinels paused in his rounds, but he did not seem to notice anything out of the ordinary, and after a moment he resumed his pacing. Eragon released his breath and whispered, "Du deloi lunaea," and felt as the spell smoothed out the impressions his boots had left in the embankment.

Still invisible, he stood and trotted away from the camp, careful to step only on clumps of grass so he would not kick up more dust. The farther he got from the sentinels, the faster he ran, until he sped over the land more quickly than a galloping horse.

Almost an hour later, he danced down the steep side of a narrow draw that the wind and rain had etched into the surface of the grasslands. At the bottom was a trickle of water lined with rushes and cattails. He continued downstream, staying well away from the soft ground next to the water—in an attempt to avoid leaving traces of his passage—until the creek widened into a small pond, and there by the edge, he saw the bulk of a bare-chested Kull sitting on a boulder.

As Eragon pushed his way through a stand of cattails, the sound of rustling leaves and stalks alerted the Kull of his presence. The creature turned his massive horned head toward Eragon, sniffing at the air. It was Nar Garzhvog, leader of the Urgals who had allied themselves with the Varden.

"You!" exclaimed Eragon, becoming visible once more.

"Greetings, Firesword," Garzhvog rumbled. Heaving up his thick limbs and giant torso, the Urgal rose to his full eight and a half feet, his gray-skinned muscles rippling in the light of the noonday sun.

"Greetings, Nar Garzhvog," said Eragon. Confused, he asked, "What of your rams? Who will lead them if you go with me?"

"My blood brother, Skgahgrezh, will lead. He is not Kull, but he has

long horns and a thick neck. He is a fine war chief."

"I see.… Why did *you* want to come, though?"

The Urgal lifted his square chin, baring his throat. "You are Firesword. You must not die, or the Urgralgra—the Urgals, as you name us—will not have our revenge against Galbatorix, and our race will die in this land. Therefore, I will run with you. I am the best of our fighters. I have defeated forty-two rams in single combat."

Eragon nodded, not displeased by the turn of events. Of all the Urgals, he trusted Garzhvog the most, for he had probed the Kull's consciousness before the Battle of the Burning Plains and had discovered that, by the standards of his race, Garzhvog was honest and reliable. *As long as he doesn't decide that his honor requires him to challenge me to a duel, we should have no cause for conflict*.

"Very well, Nar Garzhvog," he said, tightening the strap of the pack around his waist, "let us run together, you and I, as has not happened in the whole of recorded history."

Garzhvog chuckled deep in his chest. "Let us run, Firesword."

Together they faced east, and together they set forth for the Beor Mountains, Eragon running light and swift, and Garzhvog loping beside him, taking one stride for every two of Eragon's, the earth shuddering beneath the burden of his weight. Above them, swollen thunderheads gathered along the horizon, portending a torrential storm, and circling hawks uttered lonesome cries as they hunted their prey.

OVER HILL AND MOUNTAIN

Eragon and Nar Garzhvog ran for the rest of the day, through the night, and through the following day, stopping only to drink and to relieve themselves.

At the end of the second day, Garzhvog said, "Firesword, I must eat, and I must sleep."

Eragon leaned against a nearby stump, panting, and nodded. He had not wanted to speak first, but he was just as hungry and exhausted as the Kull. Soon after leaving the Varden, he had discovered that while he was faster than Garzhvog at distances of up to five miles, beyond that, Garzhvog's endurance was equal to or greater than his own.

"I will help you hunt," he said.

"That is not needed. Make us a big fire, and I will bring us food."

"Fine."

As Garzhvog strode off toward a thicket of beech trees north of them, Eragon untied the strap around his waist and, with a sigh of relief, dropped his pack next to the stump. "Blasted armor," he muttered. Even in the Empire, he had not run so far while carrying such a load. He had not anticipated how arduous it would be. His feet hurt, his legs hurt, his back hurt, and when he tried to crouch, his knees refused to bend properly.

Trying to ignore his discomfort, he set about gathering grass and dead branches for a fire, which he piled on a patch of dry, rocky ground.

He and Garzhvog were somewhere just east of the southern tip of Lake Tüdosten. The land was wet and lush, with fields of grass that stood six feet high, through which there roamed herds of deer, gazelles, and wild oxen with black hides and wide, backswept horns. The riches of the area were due, Eragon knew, to the Beor Mountains, which caused the formation of huge banks of clouds that drifted for many leagues over the plains beyond, bringing rain to places that would otherwise have been as dry as the Hadarac Desert.

Although the two of them had already run an enormous number of leagues, Eragon was disappointed by their progress. Between the Jiet River and Lake Tüdosten, they had lost several hours while hiding and taking detours to avoid being seen. Now that Lake Tüdosten was behind them, he hoped that their pace would increase. *Nasuada didn't foresee this delay, now did she? Oh no. She thought I could run flat out from there to Farthen Dûr. Ha!* Kicking at a branch that was in his way, he continued to gather wood, grumbling to himself the entire time.

When Garzhvog returned an hour later, Eragon had built a fire a yard long and two feet wide and was sitting in front of it, staring at the flames and fighting the urge to slip into the waking dreams that were his rest. His neck cracked as he looked up.

Garzhvog strode toward him, holding the carcass of a plump doe under his left arm. As if it weighed no more than a sack of rags, he lifted the doe and wedged its head in the fork of a tree twenty yards from the fire. Then he drew a knife and began to clean the carcass.

Eragon stood, feeling as if his joints had turned to stone, and stumbled toward Garzhvog.

"How did you kill it?" he asked.

"With my sling," rumbled Garzhvog.

"Do you intend to cook it on a spit? Or do Urgals eat their meat raw?"

Garzhvog turned his head and gazed through the coil of his left horn at Eragon, a deep-set yellow eye gleaming with some enigmatic emotion. "We are not beasts, Firesword."

"I did not say you were."

With a grunt, the Urgal returned to his work.

"It will take too long to cook on a spit," said Eragon.

"I thought a stew, and we can fry what is left on a rock."

"Stew? How? We don't have a pot."

Reaching down, Garzhvog scrubbed his right hand clean on the ground, then removed a square of folded material from the pouch at his belt and tossed it at Eragon.

Eragon tried to catch it but was so tired he missed, and the object struck the ground. It looked like an exceptionally large piece of vellum. As he picked it up, the square fell open, and he saw it had the shape of a bag, perhaps a foot and a half wide and three feet deep. The rim was reinforced with a thick strip of leather, upon which were sewn metal rings. He turned the container over, amazed by its softness and the fact that it had no seams.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The stomach of the cave bear I killed the year I first got my horns. Hang it from a frame or put it in a hole, then fill it with water and drop hot stones in it. Stones heat water, and stew tastes good."

"Won't the stones burn through the stomach?"

"They have not yet."

"Is it enchanted?"

"No magic. Strong stomach." Garzhvog's breath huffed out as he grasped the deer's hips on either side and, with a single movement, broke its pelvis in two. The sternum he split using his knife.

"It must have been a big bear," Eragon said.

Garzhvog made a *ruk-ruk* sound deep in his throat. "It was bigger

than I am now, Shadeslayer."

"Did you kill it with your sling as well?"

"I choked him to death with my hands. No weapons are allowed when you come of age and must prove your courage." Garzhvog paused for a moment, his knife buried to the hilt in the carcass. "Most do not try to kill a cave bear. Most hunt wolves or mountain goats. That is why I became war chief and others did not."

Eragon left him preparing the meat and went to the fire. Next to it, he dug a hole, which he lined with the bear stomach, pushing stakes through the metal rings to hold the stomach in place. He gathered a dozen apple-sized rocks from the surrounding field and tossed them into the center of the fire. While he waited for the rocks to heat, he used magic to fill the bear stomach two-thirds with water, and then he fashioned a pair of tongs out of a sapling willow and a piece of knotted rawhide.

When the rocks were cherry red, he shouted, "They're ready!"

"Put them in," Garzhvog replied.

Using the tongs, Eragon extracted the nearest stone from the fire and lowered it into the container. The surface of the water exploded into steam as the stone touched it. He deposited two more stones in the bear stomach, which brought the water to a rolling boil.

Garzhvog lumbered over and poured a double handful of meat into the water, then seasoned the stew with large pinches of salt from the pouch at his belt and several sprigs of rosemary, thyme, and other wild greens he had chanced upon while hunting. Then he placed a flat piece of shale across one side of the fire. When the stone was hot, he fried strips of meat on it.

While the food cooked, Eragon and Garzhvog carved themselves spoons from the stump where Eragon had dropped his pack.

Hunger made it seem longer to Eragon, but it was not many more minutes before the stew was done, and he and Garzhvog ate, ravenous as wolves. Eragon devoured twice as much as he thought he ever had before, and what he did not consume, Garzhvog did, eating enough for six large men.

Afterward, Eragon lay back, propping himself up on his elbows, and stared at the flashing fireflies that had appeared along the edge of the beech trees, swirling in abstract patterns as they chased one another. Somewhere an owl hooted, soft and throaty. The first few stars speckled the purple sky.

Eragon stared without seeing and thought of Saphira and then of Arya and then of Arya and Saphira, and then he closed his eyes, a dull throb forming behind his temples. He heard a cracking sound and, opening his eyes once more, saw that on the other side of the empty bear stomach, Garzhvog was cleaning his teeth with the pointed end

of a broken thighbone. Eragon dropped his gaze to the bottom of the Urgal's bare feet—Garzhvog having removed his sandals before they began their meal—and to his surprise noticed that the Urgal had seven toes on each foot.

"The dwarves have the same number of toes as you do," he said.

Garzhvog spat a piece of meat into the coals of the fire. "I did not know that. I have never wanted to look at the feet of a dwarf."

"Don't you find it curious that Urgals and dwarves should both have fourteen toes, while elves and humans have ten?"

Garzhvog's thick lips lifted in a snarl. "We share no blood with those hornless mountain rats, Firesword. They have fourteen toes, and we have fourteen toes. It pleased the gods to shape us so when they created the world. There is no other explanation."

Eragon grunted in response and returned to watching the fireflies. Then: "Tell me a story your race is fond of, Nar Garzhvog."

The Kull pondered for a moment, then removed the bone from his mouth. He said, "Long ago, there lived a young Urgralgra, and her name was Maghara. She had horns that shone like polished stone, hair that hung past her waist, and a laugh that could charm the birds out of the trees. But she was not pretty. She was ugly. Now, in her village, there also lived a ram who was very strong. He had killed four rams in wrestling matches and had defeated twenty-three others besides. But although his feats had won him wide renown, he had yet to choose a brood-mate. Maghara wished to be his brood-mate, but he would not look at her, for she was ugly, and because of her ugliness, he did not see her bright horns, nor her long hair, and he did not hear her pleasant laugh. Sick at heart that he would not look at her, Maghara climbed the tallest mountain in the Spine, and she called out to Rahna to help her. Rahna is mother of us all, and it was she who invented weaving and farming and she who raised the Beor Mountains when she was fleeing the great dragon. Rahna, She of the Gilded Horns, she answered Maghara, and she asked why Maghara had summoned her. 'Make me pretty, Honored Mother, so I can attract the ram I want,' said Maghara. And Rahna answered, 'You do not need to be pretty, Maghara. You have bright horns and long hair and a pleasant laugh. With those, you can catch a ram who is not so foolish as to look at only a female's face.' And Maghara, she threw herself down upon the ground and said, 'I will not be happy unless I can have this ram, Honored Mother. Please, make me pretty.' Rahna, she smiled then and said, 'If I do this, child, how will you repay me for this favor?' And Maghara said, 'I will give you anything you want.'

"Rahna was well pleased with her offer, and so she made Maghara pretty then, and Maghara returned to her village, and everyone wondered at her beauty. With her new face, Maghara became the

brood-mate of the ram she wanted, and they had many children, and they lived in happiness for seven years. Then Rahna came to Maghara, and Rahna said, 'You have had seven years with the ram you wanted. Have you enjoyed them?' And Maghara said, 'I have.' And Rahna said, 'Then I have come for my payment.' And she looked around their house of stone, and she seized hold of Maghara's eldest son and said, 'I will have him.' Maghara begged She of the Gilded Horns not to take her eldest son, but Rahna would not relent. At last, Maghara took her brood-mate's club, and she struck at Rahna, but the club shattered in her hands. In punishment, Rahna stripped Maghara's beauty from her, and then Rahna left with Maghara's son for her hall where the four winds dwell, and she named the boy Hegraz and raised him to be one of the mightiest warriors who has ever walked this land. And so one should learn from Maghara to never fight one's fate, for you will lose that which you hold most dear."

Eragon watched the glowing rim of the crescent moon appear above the eastern horizon. "Tell me something about your villages."

"What?"

"Anything. I experienced hundreds of memories when I was in your mind and in Khagra's and in Otvek's, but I can recall only a handful of them, and those imperfectly. I am trying to make sense of what I saw."

"There is much I could tell you," rumbled Garzhvog. His heavy eyes pensive, he worked his makeshift toothpick around one of his fangs and then said, "We take logs, and we carve them with faces of the animals of the mountains, and these we bury upright by our houses so they will frighten away the spirits of the wild. Sometimes the poles almost seem to be alive. When you walk into one of our villages, you can feel the eyes of all the carved animals watching you.…" The bone paused in the Urgal's fingers, then resumed its back-and-forth motion. "By the doorway of each hut, we hang the namna. It is a strip of cloth as wide as my outstretched hand. The namna are brightly colored, and the patterns on them depict the history of the family that lives in that hut. Only the oldest and most skilled weavers are allowed to add to a namna or to reweave one if it becomes damaged.…" The bone disappeared inside of Garzhvog's fist. "During the months of winter, those who have mates work with them on their hearth rug. It takes at least five years to finish such a rug, so by the time it is done, you know whether you have made a good choice of mate."

"I've never seen one of your villages," said Eragon. "They must be very well hidden."

"Well hidden and well defended. Few who see our homes live to tell of it."

Focusing on the Kull and allowing an edge to creep into his voice, Eragon said, "How is it you learned this language, Garzhvog? Was

there a human who lived among you? Did you keep any of us as slaves?"

Garzhvog returned Eragon's gaze without flinching. "We have no slaves, Firesword. I tore the knowledge from the minds of the men I fought, and I shared it with the rest of my tribe."

"You have killed many humans, haven't you?"

"You have killed many Urgralgra, Firesword. It is why we must be allies, or my race will not survive."

Eragon crossed his arms. "When Brom and I were tracking the Ra'zac, we passed through Yazuac, a village by the Ninor River. We found all of the people piled in the center of the village, dead, with a baby stuck on a spear at the top of the pile. It was the worst thing I've ever seen. And it was Urgals who killed them."

"Before I got my horns," said Garzhvog, "my father took me to visit one of our villages along the western fringes of the Spine. We found our people tortured, burnt, and slaughtered. The men of Narda had learned of our presence, and they had surprised the village with many soldiers. Not one of our tribe escaped.… It is true we love war more than other races, Firesword, and that has been our downfall many times before. Our women will not consider a ram for a mate unless he has proven himself in battle and killed at least three foes himself. And there is a joy in battle unlike any other joy. But though we love feats of arms, that does not mean we are not aware of our faults. If our race cannot change, Galbatorix will kill us all if he defeats the Varden, and you and Nasuada will kill us all if you overthrow that snake-tongued betrayer. Am I not right, Firesword?"

Eragon jerked his chin in a nod. "Aye."

"It does no good, then, to dwell upon past wrongs. If we cannot overlook what each of our races has done, there will never be peace between humans and the Urgralgra."

"How should we treat you, though, if we defeat Galbatorix and Nasuada gives your race the land you have asked for and, twenty years from now, your children begin to kill and plunder so they can win mates? If you know your own history, Garzhvog, then you know it has always been so when Urgals sign peace accords."

With a thick sigh, Garzhvog said, "Then we will hope that there are still Urgralgra across the sea and that they are wiser than us, for we will be no more in this land."

Neither of them spoke again that night. Garzhvog curled up on his side and slept with his massive head resting on the ground, while Eragon wrapped himself in his cloak and sat against the stump and gazed at the slowly turning stars, drifting in and out of his waking dreams.

By the end of the next day, they had come into sight of the Beor Mountains. At first the mountains were nothing more than ghostly shapes on the horizon, angled panes of white and purple, but as evening drew nigh, the distant range acquired substance, and Eragon was able to make out the dark band of trees along the base and, above that, the even wider band of gleaming snow and ice and, still higher yet, the peaks themselves, which were gray, bare stone, for they were so tall, no plants grew upon them and no snow fell upon them. As when he had first seen them, the sheer size of the Beor Mountains overwhelmed Eragon. His every instinct insisted that nothing that large could exist, and yet he knew his eyes did not deceive him. The mountains averaged ten miles high, and many were even taller.

Eragon and Garzhvog did not stop that night but continued running through the hours of darkness and through the day thereafter. When morning arrived, the sky grew bright, but because of the Beor Mountains, it was almost noon before the sun burst forth between two peaks and rays of light as wide as the mountains themselves streamed out over the land that was still caught in the strange twilight of shadow. Eragon paused then, on the bank of a brook, and contemplated the sight in silent wonderment for several minutes.

As they skirted the vast range of mountains, their journey began to seem to Eragon uncomfortably similar to his flight from Gil'ead to Farthen Dûr with Murtagh, Saphira, and Arya. He even thought he recognized the place where they had camped after crossing the Hadarac Desert.

The long days and longer nights slipped by with both excruciating slowness and surprising speed, for every hour was identical to the last, which made Eragon feel not only as if their ordeal would never end but also as if large portions of it had never taken place.

When he and Garzhvog arrived at the mouth of the great rift that split the range of mountains for many leagues from north to south, they turned to their right and passed between the cold and indifferent peaks. Arriving at the Beartooth River—which flowed out of the narrow valley that led to Farthen Dûr—they forded the frigid waters and continued southward.

That night, before they ventured east into the mountains proper, they camped by a small pond and rested their limbs. Garzhvog killed another deer with his sling, this time a buck, and they both ate their fill.

His hunger sated, Eragon was hunched over, mending a hole in the side of his boot, when he heard an eerie howl that set his pulse racing. He glanced around the darkened landscape, and to his alarm, he saw the silhouette of a huge beast loping around the pebble-lined shore of

the pond.

"Garzhvog," said Eragon in a low voice, and reached over to his pack and drew his falchion.

Taking a fist-sized rock from the ground, the Kull placed it in the leather pocket of his sling, and then rising to his full height, he opened his maw and bellowed into the night until the land rang with echoes of his defiant challenge.

The beast paused, then proceeded at a slower pace, sniffing at the ground here and there. As it entered the circle of firelight, Eragon's breath caught in his throat. Standing before them was a gray-backed wolf as big as a horse, with fangs like sabers and burning yellow eyes that followed their every movement. The wolf's feet were the size of bucklers.

A Shrrg! thought Eragon.

As the giant wolf circled their camp, moving almost silently despite his great bulk, Eragon thought of the elves and how they would deal with a wild animal, and in the ancient language, he said, "Brother Wolf, we mean you no harm. Tonight our pack rests and does not hunt. You are welcome to share our food and the warmth of our den until morning." The Shrrg paused, and his ears swiveled forward while Eragon spoke in the ancient language.

"Firesword, what are you doing?" growled Garzhvog.

"Don't attack unless he does."

The heavy-shouldered beast slowly entered their camp, the tip of his huge wet nose twitching the whole while. The wolf poked his shaggy head toward the fire, seemingly curious about the writhing flames, then moved over to the scraps of meat and viscera scattered over the ground where Garzhvog had butchered the buck. Crouching, the wolf snapped up the gobbets of flesh, then rose and, without a backward glance, padded off into the depths of the night.

Eragon relaxed and sheathed the falchion. Garzhvog, however, remained standing where he was, his lips pulled back in a snarl, looking and listening for anything out of the ordinary in the surrounding darkness.

At dawn's first light, Eragon and Garzhvog left their camp, and running eastward, entered the valley that would lead them to Mount Thardûr.

As they passed underneath the boughs of the dense forest that guarded the interior of the mountain range, the air became noticeably cooler and the soft bed of needles on the ground muffled their footsteps. The tall, dark, grim trees that loomed over them seemed to be watching as they made their way between the thick trunks and around the twisted roots that knuckled up out of the moist earth,

standing two, three, and often four feet high. Large black squirrels scampered among the branches, chattering loudly. A thick layer of moss blanketed the corpses of trees that had fallen. Ferns and thimbleberries and other green leafy plants flourished alongside mushrooms of every shape, size, and color.

The world narrowed once Eragon and Garzhvog were fully inside the long valley. The gigantic mountains pressed close on either side, oppressive with their bulk, and the sky was a distant, unreachable strip of sea blue, the highest sky Eragon had ever seen. A few thin clouds grazed the shoulders of the mountains.

An hour or so after noon, Eragon and Garzhvog slowed as a series of terrible roars echoed among the trees. Eragon pulled his sword from its sheath, and Garzhvog plucked a smooth river rock from the ground and fit it in the pocket of his sling.

"It is a cave bear," said Garzhvog. A furious, high-pitched squeal, similar to metal scraping over metal, punctuated his statement. "And Nagra. We must be careful, Firesword."

They proceeded at a slow pace and soon spotted the animals several hundred feet up the side of a mountain. A drove of reddish boars with thick, slashing tusks milled in squealing confusion before a huge mass of silver-brown fur, hooked claws, and snapping teeth that moved with deadly speed. At first the distance fooled Eragon, but then he compared the animals to the trees next to them and realized that each boar would have dwarfed a Shrrg and that the bear was nearly as large as his house in Palancar Valley. The boars had bloodied the cave bear's flanks, but that seemed to only enrage the beast. Rearing on his hind legs, the bear bellowed and swatted one of the boars with a massive paw, knocking it aside and tearing open its hide. Three more times the boar attempted to rise, and three more times the cave bear struck at it, until at last the boar gave up and lay still. As the bear bent to feed, the rest of the squealing pigs fled back under the trees, heading higher up the mountain and away from the bear.

Awed by the bear's strength, Eragon followed Garzhvog as the Urgal slowly walked across the bear's field of vision. Lifting his crimson snout from the belly of his kill, the bear watched them with small, beady eyes, then apparently decided they were no threat to him and resumed eating.

"I think even Saphira might not be able to overcome such a monster," Eragon murmured.

Garzhvog uttered a small grunt. "She can breathe fire. A bear cannot."

Neither of them looked away from the bear until trees hid it from view, and even then they kept their weapons at readiness, not knowing what other dangers they might encounter.

The day had passed into late afternoon when they became conscious of another sound: laughter. Eragon and Garzhvog halted, and then Garzhvog raised a finger and, with surprising stealth, crept through a wall of brush toward the laughter. Placing his feet with care, Eragon went with the Kull, holding his breath for fear his breathing would betray their presence.

Peering through a cluster of dogwood leaves, Eragon saw that there was now a well-worn path at the bottom of the valley, and next to the path, three dwarf children were playing, throwing sticks at each other and shrieking with laughter. No adults were visible. Eragon withdrew to a safe distance, exhaled, and studied the sky, where he spotted several plumes of white smoke perhaps a mile farther up the valley.

A branch snapped as Garzhvog squatted next to him, so that they were about level. Garzhvog said, "Firesword, here we part."

"You will not come to Bregan Hold with me?"

"No. My task was to keep you safe. If I go with you, the dwarves will not trust you as they should. Thardûr mountain is close at hand, and I am confident no one will dare hurt you between here and there."

Eragon rubbed the back of his neck and looked back and forth between Garzhvog and the smoke east of them. "Are you going to run straight back to the Varden?"

With a low chuckle, Garzhvog said, "Aye, but maybe not so fast as we did coming here."

Unsure of what to say, Eragon pushed at the rotten end of a log with the tip of his boot, exposing a clutch of white larvae squirming in the tunnels they had excavated. "Don't let a Shrrg or a bear eat you, eh? Then I would have to track down the beast and kill him, and I don't have the time for that."

Garzhvog pressed both his fists against his bony forehead. "May your enemies cower before you, Firesword." Standing and turning, Garzhvog loped away from Eragon. The forest soon hid the Kull's bulky form.

Eragon filled his lungs with the fresh mountain air, then pushed his way through the wall of brush. As he emerged from the thicket of brakes and dogwood, the tiny dwarf children froze, the expressions on their round-cheeked faces wary. Holding his hands out to his sides, Eragon said, "I am Eragon Shadeslayer, Son of None. I seek Orik, Thrifk's son, at Bregan Hold. Can you take me to him?" When the children did not respond, he realized they understood nothing of his own language. "I am a Dragon Rider," he said, speaking slowly and emphasizing the words. "Eka eddyr aí Shur'tugal … Shur'tugal … Argetlam."

At that, the children's eyes brightened, and their mouths formed

round shapes of amazement. “Argetlam!” they exclaimed. “Argetlam!” And they ran over and threw themselves at him, wrapping their short arms around his legs and tugging at his clothes, shouting with merriment the entire time. Eragon stared down at them, feeling a foolish grin spread across his face. The children grasped his hands, and he allowed them to pull him down the path. Even though he could not understand, the children kept up a continuous stream of Dwarvish, telling him about what he knew not, but he enjoyed listening to their speech.

When one of the children—a girl, he thought—held her arms out toward him, he picked her up and placed her on his shoulders, wincing as she grasped fistfuls of his hair. She laughed, high and sweet, which made him smile again. Thus accoutered and accompanied, Eragon made his way toward Mount Thardûr and there to Bregan Hold and his foster brother, Orik.

Roran stared at the round, flat stone he held cupped in his hands. His eyebrows met in a scowl of frustration.

"Stenr rïsa!" he growled under his breath.

The stone refused to budge.

"What are you up to, Stronghammer?" asked Carn, dropping onto the log where Roran sat.

Slipping the stone into his belt, Roran accepted the bread and cheese Carn had brought him and said, "Nothing. Just woolgathering."

Carn nodded. "Most do before a mission."

As he ate, Roran allowed his gaze to drift over the men he found himself with. Their group was thirty strong, himself included. They were all hardened warriors. Everyone carried a bow, and most also wore a sword, although a few chose to fight with a spear, or with a mace or a hammer. Of the thirty men, he guessed that seven or eight were close to his own age, while the rest were several years older. The eldest among them was their captain, Martland Redbeard, the deposed earl of Thun, who had seen enough winters that his famed beard had become frosted with silver hairs.

When Roran had first joined Martland's command, he had presented himself to Martland in his tent. The earl was a short man, with powerful limbs from a lifetime of riding horses and wielding swords. His titular beard was thick and well groomed and hung to the middle of his sternum. After looking Roran over, the earl had said, "Lady Nasuada has told me great things about you, my boy, and I have heard much else from the stories my men tell, rumors, gossip, hearsay, and the like. You know how it is. No doubt, you have accomplished notable feats; bearding the Ra'zac in their own den, for example, now there was a tricky piece of work. Of course, you had your cousin to help you, didn't you, hmm? … You may be accustomed to having your way with the people from your village, but you are part of the Varden now, my boy. More specifically, you are one of my warriors. We are not your family. We are not your neighbors. We are not even necessarily your friends. Our duty is to carry out Nasuada's orders, and carry them out we will, no matter how any one of us might feel about it. While you serve under me, you will do what I tell you, when I tell you, and how I tell you, or I swear upon the bones of my blessed mother—may she rest in peace—I will personally whip the skin off your back, no matter to whom you may be related. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Very good. If you behave yourself and show you have some common sense, and if you can manage to stay alive, it is possible for a man of determination to advance quickly among the Varden. Whether you do or not, however, depends entirely on if I deem you fit to command men of your own. But don't you believe, not for one moment, not *one* blasted moment, that you can flatter me into a good opinion of you. I don't care whether you like or hate me. My only concern is whether you can do what needs to be done."

"I understand perfectly, sir!"

"Yes, well, maybe you do at that, Stronghammer. We shall know soon enough. Leave and report to Ulhart, my right-hand man."

Roran swallowed the last of his bread and washed it down with a swig of wine from the skin he carried. He wished they could have had a hot dinner that night, but they were deep in the Empire's territory, and soldiers might have spotted a fire. With a sigh, he stretched out his legs. His knees were sore from riding Snowfire from dusk until dawn for the past three days.

In the back of his mind, Roran felt a faint but constant pressure, a mental itch that, night or day, pointed him in the same direction: the direction of Katrina. The source of the sensation was the ring Eragon had given him, and it was a comfort to Roran knowing that, because of it, he and Katrina could find each other anywhere in Alagaësia, even if they were both blind and deaf.

Beside him, he heard Carn muttering phrases in the ancient language, and he smiled. Carn was their spellcaster, sent to ensure that an enemy magician could not kill them all with a wave of his hand. From some of the other men, Roran had gathered that Carn was not a particularly strong magician—he struggled to cast every spell—but that he compensated for his weakness by inventing extraordinarily clever spells and by excelling at worming his way into his opponents' minds. Carn was thin of face and thin of body, with drooping eyes and a nervous, excitable air. Roran had taken an immediate liking to him.

Across from Roran, two of the men, Halmar and Ferth, were sitting in front of their tent, and Halmar was telling Ferth, "… so when the soldiers came for him, he pulled all his men inside his estate and set fire to the pools of oil his servants had poured earlier, trapping the soldiers and making it appear to those who came later as if the whole lot of them had burned to death. Can you believe it? Five hundred soldiers he killed at one go, without even drawing a blade!"

"How did he escape?" Ferth asked.

"Redbeard's grandfather was a cunning bastard, he was. He had a tunnel dug all the way from the family hall to the nearest river. With it, Redbeard was able to get his family and all their servants out alive.

He took them to Surda then, where King Larkin sheltered them. It was quite a number of years before Galbatorix learned they were still alive. We're lucky to be under Redbeard, to be sure. He's lost only two battles, and those because of magic."

Halmar fell silent as Ulhart stepped into the middle of the row of sixteen tents. The grim-faced veteran stood with his legs spread, immovable as a deep-rooted oak tree, and surveyed the tents, checking that everyone was present. He said, "Sun's down, get to sleep. We ride out two hours before first light. Convoy should be seven miles northwest of us. Make good time, we strike just as they start moving. Kill everyone, burn everything, an' we go back. You know how it goes. Stronghammer, you ride with me. Mess up, an' I'll gut you with a dull fishhook." The men chuckled. "Right, get to sleep."

Wind whipped Roran's face. The thunder of pulsing blood filled his ears, drowning out every other sound. Snowfire surged between his legs, galloping. Roran's vision had narrowed; he saw nothing but the two soldiers sitting on brown mares next to the second-to-last wagon of the supply train.

Raising his hammer overhead, Roran howled with all his might.

The two soldiers started and fumbled with their weapons and shields. One of them dropped his spear and bent to recover it.

Pulling on Snowfire's reins to slow him, Roran stood upright in his stirrups and, drawing abreast of the first soldier, struck him on the shoulder, splitting his mail hauberk. The man screamed, his arm going limp. Roran finished him off with a backhand blow.

The other soldier had retrieved his spear, and he jabbed at Roran, aiming at his neck. Roran ducked behind his round shield, the spear jarring him each time it buried itself in the wood. He pressed his legs against Snowfire's sides, and the stallion reared, neighing and pawing at the air with iron-shod hooves. One hoof caught the soldier in the chest, tearing his red tunic. As Snowfire dropped to all fours again, Roran swung his hammer sideways and crushed the man's throat.

Leaving the soldier thrashing on the ground, Roran spurred Snowfire toward the next wagon in the convoy, where Ulhart was battling three soldiers of his own. Four oxen pulled each wagon, and as Snowfire passed the wagon Roran had just captured, the lead ox tossed his head, and the tip of his left horn caught Roran in the lower part of his right leg. Roran gasped. He felt as if a red-hot iron had been laid against his shin. He glanced down and saw a flap of his boot hanging loose, along with a layer of his skin and muscle.

With another battle-cry, Roran rode up to the closest of the three soldiers Ulhart was fighting and felled him with a single swipe of his

hammer. The next man evaded Roran's subsequent attack, then turned his horse and galloped away.

"Get him!" Ulhart shouted, but Roran was already in pursuit.

The fleeing soldier dug his spurs into the belly of his horse until the animal bled, but despite his desperate cruelty, his steed could not outrun Snowfire. Roran bent low over Snowfire's neck as the stallion extended himself, flying over the ground with incredible speed. Realizing flight was hopeless, the soldier reined in his mount, wheeled about, and slashed at Roran with a saber. Roran lifted his hammer and barely managed to deflect the razor-sharp blade. He immediately retaliated with a looping overhead attack, but the soldier parried and then slashed at Roran's arms and legs twice more. In his mind, Roran cursed. The soldier was obviously more experienced with swordplay than he was; if he could not win the engagement in the next few seconds, the soldier would kill him.

The soldier must have sensed his advantage, for he pressed the attack, forcing Snowfire to prance backward. On three occasions, Roran was sure the soldier was about to wound him, but the man's saber twisted at the last moment and missed Roran, diverted by an unseen force. Roran was thankful for Eragon's wards then.

Having no other recourse, Roran resorted to the unexpected: he stuck his head and neck out and shouted, "Bah!" just as he would if he were trying to scare someone in a dark hallway. The soldier flinched, and as he flinched, Roran leaned over and brought his hammer down on the man's left knee. The man's face went white with pain. Before he could recover, Roran struck him in the small of his back, and then as the soldier screamed and arched his spine, Roran ended his misery with a quick blow to the head.

Roran sat panting for a moment, then tugged on Snowfire's reins and spurred him into a canter as they returned to the convoy. His eyes darting from place to place, drawn by any flicker of motion, Roran took stock of the battle. Most of the soldiers were already dead, as were the men who had been driving the wagons. By the lead wagon, Carn stood facing a tall man in robes, the two of them rigid except for occasional twitches, the only sign of their invisible duel. Even as Roran watched, Carn's opponent pitched forward and lay motionless on the ground.

By the middle of the convoy, however, five enterprising soldiers had cut the oxen loose from three wagons and had pulled the wagons into a triangle, from within which they were able to hold off Martland Redbeard and ten other Varden. Four of the soldiers poked spears between the wagons, while the fifth fired arrows at the Varden, forcing them to retreat behind the nearest wagon for cover. The archer had already wounded several of the Varden, some of whom had fallen

off their horses, others of whom had kept their saddles long enough to find cover.

Roran frowned. They could not afford to linger out in the open on one of the Empire's main roads while they slowly picked off the entrenched soldiers. Time was against them.

All the soldiers were facing west, the direction from which the Varden had attacked. Aside from Roran, none of the Varden had crossed to the other side of the convoy. Thus, the soldiers were unaware that he was bearing down on them from the east.

A plan occurred to Roran. In any other circumstances, he would have dismissed it as ludicrous and impractical, but as it was, he accepted the plan as the only course of action that could resolve the standoff without further delay. He did not bother to consider the danger to himself; he had abandoned all fear of death and injury the moment their charge had begun.

Roran urged Snowfire into a full gallop. He placed his left hand on the front of his saddle, edged his boots almost out of the stirrups, and gathered his muscles in preparation. When Snowfire was fifty feet away from the triangle of wagons, he pressed downward with his hand and, lifting himself, placed his feet on the saddle and stood crouched on Snowfire. It took all his skill and concentration to maintain his balance. As Roran had expected, Snowfire lessened his speed and started to veer to the side as the cluster of wagons loomed large before them.

Roran released the reins just as Snowfire turned, and jumped off the horse's back, leaping high over the east-facing wagon of the triangle. His stomach lurched. He caught a glimpse of the archer's upturned face, the soldier's eyes round and edged with white, then slammed into the man, and they both crashed to the ground. Roran landed on top, the soldier's body cushioning his fall. Pushing himself onto his knees, Roran raised his shield and drove its rim through the gap between the soldier's helm and his tunic, breaking his neck. Then Roran shoved himself upright.

The other four soldiers were slow to react. The one to Roran's left made the mistake of trying to pull his spear inside the triangle of wagons, but in his haste, he wedged the spear between the rear of one wagon and the front wheel of another, and the shaft splintered in his hands. Roran lunged toward him. The soldier tried to retreat, but the wagons blocked his way. Swinging the hammer in an underhand blow, Roran caught the soldier beneath his chin.

The second soldier was smarter. He let go of his spear and reached for the sword at his belt but only succeeded in drawing the blade halfway out of the sheath before Roran staved in his chest.

The third and fourth soldiers were ready for Roran by then. They

converged on him, naked blades outstretched, snarls on their faces. Roran tried to sidestep them, but his torn leg failed him, and he stumbled and fell to one knee. The closest soldier slashed downward. With his shield, Roran blocked the blow, then dove forward and crushed the soldier's foot with the flat end of his hammer. Cursing, the soldier toppled to the ground. Roran promptly smashed the soldier's face, then flipped onto his back, knowing that the last soldier was directly behind him.

Roran froze, his arms and legs splayed to either side.

The soldier stood over him, holding his sword extended, the tip of the gleaming blade less than an inch away from Roran's throat.

So this is how it ends, thought Roran.

Then a thick arm appeared around the soldier's neck, yanking him backward, and the soldier uttered a choked cry as a sword blade sprouted from the middle of his chest, along with a spray of blood. The soldier collapsed into a limp pile, and in his place, there stood Martland Redbeard. The earl was breathing heavily, and his beard and chest were splattered with gore.

Martland stuck his sword in the dirt, leaned on the pommel, and surveyed the carnage within the triangle of wagons. He nodded. "You'll do, I think."

Roran sat on the end of a wagon, biting his tongue as Carn cut off the rest of his boot. Trying to ignore the stabs of agony from his leg, Roran gazed up at the vultures circling overhead and concentrated on memories of his home in Palancar Valley.

He grunted as Carn probed especially deep into the gash.

"Sorry," said Carn. "I have to inspect the wound."

Roran kept staring at the vultures and did not answer. After a minute, Carn uttered a number of words in the ancient language, and a few seconds later, the pain in Roran's leg subsided to a dull ache. Looking down, Roran saw his leg was whole once more.

The effort of healing Roran and the two other men before him had left Carn gray-faced and shaking. The magician slumped against the wagon, wrapping his arms around his middle, his expression queasy.

"Are you all right?" Roran asked.

Carn lifted his shoulders in a minuscule shrug. "I just need a moment to recover.… The ox scratched the outer bone of your lower leg. I repaired the scratch, but I didn't have the strength to completely heal the rest of your injury. I stitched together your skin and muscle, so it won't bleed or pain you overmuch, but only lightly. The flesh there won't hold much more than your weight, not until it mends on its own, that is."

"How long will that take?"

"A week, perhaps two."

Roran pulled on the remains of his boot. "Eragon cast wards around me to protect me from injury. They saved my life several times today. Why didn't they protect me from the ox's horn, though?"

"I don't know, Roran," Carn said, sighing. "No one can prepare for every eventuality. That's one reason magic is so perilous. If you overlook a single facet of a spell, it may do nothing but weaken you, or worse, it may do some horrible thing you never intended. It happens to even the best magicians. There must be a flaw in your cousin's wards—a misplaced word or a poorly reasoned statement—that allowed the ox to gore you."

Easing himself off the wagon, Roran limped toward the head of the convoy, assessing the result of the battle. Five of the Varden had been wounded during the fighting, including himself, and two others had died: one a man Roran had barely met, the other Ferth, whom he had spoken with on several occasions. Of the soldiers and the men who steered the wagons, none remained alive.

Roran paused by the first two soldiers he had killed and studied their corpses. His saliva turned bitter, and his gut roiled with revulsion. *Now I have killed … I don't know how many*. He realized that during the madness of the Battle of the Burning Plains, he had lost count of the number of men he had slain. That he had sent so many to their deaths he could not remember the full number unsettled him. *Must I slaughter entire fields of men in order to regain what the Empire stole from me?* An even more disconcerting thought occurred to him: *And if I do, how could I return to Palancar Valley and live in peace when my soul was stained black with the blood of hundreds?*

Closing his eyes, Roran consciously relaxed all the muscles in his body, seeking to calm himself. *I kill for my love. I kill for my love of Katrina, and for my love of Eragon and everyone from Carvahall, and also for my love of the Varden, and my love of this land of ours. For my love, I will wade through an ocean of blood, even if it destroys me*.

"Never seen the likes o' that before, Stronghammer," said Ulhart. Roran opened his eyes to find the grizzled warrior standing in front of him, holding Snowfire by the reins. "No one else crazy enough to try a trick like that, jumping over the wagons, none that lived to tell the tale, nohow. Good job, that. Watch yourself, though. Can't go around leaping off horses an' taking on five men yourself an' expect to see another summer, eh? Bit of caution if you're wise."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Roran as he accepted Snowfire's reins from Ulhart.

In the minutes since Roran had disposed of the last of the soldiers, the uninjured warriors had been going to each of the wagons in the convoy, cutting open their bundles of cargo, and reporting the

contents to Martland, who recorded what they found so Nasuada could study the information and perhaps gather from it some indication of Galbatorix's plans. Roran watched as the men examined the last few wagons, which contained bags of wheat and stacks of uniforms. That finished, the men slit the throats of the remaining oxen, soaking the road with blood. Killing the beasts bothered Roran, but he understood the importance of denying them to the Empire and would have wielded the knife himself if asked. They would have taken the oxen back to the Varden, but the animals were too slow and cumbersome. The soldiers' horses, however, could keep pace as they fled enemy territory, so they captured as many as they could and tied them behind their own steeds.

Then one of the men took a resin-soaked torch from his saddlebags and, after a few seconds of work with his flint and steel, lit it. Riding up and down the convoy, he pressed the torch against each wagon until it caught fire and then tossed the torch into the back of the last wagon.

"Mount up!" shouted Martland.

Roran's leg throbbed as he pulled himself onto Snowfire. He spurred the stallion over next to Carn as the surviving men assembled on their steeds in a double line behind Martland. The horses snorted and pawed at the ground, impatient to put distance between themselves and the fire.

Martland started forward at a swift trot, and the rest of the group followed, leaving behind them the line of burning wagons, like so many glowing beads strung out upon the lonely road.

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A cheer went up from the crowd.

Eragon was sitting in the wooden stands that the dwarves had built along the base of the outer ramparts of Bregan Hold. The hold sat on a rounded shoulder of Thardûr mountain, over a mile above the floor of the mist-laden valley, and from it one could see for leagues in either direction, or until the ridged mountains obscured the view. Like Tronjheim and the other dwarf cities Eragon had visited, Bregan Hold was made entirely of quarried stone—in this case, a reddish granite that lent a sense of warmth to the rooms and corridors within. The hold itself was a thick, solid building that rose five stories to an open bell tower, which was topped by a teardrop of glass that was as large around as two dwarves and was held in place by four granite ribs that joined together to form a pointed capstone. The teardrop, as Orik had told Eragon, was a larger version of the dwarves' flameless lanterns, and during notable occasions or emergencies, it could be used to illuminate the entire valley with a golden light. The dwarves called it Az Sindriznarrvel, or The Gem of Sindri. Clustered around the flanks of the hold were numerous outbuildings, living quarters for the servants and warriors of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, as well as other structures, such as stables, forges, and a church devoted to Morgothal, the dwarves' god of fire and their patron god of smiths. Below the high, smooth walls of Bregan Hold were dozens of farms scattered about clearings in the forest, coils of smoke drifting up from the stone houses.

All that and more, Orik had shown and explained to Eragon after the three dwarf children had escorted Eragon into the courtyard of Bregan Hold, shouting, "Argetlam!" to everyone within earshot. Orik had greeted Eragon like a brother and then had taken him to the baths and, when he was clean, saw to it that he was garbed in a robe of deep purple, with a gold circlet for his brow.

Afterward, Orik surprised Eragon by introducing him to Hvedra, a bright-eyed, apple-faced dwarf woman with long hair, and proudly announcing that they had been married but two days past. While Eragon expressed his astonishment and congratulations, Orik shifted from foot to foot before replying, "It pained me that you were not able to attend the ceremony, Eragon. I had one of our spellcasters contact Nasuada, and I asked her if she would give you and Saphira my invitation, but she refused to mention it to you; she feared the offer might distract you from the task at hand. I cannot blame her, but I

wish that this war would have allowed you to be at our wedding, and us at your cousin's, for we are all related now, by law if not by blood."

In her thick accent, Hvedra said, "Please, consider me as your kin now, Shadeslayer. So long as it is within mine power, you shall always be treated as family at Bregan Hold, and you may claim sanctuary of us whenever you need, even if it is Galbatorix who hunts you."

Eragon bowed, touched by her offer. "You are most kind." Then he asked, "If you don't mind my curiosity, why did you and Orik choose to marry now?"

"We had planned to join hands this spring, but …"

"But," Orik continued in his gruff manner, "the Urgals attacked Farthen Dûr, and then Hrothgar sent me traipsing off with you to Ellesméra. When I returned here and the families of the clan accepted me as their new grimstborith, we thought it the perfect time to consummate our betrothal and become husband and wife. None of us may survive the year, so why tarry?"

"So you *did* become clan chief," Eragon said.

"Aye. Choosing the next leader of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum was a contentious business—we were hard at it for over a week—but in the end, most of the families agreed that I should follow in Hrothgar's footsteps and inherit his position since I was his only named heir."

Now Eragon sat next to Orik and Hvedra, devouring the bread and mutton the dwarves had brought him and watching the contest taking place in front of the stands. It was customary, Orik had said, for a dwarf family, if they had the gold, to stage games for the entertainment of their wedding guests. Hrothgar's family was so wealthy, the current games had already lasted for three days and were scheduled to continue for another four. The games consisted of many events: wrestling, archery, swordsmanship, feats of strength, and the current event, the Ghastgar.

From opposite ends of a grassy field, two dwarves rode toward each other on white Feldûnost. The horned mountain goats bounded across the sward, each leap over seventy feet long. The dwarf on the right had a small buckler strapped to his left arm but carried no weapons. The dwarf on the left had no shield, but in his right hand, he held a javelin poised to throw.

Eragon held his breath as the distance between the Feldûnost narrowed. When they were less than thirty feet apart, the dwarf with the spear whipped his arm through the air and launched the missile at his opponent. The other dwarf did not cover himself with his shield, but rather reached out and, with amazing dexterity, caught the spear by the shaft. He brandished it over his head. The crowd gathered around the lists let out a resounding cheer, which Eragon joined in, clapping vigorously.

“That was skillfully done!” exclaimed Orik. He laughed and drained his tankard of mead, his polished coat of mail sparkling in the early-evening light. He wore a helm embellished with gold, silver, and rubies and, on his fingers, five large rings. At his waist hung his ever-present ax. Hvedra was attired even more richly, with strips of embroidered cloth upon her sumptuous dress, strands of pearls and twisted gold around her neck, and in her hair, an ivory comb set with an emerald as large as Eragon’s thumb.

A line of dwarves stood and winded a set of curved horns, the brassy notes echoing off the mountains. Then a barrel-chested dwarf stepped forward and, in Dwarvish, announced the winner of the last contest, as well as the names of the next pair to compete in the Ghastgar.

When the master of ceremonies finished speaking, Eragon bent over and asked, “Will you be accompanying us to Farthen Dûr, Hvedra?”

She shook her head and smiled widely. “I cannot. I must stay here and tend to the affairs of the Ingeitum while Orik is gone, so he does not return to find our warriors starving and all our gold spent.”

Chuckling, Orik held out his tankard toward one of the servants standing several yards away. As the dwarf hurried over and refilled it with mead from a pitcher, Orik said to Eragon with obvious pride, “Hvedra does not boast. She is not only my wife, she is the … Ach, you have no word for it. She is the grimstcarvlorss of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. *Grimstcarvlorss* means … ‘the keeper of the house,’ ‘the arranger of the house.’ It is her duty to ensure that the families of our clan pay their agreed-upon tithes to Bregan Hold, that our herds are driven to the proper fields at the proper times, that our stocks of feed and grain do not fall too low, that the women of the Ingeitum weave enough fabric, that our warriors are well equipped, that our smiths always have ore to smelt into iron, and in short, that our clan is well managed and will prosper and thrive. There is a saying among our people: a good grimstcarvlorss can make a clan—”

“And a bad grimstcarvlorss will destroy a clan,” said Hvedra.

Orik smiled and clasped one of her hands in his. “And Hvedra is the best of grimstcarvlorssn. It is not an inherited title. You must prove that you are worthy of the post if you are to hold it. It is rare for the wife of a grimstborith to be grimstcarvlorss as well. I am most fortunate in that regard.” Bending their heads together, he and Hvedra rubbed noses. Eragon glanced away, feeling lonely and excluded. Leaning back, Orik took a draught of mead, then said, “There have been many famous grimstcarvlorssn in our history. It is often said that the only thing we clan leaders are good for is declaring war on each other and that the grimstcarvlorssn prefer we spend our time squabbling among ourselves so we do not have the time to interfere in

the workings of the clan."

"Come now, Skilfz Delva," chided Hvedra. "You know that is not truth. Or it shall not be truth with us."

"Mmm," said Orik, and touched his forehead to Hvedra's. They rubbed noses again.

Eragon returned his attention to the crowd below as it erupted in a frenzy of hissing and jeering. He saw that one of the dwarves competing in the Ghastgar had lost his nerve and, at the last moment, had yanked his Feldûnost off to one side and even then was attempting to flee his opponent. The dwarf with the javelin pursued him twice around the lists. When they were close enough, he rose up in his stirrups and cast the spear, striking the cowardly dwarf in the back of his left shoulder. With a howl, the dwarf fell off his steed and lay on his side, clutching at the blade and shaft embedded in his flesh. A healer rushed toward him. After a moment, everyone turned their backs on the spectacle.

Orik's upper lip curved with disgust. "Bah! It will be many years before his family is able to erase the stain of their son's dishonor. I am sorry you have had to witness this contemptible act, Eragon."

"It's never enjoyable watching someone shame themselves."

The three of them sat in silence through the next two contests, then Orik startled Eragon by grasping him by the shoulder and asking, "How would you like to see a forest of stone, Eragon?"

"No such thing exists, unless it is carved."

Orik shook his head, his eyes twinkling. "It is not carved, and it does exist. So I ask again, would you like to see a forest of stone?"

"If you are not jesting … yes, I would."

"Ah, I am glad you accepted. I do not jest, and I promise you that tomorrow you and I shall walk among trees of granite. It is one of the wonders of the Beor Mountains. Everyone who is a guest of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum should have an opportunity to visit it."

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The following morning, Eragon rose from his too-small bed in his stone room with its low ceiling and half-sized furniture, washed his face in a basin of cold water, and, out of habit, reached with his mind toward Saphira. He felt only the thoughts of the dwarves and the animals in and around the hold. Eragon faltered and leaned forward, gripping the rim of the basin, overcome by his sense of isolation. He remained in that position, unable to move or think, until his vision turned crimson and flashing spots floated in front of his eyes. With a gasp, he exhaled and refilled his lungs.

I missed her during the trip from Helgrind, he thought, *but at least I*

knew I was returning to her as fast as I could. Now I am traveling away *from her, and I do not know when we will be reunited*.

Shaking himself, he dressed and made his way through the winding corridors of Bregan Hold, bowing to the dwarves he passed, who for their part greeted him with energetic reiterations of "Argetlam!"

He found Orik and twelve other dwarves in the courtyard of the hold, saddling a line of sturdy ponies, whose breath formed white plumes in the cold air. Eragon felt like a giant as the short, burly men moved about him.

Orik hailed him. "We have a donkey in our stables, if you would like to ride."

"No, I'll continue on foot, if it's all the same to you."

Orik shrugged. "As you wish."

When they were ready to depart, Hvedra descended the broad stone steps from the entrance to the main hall of Bregan Hold, her dress trailing behind her, and presented to Orik an ivory horn clad with gold filigree around the mouth and bell. She said, "This was mine father's when he rode with Grimstborith Aldhrim. I give it to you so you may remember me in the days to come." She said more in Dwarvish, so softly Eragon could not hear, and then she and Orik touched foreheads. Straightening in his saddle, Orik placed the horn to his lips and winded it. A deep, rousing note rang forth, increasing in volume until the air within the courtyard seemed to vibrate like a wind-sawed rope. A pair of black ravens rose from the tower above, cawing. The sound of the horn made Eragon's blood tingle. He shifted in place, eager to be gone.

Lifting the horn over his head and with a final look at Hvedra, Orik spurred his pony forward, trotted out of the main gates of Bregan Hold, and turned east, toward the head of the valley. Eragon and the twelve other dwarves followed close behind.

For three hours, they followed a well-worn trail across the side of Thardûr mountain, climbing ever higher above the valley floor. The dwarves drove the ponies as fast as they could without injuring the animals, but their pace was still only a fraction of Eragon's speed when he was free to run unchecked. Although he was frustrated, Eragon refrained from complaining, for he realized that it was inevitable he would have to travel slower with any but elves or Kull.

He shivered and pulled his cloak closer around himself. The sun had yet to appear over the Beor Mountains, and a damp chill pervaded the valley, even though noon was only a few hours away.

Then they came upon a flat expanse of granite over a thousand feet wide, bordered on the right by a slanting cliff of naturally formed octagonal pillars. Curtains of shifting mist obscured the far end of the stone field.

Orik raised a hand and said, “Behold, Az Knurldrâthn.”

Eragon frowned. Stare as he might, he could discern nothing of interest in the barren location. “I see no forest of stone.”

Clambering down from his pony, Orik handed the reins to the warrior behind him and said, “Walk with me, if you would, Eragon.”

Together they strode toward the twisting bank of fog, Eragon shortening his steps to match Orik’s. The mist kissed Eragon’s face, cool and moist. The vapor became so thick that it obscured the rest of the valley, enveloping them in a featureless gray landscape where even up and down seemed arbitrary. Undaunted, Orik proceeded with a confident gait. Eragon, however, felt disoriented and slightly unsteady, and he walked with a hand held out in front of him, in case he should bump into anything hidden within the fog.

Orik stopped at the edge of a thin crack that defaced the granite they stood on and said, “What see you now?”

Squinting, Eragon swept his gaze back and forth, but the fog seemed as monotonous as ever. He opened his mouth to say as much but then noticed a slight irregularity in the texture of the mist to his right, a faint pattern of light and dark that held its shape even while the mist drifted past. He became aware of other areas that were static as well: strange, abstract patches of contrast that formed no recognizable objects.

“I don’t …,” he started to say when a breath of wind ruffled his hair. Under the gentle encouragement of the newborn breeze, the fog thinned and the disjoined patterns of shade resolved into the boles of large, ash-colored trees with bare and broken limbs. Dozens of the trees surrounded him and Orik, the pale skeletons of an ancient forest. Eragon pressed his palm against a trunk. The bark was as cold and hard as a boulder. Blotches of pallid lichen clung to the surface of the tree. The back of Eragon’s neck prickled. Although he did not consider himself overly superstitious, the ghostly mist and the eerie half-light and the appearance of the trees themselves—grim and foreboding and mysterious—ignited a spark of fear inside of him.

He wet his lips and asked, “How did these come to be?”

Orik shrugged. “Some claim that Gûntera must have placed them here when he created Alagaësia out of nothingness. Others claim Helzvog made them, for stone is his favorite element, and would not the god of stone have trees of stone for his garden? And still others say no, that once these were trees like any others, and a great catastrophe eons ago must have buried them in the ground, and that over time, wood became dirt, and dirt became stone.”

“Is that possible?”

“Only the gods know for certain. Who besides them can hope to understand the whys and wherefores of the world?” Orik shifted his

position. “Our ancestors discovered the first of the trees while quarrying granite here, over a thousand years ago. The then grimstborith of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, Hvalmar Lackhand, stopped the mining and, instead, had his masons chisel out the trees from the surrounding stone. When they had excavated nigh on fifty trees, Hvalmar realized that there might be hundreds, or even thousands, of stone trees entombed within the side of Mount Thardûr, and so he ordered his men to abandon the project. This place, however, captured the imagination of our race, and ever since, knurlan from every clan have traveled here and labored to extricate more trees from the grip of the granite. There are even knurlan who have dedicated their lives to the task. It has also become a tradition to send troublesome offspring here to chisel out a tree or two while under the supervision of a master mason.”

“That sounds tedious.”

“It gives them time to repent of their ways.” With one hand, Orik stroked his braided beard. “I spent some months here myself when I was a rambunctious lad of four-and-thirty.”

“And did you repent of your ways?”

“Eta. No. It was too … *tedious*. After all those weeks, I had freed only a single branch from the granite, so I ran away and fell in with a group of Vrenshrrgn—”

“Dwarves from the clan Vrenshrrgn?”

“Yes, knurlagn of the clan Vrenshrrgn, War Wolves, Wolves of War, however you might say it in this tongue. I fell in with them, became drunk on ale, and as they were hunting Nagran, decided that I too should kill a boar and bring it to Hrothgar to appease his anger at me. It wasn’t the wisest thing I have done. Even our most skilled warriors fear to hunt Nagran, and I was still more boy than man. Once my mind cleared, I cursed myself for a fool, but I had sworn I would, so I had no choice but to fulfill my oath.”

When Orik paused, Eragon asked, “What happened?”

“Oh, I killed a Nagra, with help from the Vrenshrrgn, but the boar gored me in the shoulder and tossed me into the branches of a nearby tree. The Vrenshrrgn had to carry the both of us, the Nagra and me, back to Bregan Hold. The boar pleased Hrothgar, and I … I, despite the ministrations of our best healers, I had to spend the next month resting in bed, which Hrothgar said was punishment enough for defying his orders.”

Eragon watched the dwarf for a while. “You miss him.”

Orik stood for a moment with his chin tucked against his stocky chest. Lifting his ax, he struck the granite with the end of the haft, producing a sharp clack that echoed among the trees. “It has been nigh on two centuries since the last dûrgrimstvren, the last clan war,

racked our nation, Eragon. But by Morgothal's black beard, we stand on the brink of another one now."

"Now, of all times?" exclaimed Eragon, appalled. "Is it really that bad?"

Orik scowled. "It is worse. Tensions between the clans are higher than they have ever been in living memory. Hrothgar's death and Nasuada's invasion of the Empire have served to inflame passions, aggravate old rivalries, and lend strength to those who believe it is folly to cast our lot with the Varden."

"How can they believe that when Galbatorix has already attacked Tronjheim with the Urgals?"

"Because," said Orik, "they are convinced it is impossible to defeat Galbatorix, and their argument holds much sway with our people. Can you honestly tell me, Eragon, that if Galbatorix were to confront you and Saphira this very instant, that the two of you could best him?"

Eragon's throat tightened. "No."

"I thought not. Those who are opposed to the Varden have blinded themselves to Galbatorix's threat. They say that if we had refused shelter to the Varden, if we had not accepted you and Saphira into fair Tronjheim, then Galbatorix would have had no reason to make war on us. They say that if we just keep to ourselves and remain hidden in our caves and tunnels, we shall have nothing to fear from Galbatorix. They do not realize that Galbatorix's hunger for power is insatiable and that he will not rest until all of Alagaësia lies at his feet." Orik shook his head, and the muscles in his forearms bunched and knotted as he pinched the ax blade between his wide fingers. "I will not allow our race to cower in tunnels like frightened rabbits until the wolf outside digs his way in and eats us all. We must continue fighting out of the hope that somehow we can find a way to kill Galbatorix. And I will not allow our nation to disintegrate into a clan war. With circumstances as they are, another dûrgrimstvren would destroy our civilization and possibly doom the Varden as well." His jaw set, Orik turned toward Eragon. "For the good of my people, I intend to seek the throne myself. Dûrgrimstn Gedthrall, Ledwonnû, and Nagra have already pledged their support to me. However, there are many who stand between me and the crown; it will not be easy to garner enough votes to become king. I need to know, Eragon, will you back me in this?"

Crossing his arms, Eragon walked from one tree to the next and then back again. "If I do, my support might turn the other clans against you. Not only will you be asking your people to ally themselves with the Varden, you will be asking them to accept a Dragon Rider as one of their own, which they have never done before and I doubt they will want to now."

“Aye, it may turn some against me,” said Orik, “but it may also gain me the votes of others. Let me be the judge of that. All I wish to know is, Will you back me? … Eragon, why do you hesitate?”

Eragon stared at a gnarled root that rose out of the granite by his feet, avoiding Orik’s eyes. “You are concerned about the good of your people, and rightly so. But my concerns are broader; they encompass the good of the Varden and the elves and everyone else who opposes Galbatorix. If … if it is not likely you can win the crown, and there is another clan chief who could, and who is not unsympathetic to the Varden—”

“No one would be a more sympathetic grimstnzborith than I!”

“I’m not questioning your friendship,” Eragon protested. “But if what I said came to pass and my support might ensure that such a clan chief won the throne, for the good of your people and for the good of the rest of Alagaësia, shouldn’t I back the dwarf who has the best chance of succeeding?”

In a deadly quiet voice, Orik said, “You swore a blood-oath on the Knurlnien, Eragon. By every law of our realm, you are a member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, no matter how greatly others may disapprove. What Hrothgar did by adopting you has no precedent in all of our history, and it cannot be undone unless, as grimstborith, I banish you from our clan. If you turn against me, Eragon, you will shame me in front of our entire race and none will ever trust my leadership again. Moreover, you will prove to your detractors that we cannot trust a Dragon Rider. Clan members do not betray each other to other clans, Eragon. It is not done, not unless you wish to wake up one night with a dagger buried in your heart.”

“Are you threatening me?” asked Eragon, just as quietly.

Orik swore and banged his ax against the granite again. “No! I would never lift a hand against you, Eragon! You are my foster brother, you are the only Rider free of Galbatorix’s influence, and blast it if I have not become fond of you during our travels together. But even though I would not harm you, that does not mean the rest of the Ingeitum would be so forbearing. I say that not as a threat but as a statement of fact. You must understand this, Eragon. If the clan hears you have given your support to another, I may not be able to restrain them. Even though you are our guest and the rules of hospitality protect you, if you speak out against the Ingeitum, the clan will see you as having betrayed them, and it is not our custom to allow traitors to remain within our midst. Do you understand me, Eragon?”

“What do you expect of me?” shouted Eragon. He flung his arms outward and paced back and forth in front of Orik. “I swore an oath to Nasuada as well, and those were the orders she gave me.”

“And you also pledged yourself to Dûrgrimst Ingeitum!” roared

Orik.

Eragon stopped and stared at the dwarf. “Would you have me doom all of Alagaësia just so you can maintain your standing among the clans?”

“Do not insult me!”

“Then don’t ask the impossible of me! I will back you if it seems likely you can ascend to the throne, and if not, then I won’t. You worry about Dûrgrimst Ingeitum and your race as a whole, while it is my duty to worry about them and all of Alagaësia as well.” Eragon slumped against the cold trunk of a tree. “And I cannot afford to offend you or your—I mean, *our*—clan or the rest of dwarfdom.”

In a kinder tone, Orik said, “There is another way, Eragon. It would be more difficult for you, but it would resolve your quandary.”

“Oh? What wondrous solution would this be?”

Sliding his ax back under his belt, Orik walked over to Eragon, grasped him by the forearms, and gazed up at him through bushy eyebrows. “Trust me to do the right thing, Eragon Shadeslayer. Give me the same loyalty you would if you were indeed born of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. Those under me would never presume to speak out against their own grimstborith in favor of another clan. If a grimstborith strikes the rock wrong, it is his responsibility alone, but that does not mean I am oblivious to your concerns.” He glanced down for a moment, then said, “If I cannot be king, trust me not to be so blinded by the prospect of power that I cannot recognize when my bid has failed. If that should happen—not that I believe it shall—then I will, of my own volition, lend my support to one of the other candidates, for I have no more desire than you to see a grimstnzborith elected who is hostile to the Varden. And if I should help promote another to the throne, the status and prestige I will place at the service of that clan chief shall, of its very nature, include your own, since you are Ingeitum. Will you trust me, Eragon? Will you accept me as your grimstborith, as the rest of my hall-sworn subjects do?”

Eragon groaned and leaned his head against the rough tree and peered up at the crooked, bone-white branches wreathed in mist. *Trust.* Of all the things Orik could have asked of him, that was the most difficult to grant. Eragon liked Orik, but to subordinate himself to the dwarf’s authority when so much was at stake would be to relinquish even more of his freedom, a prospect he loathed. And along with his freedom, he would also be relinquishing part of his responsibility for the fate of Alagaësia. Eragon felt as if he were hanging off the edge of a precipice and Orik was trying to convince him there was a ledge only a few feet below him, but Eragon could not bring himself to release his grip, for fear he would fall to his doom.

He said, “I would not be a mindless servant for you to order about. When it came to matters of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, I would defer to you, but in all else, you would have no hold over me.”

Orik nodded, his face serious. “I’m not worried about what mission Nasuada might send you on, nor whom you might kill while fighting the Empire. No, what gives me restless nights when I ought to be sleeping sound as Arghen in his cave is imagining you attempting to influence the clanmeet’s voting. Your intentions are noble, I know, but noble or not, you are unfamiliar with our politics, no matter how well Nasuada may have schooled you. This is mine area of expertise, Eragon. Let me conduct it in the manner I deem appropriate. It is what Hrothgar groomed me for my entire life.”

Eragon sighed, and with a sensation of falling, he said, “Very well. I will do as you think best about the succession, Grimstborith Orik.”

A broad smile spread across Orik’s face. He tightened his grip on Eragon’s forearms, then released him, saying, “Ah, thank you, Eragon. You don’t know what this means to me. It is good of you, very good of you, and I won’t forget it, not if I live to be two hundred years old and my beard grows so long, it drags in the dirt.”

Despite himself, Eragon chuckled. “Well, I hope it doesn’t grow that long. You would trip over it all the time!”

“Perhaps I would at that,” said Orik, laughing. “Besides, I rather think Hvedra would cut it short once it reached my knees. She has very definite opinions about the proper length of a beard.”

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Orik led the way as the two of them departed the forest of stone trees, striding through the colorless mist that swirled among the calcified trunks. They rejoined Orik’s twelve warriors, then began to descend the side of Mount Thardûr. At the bottom of the valley, they continued in a straight line to the other side, and there the dwarves brought Eragon to a tunnel hidden so cleverly within the rock face, he never would have found the entrance on his own.

It was with regret that Eragon left behind the pale sunshine and fresh mountain air for the darkness of the tunnel. The passageway was eight feet wide and six feet high—which made it feel quite low to Eragon—and like all the dwarf tunnels he had visited, it was as straight as an arrow for as far as he could see. He looked back over his shoulder just in time to see the dwarf Farr swing closed the hinged slab of granite that served as a door to the tunnel, plunging their party into night. A moment later, fourteen glowing orbs of differing colors appeared as the dwarves removed flameless lanterns from their saddlebags. Orik handed one to Eragon.

Then they started forward under the roots of the mountain, and the

ponies' hooves filled the tunnel with clashing echoes that seemed to shout at them like angry wraiths. Eragon grimaced, knowing they would have to listen to the din all the way to Farthen Dûr, for that was where the tunnel ended, many leagues thence. He hunched his shoulders and tightened his grip on the straps of his pack and wished he were with Saphira, flying high above the ground.

Roran squatted and gazed through the latticework of willow branches.

Two hundred yards away, fifty-three soldiers and wagon drivers sat around three separate cookfires, eating their dinner as dusk rapidly settled over the land. The men had stopped for the night on the broad, grass-covered bank next to a nameless river. The wagons full of supplies for Galbatorix's troops were parked in a rough half circle around the fires. Scores of hobbled oxen grazed behind the camp, lowing occasionally to each other. Twenty yards or so downstream, however, a soft earth shelf reared high out of the ground, which prevented any attack or escape from that quarter.

What were they thinking? Roran wondered. It was only prudent, when in hostile territory, to camp in a defensible location, which usually meant finding a natural formation to protect your back. Even so, you had to be careful to choose a resting place you could flee from if ambushed. As it was, it would be childishly easy for Roran and the other warriors under Martland's command to sweep out of the brush where they were hiding and pin the men of the Empire in the tip of the V formed by the earthen shelf and the river, where they could pick off the soldiers and drivers at their leisure. It puzzled Roran that trained soldiers would make such an obvious mistake. *Maybe they are from a city*, he thought. *Or maybe they are merely inexperienced*. He frowned. *Then why would they be entrusted with such a crucial mission?*

"Have you detected any traps?" he asked. He did not have to turn his head to know that Carn was close beside him, as well as Halmar and two other men. Save the four swordsmen who had joined Martland's company to replace those who had died or been irreparably wounded during their last engagement, Roran had fought alongside all of the men in their group. While he did not like every single one, he trusted them with his life, as he knew they trusted him. It was a bond that transcended age or upbringing. After his first battle, Roran had been surprised by how close he felt to his companions, as well as by how warm they were to him in turn.

"None that I can tell," murmured Carn. "But then—"

"They may have invented new spells you cannot detect, yes, yes. Is there a magician with them, though?"

"I can't tell for sure, but no, I don't think so."

Roran pushed away a shock of narrow willow leaves to better see the layout of the wagons. "I don't like it," he grumbled. "A magician accompanied the other convoy. Why not this one?"

“There are fewer of us than you might imagine.”

“Mmh.” Roran scratched his beard, still bothered by the soldiers’ apparent disregard of common sense. *Could they be trying to invite an attack? They don’t seem prepared for one, but appearances are hardly everything. What sort of trap could they have prepared for us? No one else is within thirty leagues, and Murtagh and Thorn were last spotted flying north from Feinster*. “Send the signal,” he said. “But tell Martland it bothers me they camped here. Either they’re idiots or they have some sort of defense invisible to us: magic or other trickery of the king.”

Silence, then: “I sent it. Martland says he shares your concern, but unless you want to run back to Nasuada with your tail tucked between your legs, we try our luck.”

Roran grunted and turned away from the soldiers. He gestured with his chin, and the other men scampered with him on hands and knees to where they had left their horses.

Standing, Roran mounted Snowfire.

“Whoa, steady, boy,” he whispered, petting Snowfire as the stallion tossed his head. In the dim light, Snowfire’s mane and hide gleamed like silver. Not for the first time, Roran wished his horse were a less visible shade, a nice bay or chestnut perhaps.

Taking his shield from where it hung by his saddle, Roran fit his left arm through the straps, then pulled his hammer from his belt.

He dry-swallowed, a familiar tightness between his shoulders, and readjusted his grip on the hammer.

When the five men were ready, Carn raised a finger and his eyelids drifted half closed and his lips twitched, as if he were talking with himself. A cricket sounded nearby.

Carn’s eyelids snapped open. “Remember, keep your gaze directed downward until your vision adjusts, and even then, don’t look at the sky.” Then he began to chant in the ancient language, incomprehensible words that shivered with power.

Roran covered himself with his shield and squinted at his saddle as a pure white light, bright as the noonday sun, illuminated the landscape. The stark glow originated from a point somewhere above the camp; Roran resisted the temptation to see exactly where.

Shouting, he kicked Snowfire in the ribs and hunched over the horse’s neck as his steed leaped forward. On either side, Carn and the other warriors did the same, brandishing their weapons. Branches tore at Roran’s head and shoulders, and then Snowfire broke free of the trees and raced toward the camp at full gallop.

Two other groups of horsemen also thundered toward the camp, one led by Martland, the other Ulhart.

The soldiers and drivers cried out in alarm and covered their eyes. Staggering about like blind men, they scrabbled after their weapons

while trying to position themselves to repel the attack.

Roran made no attempt to slow Snowfire. Spurring the stallion once more, he rose high in the stirrups and held on with all his strength as Snowfire jumped over the slight gap between two wagons. His teeth clattered as they landed. Snowfire kicked dirt into one of the fires, sending up a burst of sparks.

The rest of Roran's group jumped the wagons as well. Knowing they would attend to the soldiers behind him, Roran concentrated on those in front. Aiming Snowfire at one of the men, he jabbed at the soldier with the end of his hammer and broke the man's nose, splashing crimson blood across his face. Roran dispatched the man with a second blow to the head, then parried a sword from another soldier.

Farther down the curved line of wagons, Martland, Ulhart, and their men also jumped into the camp, alighting with a clack of hooves and a jangle of armor and weapons. A horse screamed and fell as a soldier wounded it with a spear.

Roran blocked the soldier's sword a second time, then rapped the man's sword hand, breaking bones and forcing the man to drop his weapon. Without pause, Roran struck the man in the center of his red tunic, cracking his sternum and felling the gasping, mortally wounded soldier.

Roran twisted in the saddle, searching the camp for his next opponent. His muscles vibrated with frantic excitement; every detail around him was as sharp and clear as if it were etched in glass. He felt invincible, invulnerable. Time itself seemed to stretch and slow, so that a confused moth that fluttered past him appeared to be flying through honey instead of air.

Then a pair of hands clamped down on the back of his mail hauberk and yanked him off Snowfire and slammed him into the hard ground, knocking the breath out of him. Roran's sight flickered and went black for a moment. When he recovered, he saw that the first soldier he had attacked was sitting on his chest, choking him. The soldier blotted out the source of light Carn had created in the sky. A white halo surrounded his head and shoulders, casting his features in such deep shadow, Roran could make out nothing of his face but the flash of bared teeth.

The soldier tightened his fingers around Roran's throat as Roran gasped for air. Roran groped after his hammer, which he had dropped, but it was not within reach. Tensing his neck to keep the soldier from crushing the life out of him, he drew his dagger from his belt and drove it through the soldier's hauberk, through his gambeson, and between the ribs on the soldier's left side.

The soldier did not even flinch, nor did his grip relax.

A continuous stream of gurgling laughter emanated from the

soldier. The lurching, heart-stopping chuckle, hideous in the extreme, turned Roran's stomach cold with fear. He remembered the sound from before; he had heard it while watching the Varden fight the men who felt no pain on the grassy field beside the Jiet River. In a flash, he understood why the soldiers had chosen such a poor campsite: *They do not care if they are trapped or not, for we cannot hurt them*.

Roran's vision turned red, and yellow stars danced before his eyes. Teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, he yanked the dagger free and stabbed upward, into the soldier's armpit, twisting the blade in the wound. Gouts of hot blood spurted over his hand, but the soldier did not seem to notice. The world exploded in blotches of pulsing colors as the soldier smashed Roran's head against the ground. Once. Twice. Three times. Roran bucked his hips, trying without success to throw the man off. Blind and desperate, he slashed at where he guessed the man's face to be and felt the dagger catch in soft flesh. He pulled the dagger back slightly, then lunged in that direction, feeling the impact as the tip of the blade struck bone.

The pressure around Roran's neck vanished.

Roran lay where he was, his chest heaving, then rolled over and vomited, throat burning. Still gasping and coughing, he staggered upright and saw the soldier sprawled motionless next to him, the dagger protruding from the man's left nostril.

"Go for the head!" shouted Roran, despite his raw throat. "The head!"

He left the dagger buried in the soldier's nostril and retrieved his hammer from the trampled ground where it had fallen, pausing long enough to also grab an abandoned spear, which he held with his shield hand. Jumping over the fallen soldier, he ran toward Halmar, who was on foot as well and dueling three soldiers at once. Before the soldiers noticed him, Roran bashed the two closest ones in the head so hard, he split their helms. The third he left to Halmar, instead bounding over to the soldier whose sternum he had broken and whom he had left for dead. He found the man sitting against the wheel of a wagon, spitting up clotted blood and struggling to string a bow.

Roran gored him through an eye with the spear. Pieces of gray flesh clung to the blade of the spear as he pulled it free.

An idea occurred to Roran then. He threw the spear at a man in a red tunic on the other side of the nearest fire—impaling him through the torso—then slid the haft of his hammer under his belt and strung the soldier's bow. Placing his back against a wagon, Roran began to shoot the soldiers rushing about the encampment, attempting either to kill them with a lucky shot to the face, the throat, or the heart or to cripple them so his companions could more easily dispatch them. If nothing else, he reasoned that an injured soldier might bleed to death

before the fight ended.

The initial confidence of the attack had faded into confusion. The Varden were scattered and dismayed, some on their steeds, some on foot, and most bloodied. At least five, so far as Roran could tell, had died when soldiers they had thought slain had returned to assail them. How many soldiers were left, it was impossible to tell in the throng of flailing bodies, but Roran could see that they still outnumbered the scant twenty-five or so of the remaining Varden. *They could tear us into pieces with their bare hands while we try to hack them apart*, he realized. He searched with his eyes among the frenzy for Snowfire and saw that the white horse had run farther down the river, where he now stood by a willow tree, nostrils flared and ears plastered flat against his skull.

With the bow, Roran killed four more soldiers and wounded over a score. When he had only two arrows left, he spotted Carn standing on the other side of the camp, dueling a soldier by the corner of a burning tent. Drawing the bow until the fletching on the arrow tickled his ear, Roran shot the soldier in the chest. The soldier stumbled, and Carn decapitated him.

Roran tossed the bow aside and, hammer in hand, ran over to Carn and shouted, “Can’t you kill them with magic?”

For a moment, Carn could only pant, then he shook his head and said, “Every spell I cast was blocked.” The light from the burning tent gilded the side of his face.

Roran cursed. “Together then!” he cried, and hefted his shield.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two of them advanced upon the nearest group of soldiers: a cluster of eight men surrounding three of the Varden. The next few minutes were a spasm of flashing weapons, tearing flesh, and sudden pains for Roran. The soldiers tired more slowly than ordinary men, and they never shirked from an attack, nor did they slacken in their efforts even when suffering from the most horrific injuries. The exertion of the fight was so great, Roran’s nausea returned, and after the eighth soldier fell, he leaned over and vomited again. He spat to clear his mouth of bile.

One of the Varden they had sought to rescue had died in the struggle, slain by a knife in the kidneys, but the two who were still standing joined forces with Roran and Carn, and with them, they charged the next batch of soldiers.

“Drive them toward the river!” Roran shouted. The water and the mud would limit the soldiers’ movement and perhaps allow the Varden to gain the upper hand.

Not far away, Martland had succeeded in rallying the twelve of the Varden who were still on their horses, and they were already doing what Roran had suggested: herding the soldiers back toward the

shining water.

The soldiers and the few drivers who were still alive resisted. They shoved their shields against the men on foot. They jabbed spears at the horses. But in spite of their violent opposition, the Varden forced them to retreat a step at a time until the men in the crimson tunics stood knee-deep in the fast-flowing water, half blinded by the uncanny light shining down on them.

"Hold the line!" shouted Martland, dismounting and planting himself with spread legs on the edge of the riverbank. "Don't let them regain the shore!"

Roran dropped into a half crouch, ground his heels into the soft earth until he was comfortable with his stance, and waited for the large soldier standing in the cold water several feet in front of him to attack. With a roar, the soldier splashed out of the shallows, swinging his sword at Roran, which Roran caught on his shield. Roran retaliated with a stroke of his hammer, but the soldier blocked him with his own shield and then cut at Roran's legs. For several seconds, they exchanged blows, but neither wounded the other. Then Roran shattered the man's left forearm, knocking him back several paces. The soldier merely smiled and uttered a mirthless, soul-chilling laugh.

Roran wondered whether he or any of his companions would survive the night. *They're harder to kill than snakes. We can cut them to ribbons, and they'll still keep coming at us unless we hit something vital*. His next thought vanished as the soldier rushed at him again, his notched sword flickering in the pale light like a tongue of flame.

Thereafter, the battle assumed a nightmarish quality for Roran. The strange, baleful light gave the water and the soldiers an unearthly aspect, bleaching them of color and projecting long, thin, razor-sharp shadows across the shifting water, while beyond and all around, the fullness of night prevailed. Again and again, he repelled the soldiers who stumbled out of the water to kill him, hammering at them until they were barely recognizable as human, and yet they would not die. With every blow, medallions of black blood stained the surface of the river, like blots of spilled ink, and drifted away on the current. The deadly sameness of each clash numbed and horrified Roran. No matter how hard he strove, there was always another mutilated soldier there to slash and stab at him. And always the demented giggling of men who knew they were dead and yet continued to maintain a semblance of life even while the Varden destroyed their bodies.

And then silence.

Roran remained crouched behind his shield with his hammer half raised, gasping and drenched with sweat and blood. A minute passed before it dawned on him that no one stood in the water before him. He glanced left and right three times, unable to grasp that the soldiers

were finally, blessedly, irrevocably dead. A corpse floated past him in the glittering water.

An inarticulate bellow escaped him as a hand gripped his right arm. He whipped around, snarling and pulling away, only to see Carn next to him. The wan, gore-smeared spellcaster was speaking. “We won, Roran! Eh? They’re gone! We vanquished them!”

Roran let his arms drop and tilted his head back, too tired even to sit. He felt … he felt as if his senses were abnormally sharp, and yet his emotions were dull, muted things, tamped down somewhere deep inside of himself. He was glad it was so; otherwise, he thought he would go mad.

“Gather up and inspect the wagons!” shouted Martland. “The sooner you bestir yourselves, the sooner we can leave this accursed place! Carn, attend to Welmar. I don’t like the look of that gash.”

With an enormous effort of will, Roran turned and trudged across the bank to the nearest wagon. Blinking away the sweat that dripped from his brow, he saw that of their original force, only nine were still fit to stand. He pushed the observation out of his mind. *Mourn later, not now*.

As Martland Redbeard walked across the corpse-strewn encampment, a soldier who Roran had assumed was dead flipped over and, from the ground, lopped off the earl’s right hand. With a movement so graceful it appeared practiced, Martland kicked the sword out of the soldier’s grip, then knelt on the soldier’s throat and, using his left hand, drew a dagger from his belt and stabbed the man through one of his ears, killing him. His face flushed and strained, Martland shoved the stump of his wrist under his left armpit and waved away everyone who rushed over to him. “Leave me alone! It’s hardly a wound at all. Get to those wagons! Unless you wastrels hurry up, we’ll be here so long, my beard will turn white as snow. Go on!” When Carn refused to budge, however, Martland scowled and shouted, “Begone with you, or I’ll have you flogged for insubordination, I will!”

Carn held up Martland’s wayward hand. “I might be able to re-attach it, but I’ll need a few minutes.”

“Ah, confound it, give me that!” exclaimed Martland, and snatched his hand away from Carn. He tucked it inside his tunic. “Stop fretting about me and save Welmar and Lindel if you can. You can try reattaching it once we’ve put a few leagues between us and these monsters.”

“It might be too late then,” said Carn.

“That was an order, spellcaster, not a request!” thundered Martland. As Carn retreated, the earl used his teeth to tie off the sleeve of his tunic over the stump of his arm, which he again stuck in his left

armpit. Sweat beaded his face. “Right, then! What misbegotten items are hidden in those confounded wagons?”

“Rope!” someone shouted.

“Whiskey!” shouted someone else.

Martland grunted. “Ulhart, you record the figures for me.”

Roran helped the others as they rifled through each of the wagons, calling out the contents to Ulhart. Afterward, they slaughtered the teams of oxen and lit the wagons on fire, as before. Then they rounded up their horses and mounted them, tying the injured into their saddles.

When they were ready to depart, Carn gestured toward the flare of light in the sky and murmured a long, tangled word. Night enveloped the world. Glancing up, Roran beheld a throbbing after-image of Carn’s face superimposed over the faint stars, and then as he became accustomed to the darkness, he beheld the soft gray shapes of thousands of disoriented moths scattering across the sky like the shades of men’s souls.

His heart heavy within him, Roran touched his heels to Snowfire’s flanks and rode away from the remnants of the convoy.

Frustrated, Eragon stormed out of the circular chamber buried deep under the center of Tronjheim. The oak door slammed shut behind him with a hollow boom.

Eragon stood with his hands on his hips in the middle of the arched corridor outside the chamber and glared at the floor, which was tessellated with rectangles of agate and jade. Since he and Orik had arrived in Tronjheim, three days ago, the thirteen chiefs of the dwarf clans had done nothing but argue about issues that Eragon considered inconsequential, such as which clans had the right to graze their flocks in certain disputed pastures. As he listened to the clan chiefs debate obscure points of their legal code, Eragon often felt like shouting that they were being blind fools who were going to doom all of Alagaësia to Galbatorix's rule unless they put aside their petty concerns and chose a new ruler without further delay.

Still lost in thought, Eragon slowly walked down the corridor, barely noticing the four guards who followed him—as they did wherever he went—nor the dwarves he passed in the hall, who greeted him with variations of "Argetlam." *The worst one is Íorûnn*, Eragon decided. The dwarf woman was the grimstborith of Dûrgrimst Vrenshrrgn, a powerful, warlike clan, and she had made it clear, from the very beginning of the deliberations, that she intended to have the throne for herself. Only one other clan, the Urzhad, had openly pledged themselves to her cause, but as she had demonstrated on multiple occasions during the meetings between the clan chiefs, she was clever, cunning, and able to twist most any situation to her advantage. *She might make an excellent queen*, Eragon admitted to himself, *but she's so devious, it's impossible to know whether she would support the Varden once she was enthroned*. He allowed himself a wry smile. Talking with Íorûnn was always awkward for him. The dwarves considered her a great beauty, and even by the standards of humans, she cut a striking figure. Besides which, she seemed to have developed a fascination with Eragon that he was unable to fathom. In every conversation they had, she insisted upon making allusions to the dwarves' history and mythology that Eragon did not understand but that seemed to amuse Orik and the other dwarves to no end.

In addition to Íorûnn, two other clan chiefs had emerged as rivals for the throne: Gannel, chief of Dûrgrimst Quan, and Nado, chief of Dûrgrimst Knurlcarathn. As the custodians of the dwarves' religion, the Quan wielded enormous influence among their race, but so far,

Gannel had obtained the support of but two other clans, Dûrgrimst Ragni Hefthyn and Dûrgrimst Ebardac—a clan primarily devoted to scholarly research. In contrast, Nado had forged a larger coalition, consisting of the clans Feldûnost, Fanghur, and Az Sweldn rak Anhûin.

Whereas Íorûnn seemed to want the throne merely for the power she would gain thereafter, and Gannel did not seem inherently hostile to the Varden—although neither was he friendly toward them—Nado was openly and vehemently opposed to any involvement with Eragon, Nasuada, the Empire, Galbatorix, Queen Islanzadí, or, so far as Eragon could tell, any living being outside of the Beor Mountains. The Knurlcarathn were the stoneworkers' clan and, in men and material goods, they had no equal, for every other clan depended upon their expertise for the tunneling and the building of their abodes, and even the Ingeitum needed them to mine the ore for their smiths. And if Nado's bid for the crown should falter, Eragon knew that many of the other, lesser clan chiefs who shared his views would leap up to take his place. Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, for example—whom Galbatorix and the Forsworn had nearly obliterated during their uprising—had declared themselves Eragon's blood enemies during his visit to the city of Tarnag and, in every action of theirs at the clanmeet, had demonstrated their implacable hatred of Eragon, Saphira, and all things to do with dragons and those who rode them. They had objected to Eragon's very presence at the meetings of the clan chiefs, even though it was perfectly legal by dwarf law, and forced a vote on the issue, thereby delaying the proceedings another six unnecessary hours.

One of these days, thought Eragon, *I will have to find a way to make peace with them. That or I'll have to finish what Galbatorix started. I refuse to live my entire life in fear of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin*. Again, as he had done so often in the past few days, he waited a moment for Saphira's response, and when it was not forthcoming, a familiar pang of unhappiness lanced his heart.

How secure the alliances between any of the clans were, however, was a question of some uncertainty. Neither Orik nor Íorûnn nor Gannel nor Nado had enough support to win a popular vote, so they were all actively engaged in trying to retain the loyalties of the clans who had already promised to help them while at the same time trying to poach their opponents' backers. Despite the importance of the process, Eragon found it exceedingly tedious and frustrating.

Based upon Orik's explanation, it was Eragon's understanding that before the clan chiefs could elect a ruler, they had to vote on whether they were *prepared* to choose a new king or queen and that the preliminary election had to garner at least nine votes in its favor if it was to pass. As of yet, none of the clan chiefs, Orik included, felt

secure enough in their positions to bring the matter to a head and proceed to the final election. It was, as Orik had said, the most delicate part of the process and, in some instances, had been known to drag on for a frustratingly long time.

As he pondered the situation, Eragon wandered aimlessly through the warren of chambers below Tronjheim until he found himself in a dry, dusty room lined with five black arches on one side and a bas-relief carving of a snarling bear twenty feet high on the other. The bear had gold teeth and round, faceted rubies for eyes.

"Where are we, Kvîstor?" asked Eragon, glancing at his guards. His voice spawned hollow echoes in the room. Eragon could sense the minds of many of the dwarves in the levels above them, but he had no idea how to reach them.

The lead guard, a youngish dwarf no older than sixty, stepped forward. "These rooms were cleared millennia ago by Grimstnzborith Korgan, when Tronjheim was under construction. We have not used them much since, except when our entire race congregates in Farthen Dûr."

Eragon nodded. "Can you lead me back to the surface?"

"Of course, Argetlam."

Several minutes of brisk walking brought them to a broad staircase with shallow, dwarf-sized steps that climbed out of the ground to a passageway somewhere in the southwestern quadrant of Tronjheim's base. From there Kvîstor guided Eragon to the southern branch of the four mile-long hallways that divided Tronjheim along the cardinal compass points.

It was the same hallway through which Eragon and Saphira had first entered Tronjheim several months ago, and Eragon walked down it, toward the center of the city-mountain, with a strange sense of nostalgia. He felt as if he had aged several years in the interim.

The four-story-high avenue thronged with dwarves from every clan. All of them noticed Eragon, of that he was sure, but not all deigned to acknowledge him, for which he was grateful, as it saved him the effort of having to return even more greetings.

Eragon stiffened as he saw a line of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin cross the hallway. As one, the dwarves turned their heads and looked at him, their expressions obscured behind the purple veils those of their clan always wore in public. The last dwarf in line spat on the floor toward Eragon before filing through an archway and out of the hall along with his or her brethren.

If Saphira were here, they would not dare to be so rude, thought Eragon.

A half hour later, he reached the end of the majestic hallway, and although he had been there many times before, a sense of awe and

wonder overwhelmed him as he stepped between the pillars of black onyx topped with yellow zircons thrice the size of a man and entered the circular chamber in the heart of Tronjheim.

The chamber was a thousand feet from side to side, with a floor of polished carnelian etched with a hammer surrounded by twelve pentacles, which was the crest of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum and of the dwarves' first king, Korgan, who had discovered Farthen Dûr while mining for gold. Opposite Eragon and to either side were the openings to the three other halls that radiated out through the city-mountain. The chamber had no ceiling but ascended all the way to the top of Tronjheim, a mile overhead. There it opened to the dragonhold where Eragon and Saphira had resided before Arya broke the star sapphire, and then to the sky beyond: a rich blue disk that seemed unimaginably distant, ringed as it was by the open mouth of Farthen Dûr, the hollow ten-mile-high mountain that sheltered Tronjheim from the rest of the world.

Only a scant amount of daylight filtered down to the base of Tronjheim. The City of Eternal Twilight, the elves called it. Since so little of the sun's radiance entered the city-mountain—except for a dazzling half hour before and after noon during the height of summer—the dwarves illuminated the interior with uncounted numbers of their flameless lanterns. Thousands of them were on glorious display in the chamber. A bright lantern hung from the outside of every other pillar of the curved arcades that lined each level of the city-mountain, and even more lanterns were mounted within the arcades, marking the entrances to strange and unknown rooms, as well as the path of Vol Turin, the Endless Staircase, which spiraled around the chamber from top to bottom. The effect was both moody and spectacular. The lanterns were of many different colors, making it appear as if the interior of the chamber were dotted with glowing jewels.

Their glory, however, paled beside the splendor of a real jewel, the greatest jewel of them all: Isidar Mithrim. On the floor of the chamber, the dwarves had built a wooden scaffold sixty feet in diameter, and within the enclosure of fitted oak beams, they were, piece by precious piece, reassembling the shattered star sapphire with the utmost care and delicacy. The shards they had yet to place they had stored in open-topped boxes padded with nests of raw wool, each box labeled with a line of spidery runes. The boxes were spread out across a large portion of the western side of the vast room. Perhaps three hundred dwarves sat hunched over them, intent on their work as they strove to fit the shards together into a cohesive whole. Another group bustled about the scaffolding, tending to the fragmented gem within, as well as building additional structures.

Eragon watched them at their labor for several minutes, then

wandered over to the section of the floor Durza had broken when he and his Urgal warriors had entered Tronjheim from the tunnels below. With the tip of his boot, Eragon tapped the polished stone in front of him. No trace of the damage Durza had wrought remained. The dwarves had done a marvelous job of erasing the marks left by the Battle of Farthen Dûr, although Eragon hoped they would commemorate the battle with a memorial of some sort, for he felt it was important that future generations not forget the cost in blood the dwarves and the Varden had paid during the course of their struggle against Galbatorix.

As Eragon walked toward the scaffolding, he nodded at Skeg, who was standing on a platform overlooking the star sapphire. Eragon had met the thin, quick-fingered dwarf before. Skeg was of Dûrgrimst Gedthrall, and it was to him King Hrothgar had entrusted the restoration of the dwarves' most valuable treasure.

Skeg gestured for Eragon to climb up onto the platform. A sparkling vista of slanting, needle-sharp spires, glittering, paper-thin edges, and rippling surfaces confronted Eragon as he heaved himself onto the rough-hewn planks. The top of the star sapphire reminded him of the ice on the Anora River in Palancar Valley at the end of winter, when the ice had melted and refrozen multiple times and was treacherous to walk over, on account of the bumps and ridges the swings in temperature had cast up. Only instead of blue, white, or clear, the remnants of the star sapphire were a soft, rosy pink, shot through with traces of dusky orange.

"How goes it?" asked Eragon.

Skeg shrugged and fluttered his hands in the air like a pair of butterflies. "It goes as it does, Argetlam. You cannot hurry perfection."

"It looks to me as if you are making quick progress."

With a bony forefinger, Skeg tapped the side of his broad, flat nose. "The top of Isidar Mithrim, what is now the bottom, Arya broke it into large pieces, which are easy to fit together. The bottom of Isidar Mithrim, though, what is now the top …" Skeg shook his head, his lined face doleful. "The force of the break, all the pieces pushing against the face of the gem, pushing away from Arya and the dragon Saphira, pushing down toward you and that black-hearted Shade … it cracked the petals of the rose into ever-smaller fragments. And the rose, Argetlam, the rose is the key to the gem. It is the most complex, the most beautiful part of Isidar Mithrim. And it is in the most pieces. Unless we can reassemble it, every last speck where it ought to be, we might as well give the gem to our jewelers and have them grind it into rings for our mothers." The words spilled out of Skeg like water from an overflowing beaker. He shouted in Dwarvish at a dwarf carrying a box across the chamber, then tugged at his white beard and asked,

“Have you ever heard recounted, Argetlam, the tale of how Isidar Mithrim was carved, in the Age of Herran?”

Eragon hesitated, thinking back to his history lessons in Ellesméra. “I know it was Dûrok who carved it.”

“Aye,” said Skeg, “it was Dûrok Ornthrond—Eagle-eye, as you say in this tongue. It was not he who discovered Isidar Mithrim, but it was he alone who extracted it from the surrounding stone, he who carved it, and he who polished it. Fifty-seven years he spent working on the Star Rose. The gem enthralled him as nothing else. Every night he sat crouched over Isidar Mithrim until the wee hours of the morning, as he was determined that the Star Rose should be not just art but something that would touch the hearts of all who gazed upon it and would earn him a seat of honor at the table of the gods. His devotion was such that, in the thirty-second year of his labors, when his wife told him that either he had to share the burden of the project with his apprentices or she would leave his hall, Dûrok said not a word but turned his shoulder to her and continued grinding the contours of the petal he had begun earlier that year.

“Dûrok worked on Isidar Mithrim until he was pleased with its every line and curve. Then he dropped his polishing cloth, took one step back from the Star Rose, said, ‘Gûntera, protect me; it is done,’ and fell dead on the floor.” Skeg tapped his chest, producing a hollow thump. “His heart gave out, for what else did he have to live for? … That is what we are trying to reconstruct, Argetlam: fifty-seven years of ceaseless concentration by one of the finest artists our race has known. Unless we can put Isidar Mithrim back together *exactly* the way it was, we shall diminish Dûrok’s accomplishment for all who have yet to see the Star Rose.” Knotting his right hand into a fist, Skeg bounced it off his thigh to emphasize his words.

Eragon leaned against the hip-high railing in front of him and watched as five dwarves on the opposite side of the gem lowered a sixth dwarf, who was bound in a rope harness, until he hung inches above the sharp edges of the fractured sapphire. Reaching inside his tunic, the suspended dwarf removed a sliver of Isidar Mithrim from a leather wallet and, grasping the sliver with a minuscule set of pincers, fit it into a small gap in the gem below.

“If the coronation were held three days from now,” said Eragon, “could you have Isidar Mithrim ready by then?”

Skeg drummed the railing with all ten of his fingers, tapping out a melody Eragon failed to recognize. The dwarf said, “We would not rush so with Isidar Mithrim if not for the offer of your dragon. This haste is foreign to us, Argetlam. It is not our nature, as it is humans’, to rush about like agitated ants. Still, we shall do our best to have Isidar Mithrim ready in time for the coronation. If that should be three

days from now … well, I should not be too hopeful of our prospects. But if it were later in the week, I think we might be finished."

Eragon thanked Skeg for his prediction, then took his leave. With his guards trailing after him, Eragon walked to one of the many common eating halls in the city-mountain, a long, low room with stone tables arranged in rows on one side and dwarves busying themselves about soapstone ovens on the other.

There Eragon dined on sourdough bread, fish with white meat that the dwarves caught in underground lakes, mushrooms, and some sort of mashed tuber that he had eaten before in Tronjheim but whose provenance he had yet to learn. Before he began eating, though, he was careful to test the food for poison, using the spells Oromis had taught him.

As Eragon washed down the last crust of bread with a sip of thin, watered-down breakfast beer, Orik and his contingent of ten warriors entered the hall. The warriors sat at their own tables, positioning themselves where they could watch both entrances, while Orik joined Eragon, lowering himself onto the stone bench opposite him with a weary sigh. He placed his elbows on the table and rubbed his face with his hands.

Eragon cast several spells to prevent anyone from eavesdropping, then asked, "Did we suffer another setback?"

"No, no setback. Only, these deliberations are trying in the extreme."

"I noticed."

"And everyone noticed your frustration," said Orik. "You must control yourself better hereafter, Eragon. Revealing weakness of any sort to our opponents does nothing but further their cause. I—" Orik fell silent as a portly dwarf waddled up and deposited a plate of steaming food in front of him.

Eragon scowled at the edge of the table. "But are you any closer to the throne? Have we gained any ground with all of this long-winded prattle?"

Orik raised a finger while he chewed on a mouthful of bread. "We have gained a great deal. Do not be so gloomy! After you left, Havard agreed to lower the tax on the salt Dûrgrimst Fanghur sells to the Ingeitum, in exchange for summer access to our tunnel to Nalsvrid-mérna, so they may hunt the red deer that gather around the lake during the warm months of the year. You should have seen how Nado gritted his teeth when Havard accepted my offer!"

"Bah," spat Eragon. "Taxes, deer—what does any of it have to do with who succeeds Hrothgar as ruler? Be honest with me, Orik. What is your position compared with the other clan chiefs? And how much longer is this likely to drag on? With every day that passes, it becomes

more likely that the Empire will discover our ruse and Galbatorix will strike at the Varden when I am not there to fend off Murtagh and Thorn."

Orik wiped his mouth on the corner of the tablecloth. "My position is sound enough. None of the grimstborithn have the support to call a vote, but Nado and I command the greatest followings. If either of us can win over, say, another two or three clans, the balance will quickly tip in that person's favor. Havard is already wavering. It won't take too much more encouragement, I think, to convince him to defect to our camp. Tonight we will break bread with him, and I will see what I can do toward providing that encouragement." Orik devoured a piece of roast mushroom, then said, "As for when the clanmeet will end, maybe after another week if we are lucky, and maybe two if we're not."

Eragon cursed in an undertone. He was so tense, his stomach churned and rumbled and threatened to reject the meal he had just eaten.

Reaching across the table, Orik caught Eragon by the wrist. "There is nothing you or I can do to further hasten the clanmeet's decision, so do not let it upset you overmuch. Worry about what you can change, and leave the rest to sort itself out, eh?" He released Eragon.

Eragon slowly exhaled and leaned on his forearms against the table. "I know. It's only that we have so little time, and if we fail …"

"What will be will be," said Orik. He smiled, but his eyes were sad and hollow. "No one can escape fate's design."

"Couldn't you seize the throne by force? I know you don't have that many troops in Tronjheim, but with my support, who could stand against you?"

Orik paused with his knife halfway between his plate and his mouth, then shook his head and resumed eating. Between mouthfuls, he said, "Such a ploy would prove disastrous."

"Why?"

"Must I explain? Our entire race would turn against us, and instead of seizing control of our nation, I would inherit an empty title. If that came to pass, I would not bet a broken sword we would live to see out the year."

"Ah."

Orik said nothing more until the food on his plate was gone. Then he downed a mouthful of beer, belched, and resumed the conversation: "We are balanced upon a windy mountain path with a mile-high drop on either side. So many of my race hate and fear Dragon Riders because of the crimes Galbatorix, the Forsworn, and now Murtagh have committed against us. And so many of them fear the world beyond the mountains and the tunnels and caverns wherein

we hide." He turned his mug around on the table. "Nado and Az Sweldn rak Anhûin are only worsening the situation. They play upon people's fears and poison their minds against you, the Varden, and King Orrin.… Az Sweldn rak Anhûin is the epitome of what we must overcome if I am to be king. Somehow we must needs find a way to allay their concerns and the concerns of those like them, for even if I am king, I will have to give them a fair hearing if I am to retain the support of the clans. A dwarf king or queen is always at the mercy of the clans, no matter how strong a ruler they may be, just as the grimstborithn are at the mercy of the families of their clan." Tilting back his head, Orik drained the last of the beer from his mug, then set it down with a sharp clack.

"Is there anything I could do, any custom or ceremony of yours I could perform, that would appease Vermûnd and his followers?" asked Eragon, naming the current grimstborith of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin. "There must be *something* I can do to put their suspicions to rest and bring this feud to an end."

Orik laughed and stood from the table. "You could die."

Early the next morning, Eragon sat with his back against the curved wall of the round room set deep below the center of Tronjheim, along with a select group of warriors, advisers, servants, and family members of the clan chiefs who were privileged enough to attend the clanmeet. The clan chiefs themselves were seated in heavy, carved chairs arranged around the edge of a circular table, which like most objects of note in the lower levels of the city-mountain bore the crest of Korgan and the Ingeitum.

At the moment, Gáldhiem, grimstborith of Dûrgrimst Feldûnost, was speaking. He was short, even for a dwarf—hardly more than two feet in height—and wore patterned robes of gold, russet, and midnight blue. Unlike the dwarves of the Ingeitum, he did not trim or braid his beard, and it tumbled across his chest like a tangled bramble. Standing on the seat of his chair, he pounded the polished table with his gloved fist and roared, "… Eta! Narho ûdim etal os isû vond! Narho ûdim etal os formvn mendûnost brakn, az Varden, hrestvog dûr grimstnzhadn! Az Jurgenvren qathrid né dômar oen etal—"

"… No," Eragon's translator, a dwarf named Hûndfast, whispered in his ear. "I will not let that happen. I will not let these beardless fools, the Varden, destroy our country. The Dragon War left us weak and not —"

Eragon stifled a yawn, bored. He allowed his gaze to drift around the granite table, from Gáldhiem to Nado, a round-faced dwarf with flaxen hair who was nodding with approval at Gáldhiem's thundering speech; to Havard, who was using a dagger to clean under the

fingernails of the two remaining fingers on his right hand; to Vermûnd, heavy-browed but otherwise inscrutable behind his purple veil; to Gannel and Ûndin, who sat leaning toward each other, whispering, while Hadfala, an elderly dwarf woman who was the clan chief of Dûrgrimst Ebardac and the third member of Gannel's alliance, frowned at the sheaf of rune-covered parchment she brought with her to every meeting; and then to the chief of Dûrgrimst Ledwonnû, Manndrâth, who sat in profile to Eragon, displaying his long, drooping nose to good effect; to Thordris, grimstborith of Dûrgrimst Nagra, of whom he could see little but her wavy auburn hair, which fell past her shoulders and lay coiled on the floor in a braid twice as long as she was tall; to the back of Orik's head as he slouched to one side in his chair; to Freowin, grimstborith of Dûrgrimst Gedthrall, an immensely corpulent dwarf who kept his eyes fixed upon the block of wood he was busy carving into the likeness of a hunched raven; and then to Hreidamar, grimstborith of Dûrgrimst Urzhad, who, in contrast with Freowin, was fit and compact, with corded forearms, and who wore a mail hauberk and helm to every gathering; and finally to Íorûnn, she of the nut-brown skin marred only by a thin, crescent-shaped scar high upon her left cheekbone, she of the satin-bright hair bound underneath a silver helm wrought in the shape of a snarling wolf's head, she of the vermilion dress and the necklace of flashing emeralds set in squares of gold carved with lines of arcane runes.

Íorûnn noticed Eragon looking at her. A lazy smile appeared on her lips. With voluptuous ease, she winked at Eragon, obscuring one of her almond-shaped eyes for a pair of heartbeats.

Eragon's cheeks stung as blood suffused them, and the tips of his ears burned. He shifted his gaze and returned it to Gáldhiem, who was still busy pontificating, his chest puffed out like that of a strutting pigeon.

As Orik had asked, Eragon remained impassive throughout the meeting, concealing his reactions from those who were watching. When the clanmeet broke for their midday meal, he hastened over to Orik and, bending so that no one else could hear, said, "Do not look for me at your table. I have had my fill of sitting and talking. I am going to explore the tunnels for a bit."

Orik nodded, appearing distracted, and murmured in reply, "Do as you wish, only be sure you are here when we resume; it would not be meet for you to play truant, no matter how tedious these talks be."

"As you say."

Eragon edged out of the conference room, along with the press of dwarves eager to have their lunches, and rejoined his four guards in the hallway outside, where they had been playing dice with idle warriors from other clans. With his guards in tow, Eragon struck out

in a random direction, allowing his feet to carry him where they would while he pondered methods of welding the dwarves' contentious factions into a whole united against Galbatorix. To his exasperation, the only methods he could envision were so far-fetched, it was absurd to imagine they might succeed.

Eragon paid little attention to the dwarves he met in the tunnels—aside from mumbled greetings that courtesy occasionally demanded—nor even to his exact surroundings, trusting that Kvîstor could guide him back to the conference room. Although Eragon did not study his surroundings in any great detail visually, he kept track of the minds of every living creature he was able to sense within a radius of several hundred feet, even down to the smallest spider crouched behind its web in the corner of a room, for Eragon had no desire to be surprised by anyone who might have cause to seek him out.

When at last he stopped, he was surprised to find himself in the same dusty room he had discovered during his wanderings the previous day. There to his left were the same five black arches that led to caverns unknown, while there to his right was the same bas-relief carving of the head and shoulders of a snarling bear. Bemused by the coincidence, Eragon sauntered over to the bronze sculpture and gazed up at the bear's gleaming fangs, wondering what had drawn him back.

After a moment, he went to the middle of the five archways and gazed through it. The narrow hallway beyond was devoid of lanterns and soon faded into the soft oblivion of shadow. Reaching out with his consciousness, Eragon probed the length of the tunnel and several of the abandoned chambers it opened to. A half-dozen spiders and a sparse collection of moths, millipedes, and blind crickets were the only inhabitants. "Hello!" called Eragon, and listened as the hall returned his voice to him with ever-decreasing volume. "Kvîstor," said Eragon, looking at him, "does no one at all live in these ancient parts?"

The fresh-faced dwarf answered, "Some do. A few strange knurlan, those to whom empty solitude is more pleasing than the touch of their wife's hand or the sound of their friends' voices. It was one such knurlag who warned us of the approach of the Urgal army, if you remember, Argetlam. Also, although we do not speak of it often, there are those who have broken the laws of our land and whom their clan chiefs have banished on pain of death for a term of years or, if the offense is severe, for the remainder of their lives. All such are as the walking dead to us; we shun them if we meet them outside of our lands and hang them if we catch them within our borders."

When Kvîstor had finished speaking, Eragon indicated that he was ready to leave. Kvîstor took the lead, and Eragon followed him out the doorway through which they had entered, the three other dwarves

close behind. They had gone no more than twenty feet when Eragon heard a faint scuffing from the rear, so faint Kvîstor did not seem to notice.

Eragon glanced back. By the amber light cast by the flameless lanterns mounted on either side of the passageway, he saw seven dwarves garbed entirely in black, their faces masked with dark cloth and their feet muffled with rags, running toward his group with a speed that Eragon had assumed was the sole province of elves, Shades, and other creatures whose blood hummed with magic. In their right hands, the dwarves held long, sharp daggers with pale blades that flickered with prismatic colors, while in their left, each carried a metal buckler with a sharpened spike protruding from the boss. Their minds, like those of the Ra'zac, were hidden from Eragon.

Saphira! was Eragon's first thought. Then he remembered he was alone.

Twisting to face the black-garbed dwarves, Eragon reached for the hilt of his falchion while opening his mouth to shout a warning.

He was too late.

As the first word rang in his throat, three of the strange dwarves grabbed the hindmost of Eragon's guards and lifted their glimmering daggers to stab him. Faster than speech or conscious thought, Eragon plunged his whole being into the flow of magic and, without relying upon the ancient language to structure his spell, rewove the fabric of the world into a pattern more pleasing to him. The three guards who stood between him and the attackers flew toward him, as if yanked by invisible strings, and landed upon their feet beside him, unharmed but disoriented.

Eragon winced at the sudden decrease in his strength.

Two of the black-garbed dwarves rushed him, stabbing at his belly with their blood-hungry daggers. Sword in hand, Eragon parried both blows, stunned by the dwarves' speed and ferocity. One of his guards leaped forward, shouting and swinging his ax at the would-be assassins. Before Eragon could grab the dwarf's hauberk and yank him back to safety, a white blade, writhing as with spectral flame, pierced the dwarf's corded neck. As the dwarf fell, Eragon glimpsed his contorted face and was shocked to see Kvîstor—and that his throat was glowing molten red as it disintegrated around the dagger.

I can't let them so much as scratch me, Eragon thought.

Enraged by Kvîstor's death, Eragon stabbed at his killer so quickly, the black-garbed dwarf had no opportunity to evade the blow and dropped lifeless at Eragon's feet.

With all his strength, Eragon shouted, "Stay behind me!"

Thin cracks split the floors and walls, and flakes of stone fell from the ceiling as his voice reverberated through the corridor. The

attacking dwarves faltered at the unbridled power of his voice, then resumed their offensive.

Eragon retreated several yards to give himself room to maneuver free of the corpses and settled into a low crouch, waving the falchion to and fro, like a snake preparing to strike. His heart was racing at twice its normal rate, and although the fight had just begun, he was already gasping for breath.

The hallway was eight feet wide, which was wide enough for three of his six remaining enemies to attack him at once. They spread out, two attempting to flank him on the right and the left, while the third charged straight at him, slashing with frenzied speed at Eragon's arms and legs.

Afraid to duel with the dwarves as he would have if they wielded normal blades, Eragon drove his legs against the floor and jumped up and forward. He spun halfway around and struck the ceiling feet-first. He pushed off, spun halfway around again, and landed on his hands and feet a yard behind the three dwarves. Even as they whirled toward him, he stepped forward and beheaded the lot of them with a single backhand blow.

Their daggers clattered against the floor an instant before their heads.

Leaping over their truncated bodies, Eragon twisted in midair and landed on the spot he had started from.

He was not a moment too soon.

A breath of wind tickled his neck as the tip of a dagger whipped past his throat. Another blade tugged at the cuff of his leggings, cutting them open. He flinched and swung the falchion, trying to gain space to fight. *My wards should have turned their blades away!* he thought, bewildered.

An involuntary cry escaped his throat as his foot struck a patch of slick blood and he lost his balance and toppled over backward. With a sickening crunch, his head collided with the stone floor. Blue lights flashed before his eyes. He gasped.

His three remaining guards sprang over him and swung their axes in unison, clearing the air above Eragon and saving him from the bite of the flashing daggers.

That was all the time Eragon needed to recover. He flipped upright and, berating himself for not trying this sooner, shouted a spell laced with nine of the twelve death-words Oromis had taught him. However, the moment after he loosed his magic he abandoned the spell, for the black-garbed dwarves were protected by numerous wards. Given a few minutes, he might have been able to evade or defeat the wards, but minutes might as well have been days in a battle such as theirs, where every second was as long as an hour. Having

failed with magic, Eragon hardened his thoughts into an iron-hard spear and launched it at where the consciousness of one of the black-garbed dwarves ought to be. The spear skated off mental armor of a sort Eragon had not encountered before: smooth and seamless, seemingly unbroken by the concerns natural to mortal creatures engaged in a struggle to the death.

Someone else is protecting them, Eragon realized. *There are more behind this attack than just these seven*.

Pivoting on one foot, Eragon lunged forward and with his falchion impaled his leftmost attacker in a knee, drawing blood. The dwarf stumbled, and Eragon's guards converged upon him, grasping the dwarf's arms so he could not swing his dire blade and hacking at him with their curved axes.

The nearest of the last two attackers raised his shield in anticipation of the blow Eragon was about to direct at him. Summoning the full measure of his might, Eragon cut at the shield, intending to shear it and the arm underneath in half, as he had often done with Zar'roc. In the fever of battle, though, he forgot to account for the dwarf's inexplicable speed. As the falchion neared its target, the dwarf tilted his shield, so as to deflect the blow to the side.

Two plumes of sparks erupted from the surface of the shield as the falchion glanced off the upper part and then the steel spike mounted in the center. Momentum carried the falchion farther than Eragon had intended, and it continued flying through the air until it struck edge-first against a wall, jarring Eragon's arm. With a crystalline sound, the blade of the falchion shattered into a dozen pieces, leaving him with a six-inch spike of jagged metal protruding from the hilt.

Dismayed, Eragon dropped the broken sword and gripped the rim of the dwarf's buckler, wresting with him back and forth and struggling to keep the shield between him and the dagger graced with a halo of translucent colors. The dwarf was incredibly tough; he matched Eragon's efforts and even succeeded in pushing him back a step. Releasing the buckler with his right hand but still holding on with his left, Eragon drew back his arm and struck the shield as hard as he could, punching through the tempered steel as easily as if it were made of rotten wood. Because of the calluses on his knuckles, he felt no pain from the impact.

The force of the blow threw the dwarf against the opposite wall. His head lolling upon a boneless neck, the dwarf dropped to the ground, like a puppet whose strings had been severed.

Eragon pulled his hand back through the jagged hole in the shield, scratching himself on the torn metal, and drew his hunting knife.

Then the last of the black-garbed dwarves was upon him. Eragon parried his dagger twice … thrice … and then cut through the dwarf's

padded sleeve and scored his dagger arm from the elbow to the wrist. The dwarf hissed with pain, blue eyes furious above his cloth mask. He initiated a series of blows, the dagger whistling through the air faster than the eye could follow, which forced Eragon to hop away to avoid the deadly edge. The dwarf pressed the attack. For several yards, Eragon succeeded in evading him, until his heel struck a body and, in attempting to step around it, he stumbled and fell against a wall, bruising his shoulder.

With an evil laugh, the dwarf pounced, stabbing downward toward Eragon's exposed chest. Throwing up an arm in a futile attempt to protect himself, Eragon rolled farther down the hallway, knowing that this time his luck had run out and he would not be able to escape.

As he completed a revolution and his face was momentarily turned toward the dwarf again, Eragon glimpsed the pale dagger descending toward his flesh, like a bolt of lightning from on high. Then, to his astonishment, the tip of the dagger caught on one of the flameless lanterns mounted on the wall. Eragon whirled away before he could see more, but an instant later, a burning hot hand seemed to strike him from behind, throwing him a good twenty feet through the hall, until he fetched up against the edge of an open archway, instantly accumulating a new collection of scrapes and bruises. A booming report deafened him. Feeling as if someone were driving splinters into his eardrums, Eragon clapped his hands over his ears and curled into a ball, howling.

When the noise and the pain had subsided, he lowered his hands and staggered to his feet, clenching his teeth as his injuries announced their presence with a myriad of unpleasant sensations. Groggy and confused, he gazed upon the site of the explosion.

The blast had blackened a ten-foot length of the hallway with soot. Soft flakes of ash tumbled through the air, which was as hot as the air from a heated forge. The dwarf who had been about to strike Eragon lay on the ground, thrashing, his body covered with burns. After a few more convulsions, he grew still. Eragon's three remaining guards lay at the edge of the soot, where the explosion had thrown them. Even as he watched, they staggered upright, blood dripping from their ears and gaping mouths, their beards singed and in disarray. The links along the fringe of their hauberks glowed red, but their leather under-armor seemed to have protected them from the worst of the heat.

Eragon took a single step forward, then stopped and groaned as a patch of agony bloomed between his shoulder blades. He tried to twist his arm around to feel the extent of the wound, but as his skin stretched, the pain became too great to continue. Nearly losing consciousness, he leaned against the wall for support. He glanced at the burnt dwarf again. *I must have suffered similar injuries on my back*.

Forcing himself to concentrate, he recited two of the spells designed to heal burns that Brom had taught him during their travels. As they took effect, it felt as if cool, soothing water were flowing across his back. He sighed with relief and straightened.

"Are you hurt?" he asked as his guards hobbled over.

The lead dwarf frowned, tapped his right ear, and shook his head.

Eragon muttered a curse and only then did he notice he could not hear his own voice. Again drawing upon the reserves of energy within his body, he cast a spell to repair the inner mechanisms of his ears and of theirs. As the incantation concluded, an irritating itch squirmed inside his ears, then faded along with the spell.

"Are you hurt?"

The dwarf on the right, a burly fellow with a forked beard, coughed and spat out a glob of congealed blood, then growled, "Nothing that time won't mend. What of you, Shadeslayer?"

"I'll live."

Testing the floor with every step, Eragon entered the soot-blackened area and knelt beside Kvîstor, hoping that he might still save the dwarf from the clutches of death. As soon as he beheld Kvîstor's wound again, he knew it was not to be.

Eragon bowed his head, the memory of recent and former bloodshed bitter to his soul. He stood. "Why did the lantern explode?"

"They are filled with heat and light, Argetlam," one of his guards replied. "If they are broken, all of it escapes at once and then it is better to be far away."

Gesturing at the crumpled corpses of their attackers, Eragon asked, "Do you know of which clan they are?"

The dwarf with the forked beard rifled through the clothes of several of the black-garbed dwarves, then said, "Barzûl! They carry no marks upon them such as you would recognize, Argetlam, but they carry this." He held up a bracelet made of braided horsehair set with polished cabochons of amethyst.

"What does it mean?"

"This amethyst," said the dwarf, and tapped one of the cabochons with a soot-streaked fingernail, "this particular variety of amethyst, it grows in only four parts of the Beor Mountains, and three of them belong to Az Sweldn rak Anhûin."

Eragon frowned. "Grimstborith Vermûnd ordered this attack?"

"I cannot say for sure, Argetlam. Another clan might have left the bracelet for us to find. They might want us to think it was Az Sweldn rak Anhûin so we do not realize who our foes really are. But … if I had to wager, Argetlam, I would wager a cartload of gold that it is Az Sweldn rak Anhûin who is responsible."

"Blast them," Eragon murmured. "Whoever it was, blast them." He

clenched his fists to stop them from shaking. With the side of his boot, he nudged one of the prismatic daggers the assassins had wielded. "The spells on these weapons and on the … on the men"—he motioned with his chin—"men, dwarves, be as it may, they must have required an incredible amount of energy, and I cannot even imagine how complex their wording was. Casting them would have been hard and dangerous.…" Eragon looked at each of his guards in turn and said, "As you are my witnesses, I swear I shall not let this attack, nor Kvîstor's death, go unpunished. Whichever clan or clans sent these dung-faced killers, when I learn their names, they will wish they had never thought to strike at me and, by striking at me, strike at Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. This I swear to you, as a Dragon Rider and as a fellow member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, and if any ask you of it, repeat my promise to them as I have given it to you."

The dwarves bowed before him, and he with the forked beard replied, "As you command, so we shall obey, Argetlam. You honor Hrothgar's memory by your words."

Then another of the dwarves said, "Whichever clan it was, they have violated the law of hospitality; they have attacked a guest. They are not even so high as rats; they are *menknurlan.*" He spat on the floor, and the other dwarves spat with him.

Eragon walked to where the remains of his falchion lay. He knelt in the soot and, with the tip of a finger, touched one of the pieces of metal, tracing its ragged edges. *I must have hit the shield and the wall so hard, I overwhelmed the spells I used to reinforce the steel*, he thought.

Then he thought, *I need a sword.*

I need a Rider's sword.

A Matter of Perspective

The wind-of-morning-heat-above-flat-land, which was different from the wind-of-morning-heat-above-hills, shifted.

Saphira adjusted the angle of her wings to compensate for the changes in the speed and pressure of the air that supported her weight thousands of feet above the sun-bathed land below. She closed her double eyelids for a moment, luxuriating in the soft bed of the wind, as well as the warmth of the morning rays beating down upon her sinewy length. She imagined how the light must make her scales sparkle and how those who saw her circling in the sky must marvel at the sight, and she hummed with pleasure, content in the knowledge that she was the most beautiful creature in Alagaësia, for who could hope to match the glory of her scales; and her long, tapering tail; and her wings, so fair and well formed; and her curved claws; and her long white fangs, with which she could sever the neck of a wild ox with a single bite? Not Glaedr-of-the-gold-scales, who had lost a leg during the fall of the Riders. Nor could Thorn or Shruikan, for they were both slaves to Galbatorix, and their forced servitude had twisted their minds. A dragon who was not free to do as he or she wished was not a dragon at all. Besides, they were males, and while males might appear majestic, they could not embody the beauty she did. No, she was the most stunning creature in Alagaësia, and that was as it should be.

Saphira wriggled with satisfaction all the way from the base of her head to the tip of her tail. Today was a perfect day. The heat of the sun made her feel as if she were lying in a nest of coals. Her belly was full, the sky was clear, and there was nothing she needed to attend to, besides watching for foes who might wish to fight, which she did anyway, as a matter of habit.

Her happiness had only one flaw, but it was a profound flaw, and the longer she considered it, the more discontented she grew, until she realized she was no longer satisfied; she wished Eragon were there to share the day with her. She growled and loosed a brief jet of blue flame from between her jaws, searing the air in front of her, then constricted her throat, cutting off the stream of liquid fire. Her tongue tingled from the flames that had run over it. When was Eragon, partner-of-her-mind-and-heart-Eragon, going to contact Nasuada from Tronjheim and ask for her, Saphira, to join him? She had urged him to obey Nasuada and travel to the mountains-higher-than-she-could-fly, but now too long had passed, and Saphira felt cold and empty in her gut.

There is a shadow in the world, she thought. *That is what has upset me. Something is wrong with Eragon. He is in danger, or he was in danger recently. And I cannot help him*. She was not a wild dragon. Since she had hatched, she had shared her entire life with Eragon, and without him, she was only half herself. If he died because she was not there to protect him, she would have no reason to continue living, save for revenge. She knew she would tear his killers apart and then she would fly on the black city of the egg-breaker-traitor who had kept her imprisoned for so many decades, and she would do her best to slay him, no matter that it would mean certain death for her.

Saphira growled again and snapped at a tiny sparrow that was foolish enough to fly within range of her teeth. She missed, and the sparrow darted past and continued on its way unmolested, which only exacerbated her foul mood. For a moment, she considered chasing the sparrow but then decided it was not worth bothering herself over such an inconsequential speck of bones and feathers. It would not even make a good snack.

Tilting on the wind and swinging her tail in the opposite direction to facilitate her turn, she wheeled around, studying the ground far below and all the small scurrying things that strove to hide from her hunter's eyes. Even from her height of thousands of feet, she could count the number of feathers on the back of a chicken hawk that was skimming the fields of planted wheat west of the Jiet River. She could see the blur of brown fur as a rabbit dashed to the safety of its warren. She could pick out the small herd of deer cowering underneath the branches of the currant bushes clustered along a tributary of the Jiet River. And she could hear the high-pitched squeaks of frightened animals warning their brethren of her presence. Their wavering cries gratified her; it was only right that her food should fear her. If ever she should fear it, she would know it was her time to die.

A league farther upstream, the Varden were packed against the Jiet River like a herd of red deer against the edge of a cliff. The Varden had arrived at the crossing yesterday, and since then, perhaps a third of the men-who-were-friends and the Urgals-who-were-friends and the horses-she-must-not-eat had forded the river. The army moved so slowly, she sometimes wondered how humans ever had time to do anything other than travel, considering how short their lives were. *It would be much more convenient if they could fly*, she thought, and wondered why they did not choose to. Flying was so easy, it never ceased to puzzle her why any creature would remain earthbound. Even Eragon retained his attachment to the soft-hard-ground, when she knew he could join her in the sky at any time merely by uttering a few words in the ancient language. But then, she did not always understand the actions of those who tottered about on two legs,

whether they had round ears, pointed ears, or horns or were so short she could squash them under her feet.

A flicker of movement to the northeast caught her attention, and she angled toward it, curious. She saw a line of five-and-forty weary horses trudging toward the Varden. Most of the horses were rider-less; therefore, it did not occur to her until another half hour had elapsed and she could make out the faces of the men in the saddles that the group might be Roran's returning from their raid. She wondered what had happened to so reduce their numbers and felt a momentary twinge of unease. She was not bonded to Roran, but Eragon cared for him, and that was reason enough for her to worry about his well-being.

Pushing her consciousness down toward the disorganized Varden, she searched until she found the music of Arya's mind, and once the elf acknowledged her and allowed access to her thoughts, Saphira said, *Roran shall be here by late afternoon. However, his company is sore diminished. Some great evil befell them this trip*.

Thank you, Saphira, said Arya. *I shall inform Nasuada*.

As Saphira withdrew from Arya's mind, she felt the questing touch of black-blue-wolf-hair-Blödhgarm. *I am not a hatchling*, she snapped. *You need not check on my health every few minutes*.

You have my most humble apologies, Bjartskular, only you have been gone for quite some time now, and if any are watching, they will begin to wonder why you and—

Yes, I know, she growled. Shortening her wingspan, she tilted downward, the sensation of weight leaving her, and gyrated in slow spirals as she dove toward the turgid river. *I shall be there shortly*.

A thousand feet above the water, she flared her wings and felt the strain in her flight membranes as the wind pressed against them with immense force. She slowed to a near standstill, then spilled air from her wings and accelerated once more, gliding to within a hundred feet of the brown not-good-to-drink-water. With an occasional flap to maintain her altitude, she flew up the Jiet River, alert for the sudden changes of pressure that plagued cool-air-above-flowing-water and that could push her in an unexpected direction or, worse, into sharp-pointy-trees or the break-bone-ground.

She swept high above the Varden gathered next to the river, high enough that her arrival would not unduly frighten the silly horses. Then, drifting downward upon still wings, she landed in a clearing among the tents—a clearing Nasuada had ordered set aside just for her—and crawled through the camp to Eragon's empty tent, where Blödhgarm and the eleven other elves he commanded were waiting for her. She greeted them with a blink of her eyes and a flick of her tongue and then curled up in front of Eragon's tent, resigned to dozing

and waiting for dark as she would if Eragon were actually in the tent and he and she were flying missions at night. It was dull, tedious work, lying there day after day, but it was necessary in order to maintain the deception that Eragon was still with the Varden, so Saphira did not complain, even if after twelve or more hours spent on the rough-hard-ground dirtying her scales, she felt like fighting a thousand soldiers, or razing a forest with tooth and claw and fire, or leaping up and flying until she could fly no more or until she reached the end of earth, water, and air.

Growling to herself, she kneaded the ground with her claws, softening it, then lay her head across her forelegs and closed her inner eyelids so she could rest and still watch those who walked by. A dragonfly buzzed over her head, and not for the first time she wondered what could have possibly inspired some feebleminded runtling to name the insect after her race. *It looks nothing like a dragon*, she grumbled, then drifted off into a light sleep.

The big-round-fire-in-the-sky was close to the horizon when Saphira heard the shouts and cries of welcome that meant Roran and his fellow warriors had reached the camp. She roused herself. As he had before, Blödhgarm half sang, half whispered a spell that created an insubstantial likeness of Eragon, which the elf caused to walk out of the tent and climb onto Saphira's back, where it sat looking around in a perfect imitation of independent life. Visually, the apparition was flawless, but it had no mind of its own, and if any of Galbatorix's agents tried to eavesdrop upon Eragon's thoughts, they would discover the deceit forthwith. Therefore, the success of the ploy depended upon Saphira ferrying the apparition through the camp and out of sight as quickly as possible, and upon the hope that Eragon's reputation was so formidable, it would discourage clandestine observers from attempting to glean information about the Varden from his consciousness, for fear of his vengeance.

Saphira started up and bounded through the camp, the twelve elves running in formation around her. Men leaped out of their path, shouting, "Hail, Shadeslayer!" and "Hail, Saphira!" which kindled a warm glow in her belly.

When she arrived at Nasuada's folded-wing-red-butterfly-chrysalis-tent, she crouched and stuck her head inside the dark gap along one wall, where Nasuada's guards had pulled aside a panel of fabric to allow her access. Blödhgarm resumed his soft singing then, and the Eragon-wraith climbed down off Saphira, entered the crimson tent, and, once it was out of sight of the gawking onlookers outside, dissolved into nothingness.

"Do you think our ruse was discovered?" Nasuada asked from her

high-backed chair.

Blödhgarm bowed with an elegant gesture. “Again, Lady Nasuada, I cannot say for sure. We will have to wait and see if the Empire moves to take advantage of Eragon’s absence before we will know the answer to that question.”

“Thank you, Blödhgarm. That will be all.”

With another bow, the elf withdrew from the tent and took up a position several yards behind Saphira, guarding her flank.

Saphira settled down onto her underside and began to lick clean the scales around the third claw on her left forefoot, between which there had accumulated unsightly lines of the dry white clay she remembered standing in when she ate her last kill.

Not a minute later, Martland Redbeard, Roran, and a man-with-round-ears, whom she did not recognize, entered the red tent and bowed to Nasuada. Saphira paused in her cleaning to taste the air with her tongue and discerned the tang of dried blood, the bitter-sour musk of sweat, the scent of horse and leather intermingled, and, faint but unmistakable, the sharp spike of man-fear. She examined the trio again and saw that the red-long-beard-man had lost his right hand, then returned to excavating the clay from around her scales.

She continued licking her foot, restoring every scale to pristine brilliance, while first Martland, then the man-with-round-ears-who-was-Ulhart, then Roran, told a tale of blood and fire and of laughing men who refused to die at their allotted times but insisted upon continuing to fight long past when Angvard had called their names. As was her wont, Saphira held her peace while others—specifically Nasuada and her adviser, long-man-gaunt-face-Jörmundur—questioned the warriors about the details of their ill-fated mission. Saphira knew it sometimes puzzled Eragon why she did not participate more in conversations. Her reasons for silence were simple: save for Arya or Glaedr, she felt most comfortable communicating only with Eragon, and in her opinion, most conversations were nothing more than pointless dithering. Whether round-ear, pointed-ear, horned, or short, two-legs seemed addicted to dithering. Brom had not dithered, which was something Saphira had liked about him. For her, choices were simple; either there was an action she could take to improve the situation, in which case she took it, or there was not, and everything else said on the subject was so much meaningless noise. In any event, she did not worry herself about the future, except where Eragon was concerned. Him, she always worried about.

When the questions were finished, Nasuada expressed her condolences to Martland for his lost hand, then dismissed Martland and Ulhart, but not Roran, to whom she said, “You have demonstrated your prowess once again, Stronghammer. I am well pleased with your

abilities."

"Thank you, my Lady."

"Our best healers will attend to him, but Martland will still need time to recover from his injury. Even once he does, he cannot lead raids such as these with only one hand. From now on, he will have to serve the Varden from the back of the army, not the front. I think, perhaps, that I shall promote him and make him one of my battle advisers. Jörmundur, what think you of that idea?"

"I think it an excellent idea, my Lady."

Nasuada nodded, appearing satisfied. "This means, however, that I must find another captain for you to serve under, Roran."

Then Roran said, "My Lady, what of my own command? Have I not proven myself to your satisfaction with these two raids, as well as with my past accomplishments?"

"If you continue to distinguish yourself as you have, Stronghammer, you will win your command soon enough. However, you must be patient and abide awhile longer. Two missions alone, however impressive, may not reveal the full scope of a man's character. I am a cautious person when it comes to entrusting my people to others, Stronghammer. In this, you must humor me."

Roran gripped the head of the hammer stuck through his belt, veins and tendons standing out on his hand, but his tone remained polite. "Of course, Lady Nasuada."

"Very good. A page will bring you your new assignment later today. Oh, and see to it that you have a large meal once you and Katrina finish celebrating your reunion. That's an order, Stronghammer. You look as if you're about to fall over."

"My Lady."

As Roran started to leave, Nasuada raised a hand and said, "Roran." He paused. "Now that you have fought these men who feel no pain, do you believe that having similar protection from the agonies of the flesh would make it easier to defeat them?"

Roran hesitated, then shook his head. "Their strength is their weakness. They do not shield themselves as they would if they feared the bite of a sword or the stab of an arrow, and thus they are careless with their lives. It is true they can continue fighting long past when an ordinary man would have dropped dead, and that is no small advantage in battle, but they also die in greater numbers, because they do not protect their bodies as they ought. In their numb confidence, they will walk into traps and peril we would go to great lengths to avoid. As long as the Varden's spirits remain high, I believe that with the right tactics we can prevail against these laughing monsters. If we were like them, though, we would hack each other into oblivion, and neither of us would care, since we would have no

thought for self-preservation. Those are my thoughts."

"Thank you, Roran."

When Roran had gone, Saphira said, *Nothing yet from Eragon?*

Nasuada shook her head. "No, nothing yet from him, and his silence is beginning to concern me. If he has not contacted us by the day after tomorrow, I will have Arya send a message to one of Orik's spellcasters demanding a report from him. If Eragon is unable to hasten the end of the dwarves' clanmeet, then I fear we will no longer be able to count on the dwarves as allies during the battles to come. The only good of such a disastrous outcome would be that Eragon could return to us without further delay."

When Saphira was ready to leave the red-chrysalis-tent, Blödhgarm again summoned up the apparition of Eragon and placed it on Saphira's back. Then Saphira withdrew her head from the confines of the tent and, as she had before, bounded through the camp, the lithe elves keeping step with her the entire way.

Once she reached Eragon's tent and the colored-shadow-Eragon disappeared inside it, Saphira lowered herself to the ground and resigned herself to waiting out the remainder of the day in unrelieved monotony. Before she resumed her reluctant nap, however, she extended her mind toward Roran and Katrina's tent and pressed against Roran's mind until he lowered the barriers around his consciousness.

Saphira? he asked.

Do you know another such as me?

Of course not. You just surprised me. I am … ah, somewhat occupied at the moment.

She studied the color of his emotions, as well as those of Katrina, and was amused by her findings. *I only wished to welcome you back. I am glad you were not injured.*

Roran's thoughts flashed quick-hot-muddled-cold, and he seemed to have difficulty forming a coherent answer. Eventually, he said, *That's very kind of you, Saphira.*

If you can, come visit me tomorrow, when we may speak at greater length. I grow restless sitting here day after day. Perhaps you could tell me more about how Eragon was before I hatched for him.

It … it would be my honor.

Satisfied she had fulfilled the demands of round-ears-two-legs courtesy by welcoming Roran, and heartened by the knowledge that the following day would not be as boring—for it was unthinkable anyone would dare ignore her request for an audience—Saphira made herself as comfortable as she could on the bare earth, wishing as she often did for the soft nest that was hers in Eragon's wind-rocked-tree-house in Ellesméra. A puff of smoke escaped her as she sighed and fell

asleep and dreamed that she flew higher than she ever had before.

She flapped and she flapped until she rose above the unreachable peaks of the Beor Mountains. There she circled for a time, gazing down at the whole of Alagaësia laid out before her. Then an uncontrollable desire entered her to climb even higher and see what she might, and so she began flapping again, and in what seemed like the blink of an eye, she soared past the glaring moon, until only she and the silver stars hung in the black sky. She drifted among the heavens for an indeterminate period, queen of the bright, jewel-like world below, but then disquiet entered her soul, and she cried out with her thoughts:

Eragon, where are you!

KISS ME SWEET

Waking, Roran extricated himself from Katrina's smooth arms and sat bare-chested on the edge of the cot they shared. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, then gazed at the pale strip of firelight that glowed between the two entrance flaps, feeling dull and stupid with accumulated exhaustion. A chill crept over him, but he remained where he was, motionless.

"Roran?" Katrina asked in a sleep-smeared voice. She propped herself up on one arm and reached for him with the other. He did not react as she touched him, sliding her hand across his upper back and rubbing his neck. "Sleep. You need your rest. You'll be gone again before long."

He shook his head, not looking at her.

"What is it?" she asked. Sitting upright, she pulled a blanket over his shoulders, then leaned against him, her cheek warm against his arm. "Are you worried about your new captain or where Nasuada may send you next?"

"No."

She was silent for a while. "Every time you leave, I feel as if less of you returns to me. You have become so grim and quiet.… If you want to tell me about what is troubling you, you can, you know, no matter how terrible it is. I am the daughter of a butcher, and I have seen my share of men fall in battle."

"Want!" Roran exclaimed, choking on the word. "I don't ever want to think about it again." He clenched his fists, his breathing uncertain. "A true warrior would not feel as I do."

"A true warrior," she said, "does not fight because he wishes to but because he has to. A man who yearns for war, a man who *enjoys* his killing, he is a brute and a monster. No matter how much glory he wins on the battlefield, that cannot erase the fact that he is no better than a rabid wolf who will turn on his friends and family as soon as his foes." She brushed his hair away from his brow and stroked the top of his head, light and slow. "You once told me that 'The Song of Gerand' was your favorite of Brom's stories, that it was why you fight with a hammer instead of a blade. Remember how Gerand disliked killing and how reluctant he was to take up arms again?"

"Aye."

"And yet he was considered the greatest warrior of his age." She cupped his cheek in her hand and turned his face toward her so that he was forced to gaze into her solemn eyes. "And you are the greatest

warrior I know of, Roran, here or anywhere."

With a dry mouth, he said, "What of Eragon or—"

"They are not half so valorous as you. Eragon, Murtagh, Galbatorix, the elves … all of them march into battle with spells upon their lips and might that far exceeds ours. But you"—she kissed him on the nose—"you are no more than a man. You face your foes on your own two feet. You are not a magician, and yet you slew the Twins. You are only as fast and as strong as a human may be, and yet you did not shirk from attacking the Ra'zac in their lair and freeing me from their dungeon."

He swallowed. "I had wards from Eragon to protect me."

"But no longer. Besides, you did not have any wards in Carvahall either, and did you flee from the Ra'zac then?" When he was unresponsive, she said, "You are no more than a man, but you have done things not even Eragon or Murtagh could have. To me, that makes you the greatest warrior in Alagaësia.… I cannot think of anyone else in Carvahall who would have gone to the lengths you did to rescue me."

"Your father would have," he said.

He felt her shiver against him. "Yes, he would have," she whispered. "But he never would have been able to convince others to follow him, as you did." She tightened her arm around him. "Whatever you have seen or done, you will always have me."

"That is all I will ever need," he said, and clasped her in his arms and held her for a span. Then he sighed. "Still, I wish this war were at an end. I wish I could till a field again and sow my crops and harvest them when they ripened. Farming is backbreaking work, but at least it is honest labor. This killing isn't honest. It is thievery … the thievery of men's lives, and no right-minded person should aspire to it."

"As I said."

"As you said." Difficult as it was, he made himself smile. "I have forgotten myself. Here I am burdening you with my troubles when you have worries enough of your own." And he placed a hand over her rounding womb.

"Your troubles shall always be my troubles, so long as we are married," she murmured, and nuzzled his arm.

"Some troubles," he said, "no one else should have to endure, especially not those you love."

She withdrew an inch or two from him, and he saw her eyes become bleak and listless, as they did whenever she fell to brooding over the time she had spent imprisoned in Helgrind. "No," she whispered, "some troubles no one else should have to endure."

"Ah, do not be sad." He pulled her closer and rocked back and forth with her and wished with all his might that Eragon had not found

Saphira's egg in the Spine. After a while, when Katrina had grown soft in his arms again, and even he no longer felt quite so tense, he caressed the curve of her neck. "Come, kiss me sweet, and then let us return to bed, for I am tired, and I would sleep."

She laughed at him then, and kissed him most sweetly, and then they lay upon the cot as they had before, and outside the tent all was still and quiet except for the Jiet River, which flowed past the camp, never pausing, never stopping, and poured itself into Roran's dreams, where he imagined himself standing at the prow of a ship, Katrina by his side, and gazing into the maw of the giant whirlpool, the Boar's Eye.

And he thought, *How can we hope to escape?*

GLÛMRA

Hundreds of feet below Tronjheim, the stone opened up into a cavern thousands of feet long with a still black lake of unknown depth along one side and a marble shore on the other. Brown and ivory stalactites dripped from the ceiling, while stalagmites stabbed upward from the ground, and in places the two joined to form bulging pillars thicker around than even the largest trees in Du Weldenvarden. Scattered among the pillars were mounds of compost studded with mushrooms, as well as three-and-twenty low stone huts. A flameless lantern glowed iron red next to each of their doors. Beyond the reach of the lanterns, shadows abounded.

Inside one of the huts, Eragon sat in a chair that was too small for him, at a granite table no higher than his knees. The smell of soft goat cheese, sliced mushrooms, yeast, stew, pigeon eggs, and coal dust pervaded the air. Across from him, Glûmra, a dwarf woman of the Family of Mord, she who was the mother of Kvîstor, Eragon's slain guard, wailed and tore at her hair and beat at her breast with her fists. Glistening tracks marked where her tears had rolled down her plump face.

The two of them were alone in the hut. Eragon's four guards—their numbers replenished by Thrand, a warrior from Orik's retinue—were waiting outside, along with Hûndfast, Eragon's translator, whom Eragon had dismissed from the hut once he learned that Glûmra could speak his language.

After the attempt on his life, Eragon had contacted Orik with his mind, whereupon Orik insisted Eragon run as fast as he could to the chambers of the Ingeitum, where he would be safe from any more assassins. Eragon had obeyed, and there he had remained while Orik forced the clanmeet to adjourn until the following morning, on the grounds that an emergency had arisen within his clan that required his immediate attention. Then Orik marched with his stoutest warriors and most adept spellcaster to the site of the ambush, which they studied and recorded with means both magical and mundane. Once Orik was satisfied they had learned all they could, he had hurried back to his chambers, where he said to Eragon, "We have much to do and little time in which to do it. Before the clanmeet resumes upon the third morning hour of tomorrow, we must attempt to establish beyond all doubt who ordered the attack. If we can, then we will have leverage to use against them. If not, then we will be flailing in the dark, uncertain of our enemies. We can keep the attack a secret until

the clanmeet, but no longer. Knurlan will have heard echoes of your fight throughout the tunnels under Tronjheim, and even now, I know they will be searching for the source of the disturbance, for fear there may have been a cave-in or similar catastrophe that might undermine the city above." Orik stamped his feet and cursed the ancestors of whoever had sent the assassins, then planted his fists on his hips and said, "A clan war was already threatening us, but now it stands upon our very threshold. We must move quickly if we are to avert that dread fate. There are knurlan to find, questions to ask, threats to make, bribes to offer, and scrolls to steal—and all before morn."

"What of me?" Eragon asked.

"You should remain here until we know if Az Sweldn rak Anhûin or some other clan has a larger force massed elsewhere to kill you. Also, as long as we can hide from your attackers whether you are alive, dead, or wounded, the longer we may keep them uncertain as to the safety of the rock beneath their feet."

At first Eragon agreed with Orik's proposal, but as he watched the dwarf bustle about issuing orders, he felt increasingly uneasy and helpless. Finally, he caught Orik by the arm and said, "If I have to sit here and stare at the wall while you search for the villains who did this, I'll grind my teeth down to nubs. There must be something I can do to help.… What of Kvîstor? Do any of his family live in Tronjheim? Has anyone told them of his death yet? Because if not, I would be the one to bring them the tidings, for it was me he died defending."

Orik inquired of his guards, and from them they learned that Kvîstor did indeed have family in Tronjheim, or more accurately, underneath Tronjheim. When he heard, Orik frowned and muttered a strange word in Dwarvish. "They are deep dwellers," he said, "knurlan who have forsaken the surface of the land for the world below, except for occasional forays above. More of them live here, below Tronjheim and Farthen Dûr, than anywhere else, because they can come out in Farthen Dûr and not feel as if they are actually outside, which most of them cannot bear, they are so accustomed to closed-in spaces. I had not known Kvîstor was of their number."

"Would you mind if I go to visit his family?" Eragon asked. "Among these rooms, there are stairs that lead below, am I right? We could leave without anyone being the wiser."

Orik thought for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. The path is safe enough, and no one would think to look for you among the deep dwellers. They would come here first, and here they would otherwise find you.… Go, and do not return until I send a messenger for you, even if the Family of Mord turns you away and you must sit on a stalagmite until morn. But, Eragon, be you careful; the deep dwellers keep to themselves for the most part, and they are prickly to an

extreme about their honor, and they have strange customs of their own. Tread carefully, as if you were on rotten shale, eh?"

And so, with Thrand added to his guards, and Hûndfast accompanying them—and with a short dwarf sword belted around his waist—Eragon went to the nearest staircase leading downward, and following it, he descended farther into the bowels of the earth than ever he had before. And in due time, he found Glûmra and informed her of Kvîstor's demise, and now he sat listening as she grieved for her slain child, alternating between wordless howls and scraps of Dwarvish sung in a haunting, dissonant key.

Discomfited by the strength of her sorrow, Eragon glanced away from her face. He looked at the green soapstone stove that stood against one wall and the worn carvings of geometric design that adorned its edges. He studied the green and brown rug that lay before the hearth, and the churn in the corner, and the provisions hanging from the beams of the ceiling. He gazed at the heavy-timbered loom that stood underneath a round window with panes of lavender glass.

Then, at the height of her wailing, Glûmra caught Eragon's eye as she rose from the table, went to the counter, and placed her left hand on the cutting board. Before Eragon could stop her, she took a carving knife and cut off the first joint of her little finger. She groaned and doubled over.

Eragon sprang halfway up with an involuntary exclamation. He wondered what madness had overcome the dwarf woman and whether he should attempt to restrain her, lest she should do herself additional harm. He opened his mouth to ask if she wanted him to heal the wound, but then he thought better of it, remembering Orik's admonishments about the deep dwellers' strange customs and strong sense of honor. *She might consider the offer an insult*, he realized. Closing his mouth, he sank back into his too-small chair.

After a minute, Glûmra straightened out of her hunched position, took a deep breath, and then quietly and calmly washed the raw end of her finger with brandy, smeared it with a yellow salve, and bandaged the wound. Her moon-face still pale from the shock, she lowered herself into the chair opposite Eragon. "I thank you, Shadeslayer, for bringing me news of mine son's fate yourself. I am glad to know that he died proudly, as a warrior ought to."

"He was most brave," Eragon said. "He could see that our enemies were as fast as elves, and yet he still leaped forward to protect me. His sacrifice bought me time to escape their blades and also revealed the danger of the enchantments they had placed on their weapons. If not for his actions, I doubt I would be here now."

Glûmra nodded slowly, eyes downcast, and smoothed the front of her dress. "Do you know who was responsible for this attack on our

clan, Shadeslayer?"

"We have only suspicions. Grimstborith Orik is trying to determine the truth of the matter even as we speak."

"Was it Az Sweldn rak Anhûin?" Glûmra asked, surprising Eragon with the astuteness of her guess. He did his best to conceal his reaction. When he remained silent, she said, "We all know of their blood feud with you, Argetlam; every knurla within these mountains knows. Some of us have looked with favor upon their opposition of you, but if they thought to actually kill you, then they have misjudged the lay of the rock and doomed themselves because of it."

Eragon raised an eyebrow, interested. "Doomed? How?"

"It was you, Shadeslayer, who slew Durza and so allowed us to save Tronjheim and the dwellings below from the clutches of Galbatorix. Our race shall never forget that so long as Tronjheim remains standing. And then there is word come by the tunnels that your dragon shall make whole again Isidar Mithrim?"

Eragon nodded.

"That is good of you, Shadeslayer. You have done much for our race, and whichever clan it was attacked you, we shall turn against them and have our vengeance."

"I swore before witnesses," Eragon said, "and I swear to you as well, that I will punish whoever sent those backstabbing murderers and that I'll make them wish they had never thought of such a foul deed. However—"

"Thank you, Shadeslayer."

Eragon hesitated, then inclined his head. "However, we must not do anything that would ignite a clan war. Not now. If force is to be used, it should be Grimstborith Orik who decides when and where we draw our swords, don't you agree?"

"I will think upon what you have said, Shadeslayer," Glûmra replied. "Orik is …" Whatever she was going to say next caught in her mouth. Her thick eyelids drooped and she sagged forward for a moment, pressing her maimed hand against her abdomen. When the bout passed, she pushed herself upright and held the back of the hand against her opposite cheek and swayed from side to side, moaning, "Oh, mine son … mine beautiful son."

Standing, she staggered around the table, heading toward a small collection of swords and axes mounted on the wall behind Eragon, next to an alcove covered by a curtain of red silk. Afraid that she intended to cause herself further injury, Eragon leaped to his feet, knocking over the oak chair in his haste. He reached for her and then saw that she was walking toward the curtained alcove, not the weapons, and he snatched his arm back before he caused offense.

The brass rings sewn on top of the silk drapery clattered against one

another as Glûmra swept aside the cloth to expose a deep, shadowed shelf carved with runes and shapes of such fantastic detail, Eragon thought he could stare at them for hours and still not grasp them in their entirety. On the low shelf rested statues of the six major dwarf gods, as well as nine other entities Eragon was unfamiliar with, all carved with exaggerated features and postures to better convey the character of the being portrayed.

Glûmra removed an amulet of gold and silver from within her bodice, which she kissed and then held against the hollow of her throat as she knelt before the alcove. Her voice rising and falling in the strange patterns of dwarf music, she began to croon a dirge in her native language. The melody brought tears to Eragon's eyes. For several minutes, Glûmra sang, and then she fell silent and continued to gaze at the figurines, and as she gazed, the lines of her grief-ravaged face softened, and where before Eragon had perceived only anger, distress, and hopelessness, her countenance assumed an air of calm acceptance, of peacefulness, and of sublime transcendence. A soft glow seemed to emanate from her features. So complete was Glûmra's transformation, Eragon almost did not recognize her.

She said, "Tonight Kvîstor will dine in Morgothal's hall. That I know." She kissed her amulet again. "I wish I might break bread with him, along with mine husband, Bauden, but it is not mine time to sleep in the catacombs of Tronjheim, and Morgothal refuses entry to his hall to those who quicken their arrival. But in time, our family shall be reunited, including all of our ancestors since Gûntera created the world from darkness. That I know."

Eragon knelt next to her, and in a hoarse voice, he asked, "How do you know this?"

"I know because it is so." Her movements slow and respectful, Glûmra touched the chiseled feet of each of the gods with the tips of her fingers. "How could it be otherwise? Since the world could not have created itself any more than a sword or a helm might, and since the only beings with the wherewithal to forge the earth and the heavens into shape are those with divine power, it is to the gods we must look for our answers. Them I trust to ensure the rightness of the world, and by mine trust, I free myself of the burdens of mine flesh."

She spoke with such conviction, Eragon felt a sudden desire to share in her belief. He longed to toss aside his doubts and fears and to know that, however horrible the world might seem at times, life was not mere confusion. He wished to know for certain that who he was would not end if a sword should shear off his head and that one day he would meet again with Brom, Garrow, and everyone else he had cared for and lost. A desperate yearning for hope and comfort filled him, confused him, left him unsteady upon the face of the earth.

And yet.

Part of himself held back and would not allow him to commit to the dwarf gods and bind his identity and his sense of well-being to something he did not understand. He also had difficulty accepting that if gods did exist, the dwarf gods were the only ones. Eragon was certain that if he asked Nar Garzhvog or a member of the nomad tribes, or even the black priests of Helgrind, if their gods were real, they would uphold the supremacy of their deities just as vigorously as Glûmra would uphold hers. *How am I supposed to know which religion is the true religion?* he wondered. *Just because someone follows a certain faith does not necessarily mean it is the right path.… Perhaps no one religion contains all of the truth of the world. Perhaps every religion contains fragments of the truth and it is our responsibility to identify those fragments and piece them together. Or perhaps the elves are right and there are no gods. But how can I know for sure?*

With a long sigh, Glûmra murmured a phrase in Dwarvish, then rose from her knees and drew closed the silk curtain over the alcove. Eragon likewise stood, wincing as his battle-sore muscles stretched, and followed her to the table, where he returned to his chair. From a stone cupboard set into the wall, the dwarf woman took two pewter mugs, then retrieved a bladder full of wine from where it hung from the ceiling and poured a drink for both her and Eragon. She raised her mug and uttered a toast in Dwarvish, which Eragon struggled to imitate, and then they drank.

"It is good," said Glûmra, "to know that Kvîstor still lives on, to know that even now he is garbed in robes fit for a king while he enjoys the evening feast in Morgothal's hall. May he win much honor in the service of the gods!" And she drank again.

Once he had emptied his mug, Eragon began to bid farewell to Glûmra, but she forestalled him with a motion of her hand. "Have you a place to stay, Shadeslayer, safe from those who wish you dead?" Whereupon Eragon told her how he was supposed to remain hidden underneath Tronjheim until Orik sent a messenger for him. Glûmra nodded with a short, definitive jerk of her chin and said, "Then you and your companions must wait here until the messenger arrives, Shadeslayer. I insist upon it." Eragon started to protest, but she shook her head. "I could not allow the men who fought with mine son to languish in the damp and the dark of the caves while I yet have life in mine bones. Summon your companions, and we shall eat and be merry this gloomy night."

Eragon realized that he could not leave without upsetting Glûmra, so he called to his guards and his translator. Together, they helped Glûmra to prepare a dinner of bread, meat, and pie, and when it was ready, the lot of them ate and drank and talked late into the night.

Glûmra was particularly lively; she drank the most, laughed the loudest, and was always the first to make a witty remark. At first Eragon was shocked by her behavior, but then he noticed how her smiles never reached her eyes and how, if she thought no one was looking, the mirth would drain from her face and her expression would become one of somber quietude. Entertaining them, he concluded, was her way of celebrating her son's memory, as well as fending off her grief at Kvîstor's death. *I have never met anyone like you before*, he thought as he watched her.

Long after midnight, someone knocked on the door of the hut. Hûndfast ushered in a dwarf who was garbed in full armor and who seemed edgy and ill at ease; he kept glancing at the doors and windows and shadowed corners. With a series of phrases in the ancient language, he convinced Eragon that he was Orik's messenger, and then he said, "I am Farn, son of Flosi.… Argetlam, Orik bids you return with all possible haste. He has most important tidings concerning the events of today."

At the doorway, Glûmra grasped Eragon's left forearm with fingers like steel, and as he gazed down into her flinty eyes, she said, "Remember your oath, Shadeslayer, and do not let the killers of mine son escape without retribution!"

"That I shall not," he promised.

CLANMEET

The dwarves standing watch outside of Orik's chambers threw open the double doors that led inside as Eragon strode toward them.

The entryway beyond was long and ornate, furnished with three circular seats upholstered with red fabric set in a line down the middle of the room. Embroidered hangings decorated the walls, along with the dwarves' ubiquitous flameless lanterns, while the ceiling had been carved to depict a famous battle from dwarven history.

Orik stood consulting with a group of his warriors and several gray-bearded dwarves of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. As Eragon approached, Orik turned toward him, his face grim. "Good, you did not delay! Hûndfast, you may retire to your quarters now. We must needs speak in private."

Eragon's translator bowed and disappeared through an archway to the left, his footsteps echoing on the polished agate floor. Once he was out of hearing, Eragon said, "You don't trust him?"

Orik shrugged. "I do not know whom to trust at the moment; the fewer people who know what we have discovered, the better. We cannot risk the news escaping to another clan before tomorrow. If it does, it will certainly mean a clan war." The dwarves behind him muttered among themselves, appearing disconcerted.

"What is your news, though?" asked Eragon, worried.

The warriors gathered behind Orik moved aside as he gestured at them, revealing as they did so three bound and bloodied dwarves stacked on top of one another in the corner. The dwarf on the bottom groaned and kicked his feet in the air but was unable to extricate himself from under his fellow prisoners.

"Who are they?" asked Eragon.

Orik replied, "I had several of our smiths examine the daggers your attackers carried. They identified the craftsmanship as that of one Kiefna Long-nose, a bladesmith of our clan who has achieved great renown among our people."

"So he can tell us who bought the daggers and thus who our enemies are?"

A brusque laugh shook Orik's chest. "Hardly, but we were able to track the daggers from Kiefna to an armorer in Dalgon, many leagues from here, who sold them to a knurlaf with—"

"A knurlaf?" Eragon asked.

Orik scowled. "A woman. A woman with seven fingers on each hand bought the daggers two months ago."

“And did you find her? There can’t be very many women with that number of fingers.”

“Actually, the condition is fairly common among our people,” said Orik. “Be that as it may, after quite a bit of difficulty, we managed to locate the woman in Dalgon. My warriors there questioned her most closely. She is of Dûrgrimst Nagra, but so far as we can determine, she was acting of her own accord, and not under orders from the leaders of her clan. From her, we learned that a dwarf had engaged her to buy the daggers and then to deliver them to a wine merchant who would take them with him from Dalgon. The woman’s employer did not tell her where the daggers were destined, but by asking among the merchants of the city, we discovered that he traveled directly from Dalgon to one of the cities held by Dûrgrimst Az Sweldn rak Anhûin.”

“So it *was* them!” Eragon exclaimed.

“That or it could have been someone who wished us to think it was them. We needed more evidence before we could establish Az Sweldn rak Anhûin’s guilt for certain.” A twinkle appeared in Orik’s eyes, and he raised a finger. “So, by means of a very, very clever spell, we retraced the path of the assassins back through the tunnels and caves and up to a deserted area on the twelfth level of Tronjheim, off the subadjunct auxiliary hall of the southern spoke in the western quadrant, along the … ah, well, it does not matter. But someday I will have to teach you how the rooms are arranged in Tronjheim, so that if ever you need to find a place within the city by yourself, you can. In any event, the trail led us to an abandoned storeroom where those three”—he gestured toward the bound dwarves—“had been staying. They were not expecting us, and so we were able to capture them alive, although they tried to kill themselves. It was not easy, but we broke the minds of two of them—leaving the third for the other grimstborithn to interrogate at their pleasure—and we took from them everything they knew about this matter.” Orik pointed at the prisoners again. “It was they who equipped the assassins for the attack, gave them the daggers and their black clothes, and fed and sheltered them last night.”

“Who are they?” asked Eragon.

“Bah!” exclaimed Orik, and spat on the floor. “They are Vargrimstn, warriors who have disgraced themselves and are now clanless. No one deals with such filth unless they are engaged in villainy themselves and do not wish others to know of it. And so it was with those three. They took their orders directly from Grimstborith Vermûnd of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin.”

“There is no doubt?”

Orik shook his head. “There is no doubt; it is Az Sweldn rak Anhûin who tried to kill you, Eragon. We will probably never know if any

other clans joined them in the attempt, but if we expose Az Sweldn rak Anhûin's treachery, it will force everyone else who might have been involved in the plot to disparage their former confederates; to abandon, or at least delay, further attacks on Dûrgrimst Ingeitum; and, if this is handled properly, to give me their vote for king."

An image flashed in Eragon's mind of the prismatic blade emerging from the back of Kvîstor's neck and of the dwarf's agonized expression as he had fallen to the floor, dying. "How will we punish Az Sweldn rak Anhûin for this crime? Should we kill Vermûnd?"

"Ah, leave that to me," said Orik, and tapped the side of his nose. "I have a plan. But we must tread carefully, for this is a situation of the utmost delicacy. Such a betrayal has not occurred in many long years. As an outsider, you cannot know how abhorrent we find it that one of our own should attack a guest. You being the only free Rider left to oppose Galbatorix only worsens the offense. Further bloodshed may yet be necessary, but at the moment, it would only bring about another clan war."

"A clan war might be the only way to deal with Az Sweldn rak Anhûin," Eragon pointed out.

"I think not, but if I am mistaken and war is unavoidable, we must ensure it is a war between the rest of the clans and Az Sweldn rak Anhûin. That would not be so bad. Together, we could crush them inside of a week. A war with the clans split into two or three factions, however, would destroy our country. It is crucial, then, that before we draw our swords, we convince the other clans of what Az Sweldn rak Anhûin has done. Toward that end, will you allow magicians from different clans to examine your memories of the attack so they may see it happened as we shall say it did and that we did not stage it for our own benefit?"

Eragon hesitated, reluctant to open his mind to strangers, then nodded toward the three dwarves stacked on top of one another. "What about them? Won't their memories be enough to convince the clans of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin's guilt?"

Orik grimaced. "They ought to be, but in order to be thorough, the clan chiefs will insist upon verifying their memories against yours, and if you refuse, Az Sweldn rak Anhûin will claim we are hiding something from the clanmeet and that our accusations are nothing more than slanderous fiction."

"Very well," said Eragon. "If I must, I must. But if any of the magicians stray where they are not supposed to, even if by accident, I will have no choice but to burn what they have seen out of their minds. There are some things I cannot allow to become common knowledge."

Nodding, Orik said, "Aye, I can think of at least one three-legged

piece of information that would cause us some consternation if it were to be trumpeted throughout the land, eh? I am sure the clan chiefs will accept your conditions—for they all have secrets of their own they would not want bandied about—just as I am sure they will order their magicians to proceed, regardless of the danger. This attack has the potential to incite such turmoil among our race, the grimstborithn will feel compelled to determine the truth about it, though it may cost them their most skilled spellcasters."

Drawing himself upright then, to the full extent of his limited height, Orik ordered the prisoners removed from the ornate entryway and dismissed all of his vassals, save for Eragon and a contingent of twenty-six of his finest warriors. With a graceful flourish, Orik grasped Eragon's left elbow and conducted him toward the inner rooms of his chambers. "Tonight you must remain here, with me, where Az Sweldn rak Anhûin will not dare to strike."

"If you intend to sleep," said Eragon, "I must warn you, I cannot rest, not tonight. My blood still churns from the tumult of the fight, and my thoughts are likewise uneasy."

Orik replied, "Rest or not as you will; you shall not disturb my slumber, for I shall pull a thick woolen cap low over my eyes. I urge you to try and calm yourself, however—perhaps with some of the techniques the elves taught you—and recover what strength you may. The new day is already upon us, and but a few hours remain until the clanmeet shall be assembled. We should both be as fresh as possible for what is to come. What we do and say today shall determine the ultimate fate of mine people, mine country, and the rest of Alagaësia. … Ah, do not look so grim about the mouth! Think of this instead: whether success or failure awaits us, and I surely hope we prevail, our names shall be remembered until the end of time for how we comport ourselves at this clanmeet. That at least is an accomplishment to fill your belly with pride! The gods are fickle, and the only immortality we can count on is that which we win through our deeds. Fame or infamy, either one is preferable to being forgotten when you have passed from this realm."

Later that night, in the dead hours before morning, Eragon's thoughts wandered as he sat slumped within the embrace of the padded arms of a dwarf couch, and the frame of his consciousness dissolved into the disordered fantasy of his waking dreams. Yet conscious of the mosaic of colored stones mounted upon the wall opposite him, he also beheld, as if a glowing scrim draped over the mosaic, scenes of his life in Palancar Valley before momentous and bloody fate had intervened in his existence. The scenes diverged from established fact, however, and immersed him in imaginary situations constructed piecemeal from

fragments of what had actually been. In the last few moments before he roused himself from his stupor, his vision flickered and the images acquired a sense of heightened reality.

He was standing in Horst's workshop, the doors of which hung open, loose upon their hinges, like an idiot's slackjaw grin. Outside was a starless night, and the all-consuming darkness seemed to press against the edges of the dull red light cast by the coals, as if eager to devour everything within the scope of that ruddy sphere. Next to the forge, Horst loomed like a giant, the shifting shadows upon his face and beard fearsome to behold. His burly arm rose and fell, and a bell-like clang shivered the air as the hammer he wielded struck the end of a yellow-glowing bar of steel. A burst of sparks extinguished itself on the ground. Four more times the smith smote the metal; then he lifted the bar from his anvil and plunged it into a barrel of oil. Wraithlike flames, blue and gossamer, flickered across the surface of the oil and then vanished with small shrieks of fury. Removing the bar from the barrel, Horst turned toward Eragon and frowned at him. He said, "Why have you come here, Eragon?"

"I need a Dragon Rider's sword."

"Begone with you. I have no time to forge you a Rider's sword. Cannot you see I am working on a pothook for Elain? She must have it for the battle. Are you alone?"

"I do not know."

"Where is your father? Where is your mother?"

"I do not know."

Then a new voice sounded, a well-polished voice of strength and power, and it said, "Good smith, he is not alone. He came with me."

"And who might you be?" demanded Horst.

"I am his father."

Between the gaping doors, a huge figure rimmed with pale light emerged from the clotted darkness and stood upon the threshold of the workshop. A red cape billowed from shoulders wider than a Kull's. In the man's left hand gleamed Zar'roc, sharp as pain. Through the slits of his brightly polished helm, his blue eyes bored into Eragon, pinning him into place, like an arrow through a rabbit. He lifted his free hand and held it out toward Eragon. "My son, come with me. Together, we can destroy the Varden, kill Galbatorix, and conquer all of Alagaësia. But give me your heart, and we shall be invincible.

"Give me your heart, my son."

With a strangled exclamation, Eragon leaped out of the couch and stood staring at the floor, his fists clenched, his chest heaving. Orik's guards gave him inquisitive glances, but he ignored them, too upset to explain his outburst.

The hour was still early, so after a time, Eragon settled back onto the couch, but thereafter, he remained alert and did not allow himself

to sink into the land of dreams, for fear of what manifestations might torment him.

Eragon stood with his back to the wall, his hand on the pommel of his dwarf sword, as he watched the various clan chiefs file into the round conference room buried beneath Tronjheim. He kept an especially close eye on Vermûnd, the grimstborith of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, but if the purple-veiled dwarf was surprised to see Eragon alive and well, he did not show it.

Eragon felt Orik's boot nudge his own. Without looking away from Vermûnd, Eragon leaned over toward Orik and heard him whisper, "Remember, to the left and three doorways down," referring to the place where Orik had stationed a hundred of his warriors without the other clan chiefs knowing.

Whispering as well, Eragon said, "If blood is shed, should I seize the opportunity to kill that snake, Vermûnd?"

"Unless he is attempting the same with you or me, please do not." A low chuckle emanated from Orik. "It would hardly *endear* you to the other grimstborithn.… Ah, I must go now. Pray to Sindri for luck, would you? We are about to venture into a lava field none have dared cross before."

And Eragon prayed.

When all of the clan chiefs were seated around the table in the center of the room, those watching from the perimeter, including Eragon, took their own seats from among the ring of chairs set against the curving wall. Eragon did not relax into his, however, as many of the dwarves did, but sat upon the edge, ready to fight at the slightest hint of danger.

As Gannel, the black-eyed warrior-priest of Dûrgrimst Quan, rose from the table and began to speak in Dwarvish, Hûndfast sidled closer to Eragon's right side and murmured a continuous translation. The dwarf said, "Greetings again, mine fellow clan chiefs. But whether 'tis well met or not, I am undecided, for certain disturbing rumors—rumors of rumors, if truth be told—have reached mine ears. I have no information beyond these vague and worrisome mutterings, nor proof upon which to found an accusation of misdeeds. However, as today is mine day to preside over this, our congregation, I propose that we delay our most serious debates for the moment, and if you are agreeable, allow me to pose a few questions to the meet."

The clan chiefs muttered among themselves, and then Íorûnn, bright, dimpling Íorûnn, said, "I have no objection, Grimstborith Gannel. You have aroused mine curiosity with these cryptic insinuations. Let us hear what questions you have."

"Aye, let us hear them," said Nado.

“Let us hear them,” agreed Manndrâth and all the rest of the clan chiefs, including Vermûnd.

Having received the permission he sought, Gannel rested his knuckles upon the table and was silent for a span, garnering the attention of everyone in the room. Then he spoke. “Yesterday, while we were lunching in our chosen places of repast, knurlan throughout the tunnels underneath the southern quadrant of Tronjheim heard a noise. Reports of its loudness differ, but that so many noticed it over so large an area proves that it was no small disturbance. Like you, I received the usual warnings of a possible cave-in. What you may not be aware of, however, is that just two hours past—”

Hûndfast hesitated, and quickly whispered, “The word is difficult to render in this tongue. *Runners-of-the-tunnels*, I think.” And then he resumed translating as before:

“—runners-of-the-tunnels discovered evidence of a mighty fight within one of the ancient tunnels that our famed forefather, Korgan Longbeard, excavated. The floor was painted with blood, the walls were dark with soot from a lantern a warrior of careless blade did breach, cracks split the surrounding stone, and sprawled throughout were seven charred and mangled bodies, with signs that others may have been removed. Nor were these the remnants of some obscure skirmish from the Battle of Farthen Dûr. No! For the blood had yet to dry, the soot was soft, the cracks were most obviously freshly broken, and, I am told, the residue of powerful magics could still be detected within the area. Even now, several of our most accomplished spellcasters are attempting to reconstruct a pictorial facsimile of what occurred, but they have little hope of success, as those involved were wrapped about with such devious enchantments. So my first question for the meet is this: do any of you possess further knowledge of this mysterious action?”

As Gannel concluded his speech, Eragon tensed his legs, ready to spring up if the purple-veiled dwarves of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin should reach for their blades.

Orik cleared his throat and said, “I believe that I can satisfy some of your curiosity upon that point, Gannel. However, since my answer must of necessity be a lengthy one, I suggest you ask your other questions before I begin.”

A frown darkened Gannel’s brow. Rapping his knuckles against the table, he said, “Very well.… In what is undoubtedly related to the clash of arms in Korgan’s tunnels, I have had reports of numerous knurlan moving through Tronjheim and, with furtive intent, gathering here and there into large bands of armed men. My agents were unable to ascertain the clan of the warriors, but that any of this council should attempt to surreptitiously marshal their forces whilst we are

engaged in a meet to decide who should succeed King Hrothgar suggests motives of the darkest kind. So my second question for the meet is this: who is responsible for this ill-thought-of maneuvering? And if none are willing to admit their misconduct, I move most strongly that we order all warriors, regardless of their clan, expelled from Tronjheim for the duration of the meet and that we immediately appoint a reader-of-law to investigate these doings and determine whom we should censure."

Gannel's revelation, question, and subsequent proposal aroused a flurry of heated conversation among the clan chiefs, with the dwarves hurling accusations, denials, and counteraccusations at each other with increasing vitriol, until, at last, when an infuriated Thordris was shouting at a red-faced Gáldhiem, Orik cleared his throat again, causing everyone to stop and stare at him.

In a mild tone, Orik said, "This too I believe I can explain to you, Gannel, at least in part. I cannot speak to the activities of the other clans, but several hundred of the warriors who have been hurrying through the servants' halls in Tronjheim have been of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum. This I freely admit."

All was silent until Íorûnn said, "And what explanation have you for this belligerent behavior, Orik, Thrifk's son?"

"As I said before, fair Íorûnn, my answer must of necessity be a lengthy one, so if you, Gannel, have any other questions to ask, I suggest you proceed forthwith."

Gannel's frown deepened until his projecting eyebrows nearly touched. He said, "I will withhold mine other questions for the time being, for they all pertain to those I have already put to the meet, and it seems we must wait upon your pleasure to learn any more of those subjects. However, since you are involved fist and foot with these doubtful activities, a new question has occurred to me that I would ask of you specifically, Grimstborith Orik. For what reason did you desert yesterday's meet? And let me warn you, I will brook no evasions. You have already intimated you have knowledge of these affairs. Well, time is for you to provide a full accounting of yourself, Grimstborith Orik."

Orik stood even as Gannel sat, and he said, "It shall be mine pleasure."

Lowering his bearded chin until it rested upon his chest, Orik paused for a brief span and then began to speak in a sonorous voice, but he did not begin as Eragon had expected, nor, Eragon surmised, as the rest of the congregation had expected. Instead of describing the attempt on Eragon's life, and thus explaining why he had terminated the previous clanmeet prematurely, Orik commenced by recounting how, at the dawn of history, the race of dwarves had migrated from

the once-verdant fields of the Hadarac Desert to the Beor Mountains, where they had excavated their uncounted miles of tunnels, built their magnificent cities both above and below the ground, and waged lusty war between their various factions, as well as with the dragons, whom, for thousands of years, the dwarves had regarded with a combination of hate, fear, and reluctant awe.

Then Orik spoke of the elves' arrival in Alagaësia and of how the elves had fought with the dragons until they nearly destroyed each other and of how, as a result, the two races had agreed to create the Dragon Riders to maintain the peace thereafter.

"And what was our response when we learned of their intentions?" demanded Orik, his voice ringing loud in the chamber. "Did we ask to be included in their pact? Did we aspire to share in the power that would be the Dragon Riders'? No! We clung to our old ways, our old hatreds, and we rejected the very thought of bonding with the dragons or allowing anyone outside our realm to police us. To preserve our authority, we sacrificed our future, for I am convinced that if some of the Dragon Riders had been knurlan, Galbatorix might have never risen to power. Even if I am wrong—and I mean not to belittle Eragon, who has proven himself a fine Rider—the dragon Saphira might have hatched for one of our race and not a human. And then what glory might have been ours?

"Instead, our importance in Alagaësia has diminished ever since Queen Tarmunora and Eragon's namesake made peace with the dragons. At first our lessened status was not so bitter a draught to swallow, and often it was easier to deny than to accept. But then came the Urgals, and then the humans, and the elves amended their spells so humans might be Riders as well. And then did we seek to be included in their accord, as well we might have … as was our right?" Orik shook his head. "Our pride would not allow it. Why should we, the oldest race in the land, beg the elves for the favor of their magic? We did not need to chain our fate to the dragons' in order to save our race from destruction, as had the elves and humans. We ignored, of course, the battles we waged among ourselves. Those, we reasoned, were private affairs and of no concern to anyone else."

The listening clan chiefs stirred. Many of them bore expressions of dissatisfaction at Orik's criticism, whereas the rest seemed more receptive to his comments and were thoughtful of countenance.

Orik continued: "While the Riders watched over Alagaësia, we enjoyed the greatest period of prosperity ever recorded in the annals of our realm. We flourished as never before, and yet we had no share in the cause of it: the Dragon Riders. When the Riders fell, our fortunes faltered, but again we had no share in the cause of it: the Riders. Neither state of affairs is, I deem, fitting for a race of our

stature. We are not a country of vassals subject to the whims of foreign masters. Nor should those who are not the descendants of Odgar and Hlordis dictate our fate."

This line of reasoning was more to the liking of the clan chiefs; they nodded and smiled, and Havard even clapped a few times at the final line.

"Consider now our present era," said Orik. "Galbatorix is ascendant, and every race fights to remain free of his rule. He has grown so powerful, the only reason we are not already his slaves is that, so far, he has not chosen to fly out upon his black dragon and attack us directly. If he did, we would fall before him like saplings before an avalanche. Fortunately, he seems content to wait for us to slaughter our way to the gates of his citadel in Urû'baen. Now, I remind you that before Eragon and Saphira turned up wet and bedraggled on our front doorstep, with a hundred yammering Kull hard upon their heels, our only hope of defeating Galbatorix was that someday, somewhere, Saphira would hatch for her chosen Rider and that this unknown person would, perhaps, perchance, if we were luckier than every gambler who has ever won a toss of dice, be able to overthrow Galbatorix. Hope? Ha! We did not even have hope; we had a hope of a hope. When Eragon first presented himself, many of us were dismayed by his appearance, myself included. 'He is but a boy,' we said. 'It would have been better if he had been an elf,' we said. But lo, he has shown himself to be the embodiment of our every hope! He slew Durza, and so allowed us to save our most beloved city, Tronjheim. His dragon, Saphira, has promised to restore the Star Rose to its former glory. During the Battle of the Burning Plains, he drove off Murtagh and Thorn, and so allowed us to win the day. And look! He even now wears the semblance of an elf, and through their strange magics, he has acquired their speed and their strength."

Orik raised a finger for emphasis. "Moreover, King Hrothgar, in his wisdom, did what no other king or grimstborith has ever done; he offered to adopt Eragon into Dûrgrimst Ingeitum and to make him a member of his own family. Eragon was under no obligation to accept this offer. Indeed, he was aware that many of the families of the Ingeitum objected to it and that, in general, many knurlan would not regard it with favor. Yet in spite of that discouragement, and in spite of the fact that he was already bound in fealty to Nasuada, Eragon accepted Hrothgar's gift, knowing full well that it would only make his life harder. As he has told me himself, Eragon swore the hall-oath upon the Heart of Stone because of the sense of obligation he feels toward all the races of Alagaësia, and especially toward us, since we, by the actions of Hrothgar, showed him and Saphira such kindness. Because of Hrothgar's genius, the last free Rider of Alagaësia, and our

one and only hope against Galbatorix, freely chose to become a knurla in all but blood. Since then, Eragon has abided by our laws and traditions to the best of his knowledge, and he has sought to learn ever more about our culture so that he may honor the true meaning of his oath. When Hrothgar fell, struck down by the traitor Murtagh, Eragon swore to me upon every stone in Alagaësia, and also as a member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, that he would strive to avenge Hrothgar's death. He has given me the respect and obedience I am due as grimstborith, and I am proud to regard him as mine foster brother."

Eragon glanced downward, his cheeks and the tips of his ears burning. He wished Orik were not so free with his praise; it would only make his position harder to maintain in the future.

Sweeping his arms out to include the other clan chiefs, Orik exclaimed, "Everything we could have ever wished for in a Dragon Rider we have received in Eragon! He exists! He is powerful! And he has embraced our people as no other Dragon Rider ever has!" Then Orik lowered his arms and, with them, the volume of his voice, until Eragon had to strain to hear his words. "How have we responded to his friendship, though? In the main, with sneers and slights and surly resentment. We are an ungrateful race, I say, and our memories are too long for our own good.… There are even those who have become so filled with festering hatred, they have turned to violence to slake the thirst of their anger. Perhaps they still believe they are doing what is best for our people, but if so, then their minds are as moldy as a lump of year-old cheese. Otherwise, why would they try to kill Eragon?"

The listening clan chiefs became perfectly still, their eyes riveted to Orik's face. So intense was their concentration, the corpulent grimstborith, Freowin, had set aside his carving of a raven and folded his hands on top of his ample belly, appearing for all the world like one of the dwarves' statues.

As they gazed at him with unblinking eyes, Orik related to the clanmeet how the seven black-clad dwarves had attacked Eragon and his guards while they were meandering among the tunnels underneath Tronjheim. Then Orik told them of the braided horsehair bracelet set with amethyst cabochons that Eragon's guards had found upon one of the corpses.

"Do not think to blame this attack upon mine clan based upon such paltry evidence!" exclaimed Vermûnd, bolting upright. "One can buy similar trinkets in most every market of our realm!"

"Quite so," said Orik, and inclined his head toward Vermûnd. In a dispassionate voice, and with a quick pace, Orik proceeded to tell his audience, as he had told Eragon the previous night, how his subjects in Dalgon had confirmed for him that the strange flickering daggers

the assassins had wielded had been forged by the smith Kiefna, and also how his subjects had discovered that the dwarf who had bought the weapons had arranged for them to be transported from Dalgon to one of the cities held by Az Sweldn rak Anhûin.

Uttering a low, growling oath, Vermûnd leaped to his feet again. "Those daggers might never have reached our city, and even if they did, you can draw no conclusions from that fact! Knurlan of many clans stay within our walls, as they do within the walls of Bregan Hold, for example. It signifies *nothing*. Be careful what you say next, Grimstborith Orik, for you have no grounds upon which to level accusations against mine clan."

"I was of the same opinion as you, Grimstborith Vermûnd," Orik replied. "Therefore, last night, my spellcasters and I retraced the assassins' path back to their place of origin, and on the twelfth level of Tronjheim, we captured three knurlan who were hiding in a dusty storeroom. We broke the minds of two of them and, from them, we learned they provisioned the assassins for their attack. And," said Orik, his voice growing harsh and terrible, "from them we learned the identity of their master. I name you, Grimstborith Vermûnd! I name you Murderer and Oath-breaker. I name you an enemy of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, and I name you a traitor to your kind, for it was you and your clan who attempted to kill Eragon!"

The clanmeet erupted into chaos as every clan chief except Orik and Vermûnd began to shout and wave their hands and otherwise attempt to dominate the conversation. Eragon stood and loosened his borrowed sword in its sheath, drawing it out a half inch, so he could respond with all possible speed if Vermûnd or one of his dwarves chose that moment to attack. Vermûnd did not move, however, nor did Orik; they stared at each other like rival wolves and paid no attention to the commotion around them.

When at last Gannel succeeded in restoring order, he said, "Grimstborith Vermûnd, can you refute these charges?"

In a flat, emotionless voice, Vermûnd replied, "I deny them with every bone in my body, and I challenge anyone to prove them to the satisfaction of a reader-of-law."

Gannel turned toward Orik. "Present your evidence, then, Grimstborith Orik, that we may judge whether it is valid or not. There are five readers-of-law here today, if I am not mistaken." He motioned toward the wall, where five white-bearded dwarves stood and bowed. "They will ensure that we do not stray beyond the boundaries of the law in our investigation. Are we agreed?"

"I am agreed," said Ûndin.

"I am agreed," said Hadfala and all the rest of the clan chiefs after her save Vermûnd.

First, Orik placed the amethyst bracelet upon the table. Every clan chief had one of their magicians examine it, and all agreed that as evidence it was inconclusive.

Then Orik had an aide bring in a mirror mounted on a bronze tripod. One of the magicians within his retinue cast a spell, and upon the glossy surface of the mirror there appeared the image of a small, book-filled room. A moment passed, and then a dwarf rushed into the room and bowed toward the clanmeet from within the mirror. In a breathless voice, he introduced himself as Rimmar, and after swearing oaths in the ancient language to ensure his honesty, he told the clanmeet how he and his assistants had made their discoveries concerning the daggers Eragon's attackers had wielded.

When the clan chiefs finished questioning Rimmar, Orik had his warriors bring in the three dwarves the Ingeitum had captured. Gannel ordered them to swear the oaths of truthfulness in the ancient language, but they cursed at him and spat on the floor and refused. Then magicians from all of the different clans joined their thoughts, invaded the prisoners' minds, and wrested from them the information the clanmeet desired. Without exception, the magicians confirmed what Orik had already said.

Lastly, Orik called upon Eragon to testify. Eragon felt nervous as he walked over to the table and the thirteen grim clan chiefs stared at him. He gazed across the room at a small whorl of color on a marble pillar and tried to ignore his discomfort. He repeated the oaths of truthfulness as one of the dwarf magicians gave them to him, and then, speaking no more than was necessary, Eragon told the clan chiefs how he and his guards had been attacked. Afterward, he answered the dwarves' inevitable questions and then allowed two of the magicians—whom Gannel chose at random from among those assembled—to examine his memories of the event. As Eragon lowered the barriers around his mind, he noted that the two magicians appeared apprehensive, and he drew some comfort from the observation. *Good*, he thought. *They will be less likely to wander where they should not if they fear me*.

To Eragon's relief, the inspection went without incident, and the magicians corroborated his account to the clan chiefs.

Gannel rose from his chair and addressed the readers-of-law, asking them: "Are you satisfied with the quality of the evidence Grimstborith Orik and Eragon Shadeslayer have shown us?"

The five white-bearded dwarves bowed, and the middle dwarf said, "We are, Grimstborith Gannel."

Gannel grunted, seeming unsurprised. "Grimstborith Vermûnd, you are responsible for the death of Kvîstor, son of Bauden, and you attempted to kill a guest. By doing so, you have brought shame upon

our entire race. What say you to this?"

The clan chief of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin pressed his hands flat against the table, veins bulging underneath his tanned skin. "If this *Dragon Rider* is a knurla in all but blood, then he is no guest and we may treat him as we would any of our enemies from a different clan."

"Why, that's preposterous!" exclaimed Orik, almost sputtering with outrage. "You can't say he—"

"Still your tongue, if you please, Orik," said Gannel. "Shouting will not settle this point. Orik, Nado, Íorûnn, if you will come with me."

Worry began to gnaw at Eragon as the four dwarves went and conferred with the readers-of-law for several minutes. *Surely they won't let Vermûnd escape punishment just because of some verbal trickery!* he thought.

Returning to the table, Íorûnn said, "The readers-of-law are unanimous. Even though Eragon is a sworn member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, he also holds positions of importance beyond our realm: namely, that of Dragon Rider, but also that of an official envoy of the Varden, sent by Nasuada to witness the coronation of our next ruler, and also that of a friend of high influence with Queen Islanzadí and her race as a whole. For those reasons, Eragon is due the same hospitality we would extend to any visiting ambassador, prince, monarch, or other person of significance." The dwarf woman glanced sidelong at Eragon, her dark, flashing eyes bold upon his limbs. "In short, he is our honored guest, and we should treat him as such … which every knurla who is not cave-mad ought to know."

"Aye, he is our guest," concurred Nado. His lips were pinched and white and his cheeks drawn, as if he had just bitten into an apple only to discover it was not yet ripe.

"What say you now, Vermûnd?" demanded Gannel.

Rising from his seat, the purple-veiled dwarf looked around the table, gazing at each of the clan chiefs in turn. "I say this, and hear me well, grimstborithn: if any clan turns their ax against Az Sweldn rak Anhûin because of these false accusations, we shall consider it an act of war, and we shall respond appropriately. If you imprison me, that too we shall consider an act of war, and we shall respond appropriately." Eragon saw Vermûnd's veil twitch, and he thought the dwarf might have smiled underneath. "If you strike at us in any possible way, whether with steel or with words, no matter how mild your rebuke, we shall consider it an act of war, and we shall respond appropriately. Unless you are eager to rend our country into a thousand bloody scraps, I suggest you let the wind waft away this morning's discussion and, in its place, fill your minds with thoughts of who should next rule from upon the granite throne."

The clan chiefs sat in silence for a long while.

Eragon had to bite his tongue to keep from jumping onto the table and railing against Vermûnd until the dwarves agreed to hang him for his crimes. He reminded himself that he had promised Orik that he would follow Orik's lead when dealing with the clanmeet. *Orik is my clan chief, and I must let him respond to this as he sees fit*.

Freowin unfolded his hands and slapped the table with a meaty palm. With his hoarse baritone voice, which carried throughout the room, although it seemed no louder than a whisper, the corpulent dwarf said, "You have shamed our race, Vermûnd. We cannot retain our honor as knurlan and ignore your trespass."

The elderly dwarf woman, Hadfala, shuffled her sheaf of rune-covered pages and said, "What did you think to accomplish, besides our doom, by killing Eragon? Even if the Varden could unseat Galbatorix without him, what of the sorrow the dragon Saphira would rain down upon us if we slew her Rider? She would fill Farthen Dûr with a sea of our own blood."

Not a word came from Vermûnd.

Laughter broke the quiet. The sound was so unexpected, at first Eragon did not realize it was coming from Orik. His mirth subsiding, Orik said, "If we move against you or Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, you will consider it an act of war, Vermûnd? Very well, then we shall not move against you, not at all."

Vermûnd's brow beetled. "How can this provide you with a source of amusement?"

Orik chuckled again. "Because I have thought of something you have not, Vermûnd. You wish us to leave you and your clan alone? Then I propose to the clanmeet that we do as Vermûnd wishes. If Vermûnd had acted upon his own and not as a grimstborith, he would be banished for his offenses upon pain of death. Therefore, let us treat the clan as we would treat the person; let us banish Az Sweldn rak Anhûin from our hearts and minds until they choose to replace Vermûnd with a grimstborith of a more moderate temperament and until they acknowledge their villainy and repent of it to the clanmeet, even if we must wait a thousand years."

The wrinkled skin around Vermûnd's eyes went pale. "You would not dare."

Orik smiled. "Ah, but we would not lay a finger upon you or your kind. We will simply ignore you and refuse to trade with Az Sweldn rak Anhûin. Will you declare war upon us for doing nothing, Vermûnd? For if the meet agrees with me, that is exactly what we shall do: *nothing*. Will you force us at swordpoint to buy your honey and your cloth and your amethyst jewelry? You have not the warriors to compel us so." Turning to the rest of the table, Orik asked, "What say the rest of you?"

The clanmeet did not take long to decide. One by one, the clan chiefs stood and voted to banish Az Sweldn rak Anhûin. Even Nado, Gáldhiem, and Havard—Vermûnd's erstwhile allies—supported Orik's proposal. With every vote of affirmation, what skin was visible of Vermûnd's face grew ever whiter, until he appeared like a ghost dressed in the clothes of his former life.

When the vote was finished, Gannel pointed toward the door and said, "Begone, Vargrimstn Vermûnd. Leave Tronjheim this very day and may none of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin trouble the clanmeet until they have fulfilled the conditions we have set forth. Until such time as that happens, we shall shun every member of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin. Know this, however: while your clan may absolve themselves of their dishonor, you, Vermûnd, shall always remain Vargrimstn, even unto your dying day. Such is the will of the clanmeet." His declaration concluded, Gannel sat.

Vermûnd remained where he was, his shoulders quivering with an emotion Eragon could not identify. "It is you who have shamed and betrayed our race," he growled. "The Dragon Riders killed all of our clan, save Anhûin and her guards. You expect us to forget this? You expect us to forgive this? Bah! I spit on the graves of your ancestors. We at least have not lost our beards. We shall not cavort with this puppet of the elves while our dead family members still cry out for vengeance."

Outrage gripped Eragon when none of the other clan chiefs replied, and he was about to answer Vermûnd's tirade with harsh words of his own when Orik glanced over at him and shook his head ever so slightly. Difficult as it was, Eragon kept his anger in check, although he wondered why Orik would allow such dire insults to pass uncontested.

It is almost as if … Oh.

Pushing himself away from the table, Vermûnd stood, his hands balled into fists and his shoulders hunched high. He resumed speaking, berating and disparaging the clan chiefs with increasing passion until he was shouting at the top of his lungs.

No matter how vile Vermûnd's imprecations were, however, the clan chiefs did not respond. They gazed into the distance, as if pondering complex dilemmas, and their eyes slid over Vermûnd without pause. When, in his fury, Vermûnd grasped Hreidamar by the front of his mail hauberk, three of Hreidamar's guards jumped forward and pulled Vermûnd away, but as they did, Eragon noticed their expressions remained bland and unchanging, as if they were merely helping Hreidamar to straighten his hauberk. Once they released Vermûnd, the guards did not look at him again.

A chill crept up Eragon's spine. The dwarves acted as if Vermûnd

had ceased to exist. *So this is what it means to be banished among the dwarves*. Eragon thought he would rather be killed than suffer such a fate, and for a moment, he felt a stir of pity for Vermûnd, but his pity vanished an instant later as he remembered Kvîstor's dying expression.

With a final oath, Vermûnd strode out of the room, followed by those of his clan who had accompanied him to the meet.

The mood among the remaining clan chiefs eased as the doors swung shut behind Vermûnd. Once again the dwarves gazed around without restriction, and they resumed talking in loud voices, discussing what else they would need to do with regard to Az Sweldn rak Anhûin.

Then Orik rapped the pommel of his dagger against the table, and everyone turned to hear what he had to say. "Now that we have dealt with Vermûnd, there is another issue I wish the meet to consider. Our purpose in assembling here is to elect Hrothgar's successor. We have all had much to say upon the topic, but now I believe the time is ripe to put words behind us and allow our actions to speak for us. So I call upon the meet to decide whether we are ready—and we are more than ready, in mine opinion—to proceed to the final vote three days hence, as is our law. My vote, as I cast it, is aye."

Freowin looked at Hadfala, who looked at Gannel, who looked at Manndrâth, who tugged on his drooping nose and looked at Nado, sunk low in his chair and biting the inside of his cheek.

"Aye," said Íorûnn.

"Aye," said Ûndin.

"… Aye," said Nado, and so did the eight other clan chiefs.

Hours later, when the clanmeet broke for lunch, Orik and Eragon returned to Orik's chambers to eat. Neither of them spoke until they entered his rooms, which were proofed against eavesdroppers. There Eragon allowed himself to smile. "You planned all along to banish Az Sweldn rak Anhûin, didn't you?"

A satisfied expression on his face, Orik smiled as well and slapped his stomach. "That I did. It was the only action I could take that would not inevitably lead to a clan war. We may still have a clan war, but it shall not be of our making. I doubt such a calamity will come to pass, though. As much as they hate you, most of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin will be appalled by what Vermûnd has done in their name. He will not remain grimstborith for long, I think."

"And now you have ensured that the vote for the new king—"

"Or queen."

"—or queen shall take place." Eragon hesitated, reluctant to tarnish Orik's enjoyment of his triumph, but then he asked, "Do you really have the support you need to win the throne?"

Orik shrugged. “Before this morning, no one had the support they needed. Now the balance has shifted, and for the time being, sympathies lie with us. We might as well strike while the iron is hot; we shall never have a better opportunity than this. In any case, we cannot allow the clanmeet to drag on any longer. If you do not return to the Varden soon, all may be lost.”

“What shall we do while we wait for the vote?”

“First, we shall celebrate our success with a feast,” Orik declared. “Then, when we are sated, we shall continue as before: attempting to gather additional votes while defending those we have already won.” Orik’s teeth flashed white underneath the fringe of his beard as he smiled again. “But before we consume so much as a single sip of mead, there is something you must attend to, which you have forgotten.”

“What?” asked Eragon, puzzled by Orik’s obvious delight.

“Why, you must summon Saphira to Tronjheim, of course! Whether I become king or not, we shall crown a new monarch in three days’ time. If Saphira is to attend the ceremony, she will need to fly quickly in order to arrive here before then.”

With a wordless exclamation, Eragon ran to find a mirror.

INSUBORDINATION

The rich black soil was cool against Roran's hand.

He picked up a loose clod and crumbled it between his fingers, noting with approval that it was moist and full of decomposing leaves, stems, moss, and other organic matter that would provide excellent food for crops. He pressed it to his lips and tongue. The soil tasted alive, full of hundreds of flavors, from pulverized mountains to beetles and punky wood and the tender tips of grass roots.

This is good farmland, thought Roran. He cast his mind back to Palancar Valley, and again he saw the autumn sun streaming through the field of barley outside his family's house—neat rows of golden stalks shifting in the breeze—with the Anora River to the west and the snowcapped mountains rising high on either side of the valley. *That is where I should be, plowing the earth and raising a family with Katrina, not watering the ground with the sap of men's limbs*.

"Ho there!" cried Captain Edric, pointing toward Roran from on his horse. "Have an end to your dawdling, Stronghammer, lest I change my mind about you and leave you to stand guard with the archers!"

Dusting his hands on his leggings, Roran rose from a kneeling position. "Yes, sir! As you wish, sir!" he said, suppressing his dislike for Edric. Since he had joined Edric's company, Roran had attempted to learn what he could of the man's history. From what he heard, Roran had concluded Edric was a competent commander—Nasuada never would have put him in charge of such an important mission otherwise—but he had an abrasive personality, and he disciplined his warriors for even the slightest deviation from established practice, as Roran had learned to his chagrin upon three separate occasions during his first day with Edric's company. It was, Roran believed, a style of command that undermined a man's morale, as well as discouraged creativity and invention from those underneath you. *Perhaps Nasuada gave me to him for those very reasons*, thought Roran. *Or perhaps this is another test of hers. Perhaps she wants to know whether I can swallow my pride long enough to work with a man like Edric*.

Getting back onto Snowfire, Roran rode to the front of the column of two hundred and fifty men. Their mission was simple; since Nasuada and King Orrin had withdrawn the bulk of their forces from Surda, Galbatorix had apparently decided to take advantage of their absence and wreak havoc throughout the defenseless country, sacking towns and villages and burning the crops needed to sustain the invasion of the Empire. The easiest way to eliminate the soldiers

would have been for Saphira to fly out and tear them to pieces, but unless she was winging her way toward Eragon, everyone agreed it would be too dangerous for the Varden to be without her for so long. So Nasuada had sent Edric's company to repel the soldiers, whose number her spies had initially estimated to be around three hundred. However, two days ago, Roran and the rest of the warriors had been dismayed when they came across tracks that indicated the size of Galbatorix's force was closer to seven hundred.

Roran reined in Snowfire next to Carn on his dappled mare and scratched his chin while he studied the lay of the land. Before them was a vast expanse of undulating grass, dotted with occasional stands of willow and cottonwood trees. Hawks hunted above, while below, the grass was full of squeaking mice, rabbits, burrowing rodents, and other wildlife. The only evidence that men had ever visited the place before was the swath of trampled vegetation that led toward the eastern horizon, marking the soldiers' trail.

Carn glanced up at the noonday sun, the skin pulling tight around his drooping eyes as he squinted. "We should overtake them before our shadows are longer than we are tall."

"And then we'll discover whether there are enough of us to drive them away," muttered Roran, "or whether they will just massacre us. For once I'd like to outnumber our enemies."

A grim smile appeared on Carn's face. "It is always thus with the Varden."

"Form up!" shouted Edric, and spurred his horse down the trail trampled through the grass. Roran clamped his jaw shut and touched his heels to Snowfire's flanks as the company followed their captain.

Six hours later, Roran sat on Snowfire, hidden within a cluster of beech trees that grew along the edge of a small, flat stream clotted with rushes and strands of floating algae. Through the net of branches that hung before him, Roran gazed upon a crumbling, gray-sided village of no more than twenty houses. Roran had watched with ever-increasing fury as the villagers had spotted the soldiers advancing from the west and then had gathered up a few bundles of possessions and fled south, toward the heart of Surda. If it had been up to him, Roran would have revealed their presence to the villagers and assured them they were not about to lose their houses, not if he and the rest of his companions could prevent it, for he well remembered the pain and desperation and sense of hopelessness that abandoning Carvahall had caused him, and he would have spared them that if he could. Also, he would have asked the men of the village to fight with them. Another ten or twenty sets of arms might mean the difference between victory or defeat, and Roran knew better than most the fervor with which

people would fight to defend their homes. However, Edric had rejected the idea and insisted that the Varden remain concealed in the hills southeast of the village.

"We're lucky they're on foot," murmured Carn, indicating the red column of soldiers marching toward the village. "We would not have been able to get here first otherwise."

Roran glanced back at the men gathered behind them. Edric had given him temporary command over eighty-one warriors. They consisted of swordsmen, spearmen, and a half-dozen archers. One of Edric's familiars, Sand, led another eighty-one of the company, while Edric headed the rest himself. All three groups were pressed against one another among the beech trees, which Roran thought was a mistake; the time it took to organize themselves once they broke from cover would be extra time the soldiers would have to marshal their defenses.

Leaning over toward Carn, Roran said, "I don't see any of them with missing hands or legs or other injuries of note, but that proves nothing one way or another. Can you tell if any of them are men who cannot feel pain?"

Carn sighed. "I wish I could. Your cousin might be able to, for Murtagh and Galbatorix are the only spellcasters Eragon need fear, but I am a poor magician, and I dare not test the soldiers. If there are any magicians disguised among the soldiers, they would know of my spying, and there is every chance I would not be able to break their minds before they alerted their companions we are here."

"We seem to have this discussion every time we are about to fight," Roran observed, studying the soldiers' armaments and trying to decide how best to deploy his men.

With a laugh, Carn said, "That's all right. I only hope we keep having it, because if not—"

"One or both of us will be dead—"

"Or Nasuada will have reassigned us to different captains—"

"And then we might as well be dead, because no one else will guard our backs as well," Roran concluded. A smile touched his lips. It had become an old joke between them. He drew his hammer from his belt and then winced as his right leg twinged where the ox had ripped his flesh with its horn. Scowling, he reached down and massaged the location of the wound.

Carn saw and asked, "Are you well?"

"It won't kill me," said Roran, then reconsidered his words. "Well, maybe it will, but I'll be blasted if I'm going to wait here while you go off and cut those bumbling oafs to pieces."

When the soldiers reached the village, they marched straight through it, pausing only to break down the door to each house and

tramp through the rooms to see if anyone was hiding inside. A dog ran out from behind a rain barrel, his ruff standing on end, and began barking at the soldiers. One of the men stepped forward and threw his spear at the dog, killing it.

As the first of the soldiers reached the far side of the village, Roran tightened his hand around the haft of his hammer in preparation for the charge, but then he heard a series of high-pitched screams, and a sense of dread gripped him. A squad of soldiers emerged from the second-to-last house, dragging three struggling people: a lanky, white-haired man, a young woman with a torn blouse, and a boy no older than eleven.

Sweat sprang up on Roran's brow. In a low, slow monotone, he began to swear, cursing the three captives for not having fled with their neighbors, cursing the soldiers for what they had done and might yet do, cursing Galbatorix, and cursing whatever whim of fate had resulted in the situation as it was. Behind him, he was aware of his men shifting and muttering with anger, eager to punish the soldiers for their brutality.

Having searched all of the houses, the mass of soldiers retraced their steps to the center of the village and formed a rough semicircle around their prisoners.

Yes! crowed Roran to himself as the soldiers turned their backs to the Varden. Edric's plan had been to wait for them to do just that. In anticipation of the order to charge, Roran rose up several inches above his saddle, his entire body tense. He tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry.

The officer in charge of the soldiers, who was the only man among them on a horse, dismounted his steed and exchanged a few inaudible words with the white-haired villager. Without warning, the officer drew his saber and decapitated the man, then hopped backward to avoid the resulting spray of blood. The young woman screamed even louder than before.

"Charge," said Edric.

It took Roran a half second to comprehend that the word Edric had uttered so calmly was the command he had been waiting for.

"Charge!" shouted Sand on the other side of Edric, and galloped out of the copse of beech trees along with his men.

"Charge!" shouted Roran, and dug his heels into Snowfire's sides. He ducked behind his shield as Snowfire carried him through the net of branches, then lowered it again when they were in the open, flying down the side of the hill, with the thunder of hoofbeats surrounding them. Desperate to save the woman and the boy, Roran urged Snowfire to the limit of his speed. Looking back, he was heartened to see that his contingent of men had separated from the rest of the

Varden without too much trouble; aside from a few stragglers, the majority were in a single bunch not thirty feet behind him.

Roran glimpsed Carn riding at the vanguard of Edric's men, his gray cloak flapping in the wind. Once again, Roran wished Edric had allowed them to remain in the same group.

As were his orders, Roran did not enter the village head-on, but rather veered to the left and rode around the buildings, so as to flank the soldiers and attack them from another direction. Sand did the same on the right, while Edric and his warriors drove straight into the village.

A line of houses concealed the initial clash from Roran, but he heard a chorus of frantic shouts, then a series of strange, metallic twangs, and then the screams of men and horses.

Worry knotted Roran's gut. *What was that noise? Could it be metal bows? Do they exist?* Regardless of the cause, he knew there should not have been so many horses crying out in agony. Roran's limbs went cold as he realized with utter certainty that the attack had somehow gone wrong and that the battle might already be lost.

He pulled hard on Snowfire's reins as they passed the last house, steering him toward the center of the village. Behind him, his men did the same. Two hundred yards ahead, Roran saw a triple line of soldiers positioned between two houses, so as to block their way. The soldiers seemed unafraid of the horses racing toward them.

Roran hesitated. His orders were clear: he and his men were to charge the western flank and cut their way through Galbatorix's troops until they rejoined Sand and Edric. However, Edric had not told Roran what he should do if riding straight up to the soldiers no longer seemed a good idea once he and his men were in position. And Roran knew that if he deviated from his orders, even if it was to prevent his men from being massacred, he would be guilty of insubordination and Edric could punish him accordingly.

Then the soldiers swept aside their voluminous cloaks and raised drawn crossbows to their shoulders.

In that instant, Roran decided that he would do whatever was necessary in order to ensure the Varden won the battle. He was not about to let the soldiers destroy his force with a single volley of arrows just because he wished to avoid the unpleasant consequences of defying his captain.

"Take cover!" shouted Roran, and wrenched Snowfire's head to the right, forcing the animal to swerve behind a house. A dozen quarrels buried themselves in the side of the building a second later. Turning around, Roran saw that all but one of his warriors had managed to duck behind nearby houses before the soldiers fired. The man who had been too slow lay bleeding in the dirt, a pair of quarrels

projecting from his chest. The bolts had torn through his mail hauberk as if it were no thicker than a sheet of tissue. Frightened by the smell of blood, his horse kicked up its heels and fled the village, leaving a plume of dust rising in its wake.

Roran reached over and grasped the edge of a beam in the side of the house, holding Snowfire in place while he desperately tried to figure out how to proceed. The soldiers had him and his men pinned down; they could not step back out into the open without being shot so full of quarrels, they would resemble hedgehogs.

A group of Roran's warriors rode up to him from a house that his own building partially shielded from the soldiers' line of sight. "What should we do, Stronghammer?" they asked him. They did not seem bothered by the fact that he had disobeyed his orders; to the contrary, they looked at him with expressions of newfound trust.

Thinking as fast as he could, Roran cast his gaze around. By chance, his eyes alighted upon the bow and quiver strapped behind one of the men's saddles. Roran smiled. Only a few of the warriors fought as archers, but they all carried a bow and arrows so they could hunt for food and help feed the company when they were alone in the wilderness, without support from the rest of the Varden.

Roran pointed toward the house he was leaning against and said, "Take your bows and climb onto the roof, as many of you as will fit, but if you value your lives, stay out of sight until I say otherwise. When I tell you to, start shooting and keep shooting until you run out of arrows or until every last soldier is dead. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get going, then. The rest of you, find buildings of your own where you can pick off the soldiers. Harald, spread the word to everyone else, and find ten of our best spearmen and ten of our best swordsmen and bring them here as fast as you can."

"Yes, sir!"

With a flurry of motion, the warriors hurried to obey. Those who were closest to Roran retrieved their bows and quivers from behind their saddles and then, standing upon the backs of their horses, pulled themselves onto the thatched roof of the house. Four minutes later, the majority of Roran's men were in place on the roofs of seven different houses—with about eight men per roof—and Harald had returned with the requested swordsmen and spearmen in tow.

To the warriors gathered around him, Roran said, "Right, now listen. When I give the order, the men up there will start shooting. As soon as the first flight of arrows strikes the soldiers, we're going to ride out and attempt to rescue Captain Edric. If we can't, we'll have to settle for giving the red-tunics a taste of good cold steel. The archers should provide enough confusion for us to close with the soldiers

before they can use their crossbows. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then fire!" Roran shouted.

With full-throated yells, the men stationed on the houses rose up above the ridges of the roofs and, as one, fired their bows at the soldiers below. The swarm of arrows whistled through the air like bloodthirsty shrikes diving toward their prey.

An instant later, when soldiers began to howl with agony at their wounds, Roran said, "Now *ride*!" and jabbed his heels into Snowfire.

Together, he and his men galloped around the side of the house, pulling their steeds into such a tight turn that they nearly fell over. Relying on his speed and the skill of the archers for protection, Roran skirted the soldiers, who were flailing in disarray, until he came upon the site of Edric's disastrous charge. There the ground was slick with blood, and the corpses of many good men and fine horses littered the space between the houses. Edric's remaining forces were engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the soldiers. To Roran's surprise, Edric was still alive, fighting back to back with five of his men.

"Stay with me!" Roran shouted to his companions as they raced into the battle.

Lashing out with his hooves, Snowfire knocked two soldiers to the ground, breaking their sword arms and staving in their rib cages. Pleased with the stallion, Roran laid about himself with his hammer, snarling with the fierce joy of battle as he felled soldier after soldier, none of whom could withstand the ferocity of his assault. "To me!" he shouted as he drew abreast of Edric and the other survivors. "To me!" In front of him, arrows continued to rain down upon the mass of soldiers, forcing them to cover themselves with their shields while at the same time trying to fend off the Varden's swords and spears.

Once he and his warriors had surrounded the Varden who were on foot, Roran shouted, "Back! Back! To the houses!" Step by step, the lot of them withdrew until they were out of reach of the soldiers' blades, and then they turned and ran toward the nearest house. The soldiers shot and killed three of the Varden along the way, but the rest arrived at the building unharmed.

Edric slumped against the side of the house, gasping for breath. When again he was able to speak, he gestured at Roran's men and said, "Your intervention is most timely and welcome, Stronghammer, but why do I see you here, and not riding out from among the soldiers, as I expected?"

Then Roran explained what he had done and pointed out the archers on the roofs.

A dark scowl appeared on Edric's brow as he listened to Roran's account. However, he did not chastise Roran for his disobedience but

merely said, “Have those men come down at once. They have succeeded in breaking the soldiers’ discipline. Now we must rely upon honest blade-work to dispose of them.”

“There are too few of us left to attack the soldiers directly!” protested Roran. “They outnumber us better than three to one.”

“Then we shall make up in valor what we lack in numbers!” Edric bellowed. “I was told you had courage, Stronghammer, but obviously rumor is mistaken and you are as timid as a frightened rabbit. Now do as you’re told, and do not question me again!” The captain indicated one of Roran’s warriors. “You there, lend me your steed.” After the man dismounted, Edric pulled himself into the saddle and said, “Half of you on horse, follow me; I go to reinforce Sand. Everyone else, remain with Roran.” Kicking his mount in the sides, Edric galloped away with the men who chose to follow him, racing from building to building as they worked their way around the soldiers clumped in the center of the village.

Roran shook with fury as he watched them depart. Never before had he allowed anyone to question his courage without answering his critic with words or blows. So long as the battle persisted, however, it would be inappropriate for him to confront Edric. *Very well*, Roran thought, *I shall demonstrate to Edric the courage he thinks I lack. But that is all he shall have from me. I will not send the archers to fight the soldiers face to face when they are safer and more effective where they are*.

Roran turned and inspected the men Edric had left to him. Among those they had rescued, Roran was delighted to see Carn, who was scratched and bloody but, on the whole, unharmed. They nodded to each other, and then Roran addressed the group: “You have heard what Edric said. I disagree. If we do as he wishes, all of us will end up piled in a cairn before sunset. We can still win this battle, but not by marching to our own deaths! What we lack in numbers, we can make up with cunning. You know how I came to join the Varden. You know I have fought and defeated the Empire before, and in just such a village! This I can do, I swear to you. But I cannot do it alone. Will you follow me? Think carefully. I will claim responsibility for ignoring Edric’s orders, but he and Nasuada may still punish everyone who was involved.”

“Then they would be fools,” growled Carn. “Would they prefer that we died here? No, I think not. You may count on me, Roran.”

As Carn made his declaration, Roran saw how the other men squared their shoulders and set their jaws and how their eyes burned with renewed determination, and he knew they had decided to cast their lot with him, if only because they would not want to be parted from the only magician in their company. Many was the warrior of the Varden who owed his life to a member of Du Vrangr Gata, and the

men-at-arms Roran had met would sooner stab themselves in a foot than go into battle without a spellcaster close at hand.

"Aye," said Harald. "You may count on us as well, Stronghammer."

"Then follow me!" said Roran. Reaching down, he pulled Carn up onto Snowfire behind himself, then hurried with his group back around the village to where the bowmen on the roofs continued to fire arrows at the soldiers. As Roran and the men with him dashed from house to house, quarrels buzzed past them—sounding like giant, angry insects—and one even buried itself halfway through Harald's shield.

Once they were safely behind cover, Roran had the men who were still mounted give their bows and arrows to the men on foot, whom he then sent to climb the houses and join the other archers. As they scrambled to obey him, Roran beckoned to Carn, who had jumped off Snowfire the moment they ceased moving, and said, "I need a spell of you. Can you shield me and ten others from these bolts?"

Carn hesitated. "For how long?"

"A minute? An hour? Who knows?"

"Shielding that many people from more than a handful of bolts would soon exceed the bounds of my strength.… Although, if you don't care if I stop the bolts in their tracks, I could deflect them from you, which—"

"That would be fine."

"Who exactly do you want me to protect?"

Roran pointed at the men he had picked to join him, and Carn asked each of them their names. Standing with his shoulders hunched inward, Carn began to mutter in the ancient language, his face pale and strained. Three times he tried to cast the spell, and three times he failed. "I'm sorry," he said, and released an unsteady breath. "I can't seem to concentrate."

"Blast it, don't apologize," growled Roran. "Just do it!" Leaping down from Snowfire, he grasped Carn on either side of his head, holding him in place. "Look at me! Look into the center of my eyes. That's it. Keep staring at me.… Good. Now place the ward around us."

Carn's features cleared and his shoulders loosened, and then, in a confident voice, he recited the incantation. As he uttered the last word, he sagged slightly in Roran's grip before recovering. "It is done," he said.

Roran patted him on the shoulder, then clambered into Snowfire's saddle again. Sweeping his gaze over the ten horsemen, he said, "Guard my sides and my back, but otherwise keep behind me so long as I am able to swing my hammer."

"Yes, sir!"

"Remember, the bolts cannot harm you now. Carn, you stay here. Don't move too much; conserve your strength. If you feel like you

can't maintain the spell any longer, signal us before you end it. Agreed?"

Carn sat on the front step of the house and nodded. "Agreed."

Renewing his grip on his shield and hammer, Roran took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself. "Brace yourselves," he said, and clucked his tongue to Snowfire.

With the ten horsemen following, Roran rode out into the middle of the dirt street that ran between the houses and faced the soldiers once more. Five hundred or so of Galbatorix's troops remained in the center of the village, most of them crouching or kneeling behind their shields while they struggled to reload their crossbows. Occasionally, a soldier would stand and loose a bolt at one of the archers on the roofs before dropping back behind his shield as a flight of arrows sliced through the air where he had just been. Throughout the corpse-strewn clearing, patches of arrows studded the ground, like reeds sprouting from the bloody soil. Several hundred feet away, on the far side of the soldiers, Roran could see a knot of thrashing bodies, and he assumed that was where Sand, Edric, and whatever remained of their forces were fighting the soldiers. If the young woman and the boy were still in the clearing, he did not notice them.

A quarrel buzzed toward Roran. When the bolt was less than a yard from his chest, it abruptly changed direction and hurtled off at an angle, missing him and his men. Roran flinched, but the missile was already past. His throat constricted, and his heartbeat doubled.

Glancing around, Roran spotted a broken wagon leaning against a house off to his left. He pointed at it and said, "Pull that over here and lay it upside down. Block as much of the street as you can." To the archers, he shouted, "Don't let the soldiers sneak around and attack us from the sides! When they come at us, thin out their ranks as much as you can. And as soon as you run out of arrows, come join us."

"Yes, sir!"

"Just be careful you don't shoot us by accident, or I swear I'll haunt your halls for the rest of time!"

"Yes, sir!"

More quarrels flew at Roran and the other horsemen in the street, but in every case, the bolts glanced off Carn's ward and veered into a wall or the ground or vanished into the sky.

Roran watched his men drag the wagon into the street. When they were nearly finished, he lifted his chin, filled his lungs, and then, projecting his voice toward the soldiers, he roared, "Ho there, you cowering carrion dogs! See how only eleven of us bar your way. Win past us, and you win your freedom. Try your hand if you have the guts. What? You hesitate? Where is your manhood, you deformed maggots, you bilious, swine-faced murderers? Your fathers were

dribbling half-wits who should have been drowned at birth! Aye, and your mothers were poxy trollops and the consorts of Urgals!" Roran smiled with satisfaction as several of the soldiers howled with outrage and began to insult him in return. One of the soldiers, however, seemed to lose his will to continue fighting, for he sprang to his feet and ran northward, covering himself with his shield and darting from side to side in a desperate attempt to avoid the archers. Despite his efforts, the Varden shot him dead before he had gone more than a hundred feet. "Ha!" exclaimed Roran. "Cowards you are, every last one of you, you verminous river rats! If it will give you spine, then know this: Roran Stronghammer is my name, and Eragon Shadeslayer is my cousin! Kill me, and that foul king of yours will reward you with an earldom, or more. But you will have to kill me with a blade; your crossbows are of no use against me. Come now, you slugs; you leeches; you starving, white-bellied ticks! Come and best me if you can!"

With a flurry of battle-cries, a group of thirty soldiers dropped their crossbows, drew their flashing swords, and, with shields held high, ran toward Roran and his men.

From over his right shoulder, Roran heard Harald say, "Sir, there are many more of them than us."

"Aye," Roran said, keeping his eyes fixed on the approaching soldiers. Four of them stumbled and then lay motionless on the ground, pierced through by numerous shafts.

"If they all charge us at once, we won't stand a chance."

"Yes, but they won't. Look, they're confused and disorganized. Their commander must have fallen. As long as we maintain order, they cannot overwhelm us."

"But, Stronghammer, we cannot kill that many men ourselves!"

Roran glanced back at Harald. "Of course we can! We fight to protect our families and to reclaim our homes and our lands. They fight because Galbatorix forces them to. They have not the heart for this battle. So think of your families, think of your homes, and remember it is they you are defending. A man who fights for something greater than himself may kill a hundred enemies with ease!" As he spoke, Roran saw in his mind an image of Katrina clad in her blue wedding dress, and he smelled the scent of her skin, and he heard the muted tones of her voice from their discussions late at night.

Katrina.

Then the soldiers were upon them, and for a span Roran heard nothing but the thud of swords bouncing off his shield and the clang of his hammer as he struck the soldiers' helms and the cries of the soldiers as they crumpled underneath his blows. The soldiers threw themselves against him with desperate strength, but they were no

match for him or his men. When he vanquished the last of the attacking soldiers, Roran burst out laughing, exhilarated. What a joy it was to crush those who would harm his wife and his unborn child!

He was pleased to see that none of his warriors had been seriously injured. He also noticed that during the fray, several of the archers had descended from the roofs to fight on horseback with them. Roran grinned at the newcomers and said, “Welcome to the battle!”

“A warm welcome indeed!” one of them replied.

Pointing with his gore-covered hammer toward the right side of the street, Roran said, “You, you, and you, pile the bodies over there. Make a funnel out of them and the wagon, so that only two or three soldiers can get to us at once.”

“Yes, sir!” the warriors answered, swinging down from their horses.

A quarrel whizzed toward Roran. He ignored it and focused on the main body of soldiers, where a group, perhaps a hundred strong, was massing in preparation for a second onslaught. “Hurry!” he shouted to the men shifting the corpses. “They’re almost upon us. Harald, go help.”

Roran wet his lips, nervous, as he watched his men labor while the soldiers advanced. To his relief, the four Varden dragged the last body into place and clambered back onto their steeds moments before the wave of soldiers struck.

The houses on either side of the street, as well as the overturned wagon and the gruesome barricade of human remains, slowed and compressed the flow of soldiers, until they were nearly at a standstill when they reached Roran. The soldiers were packed so tightly, they were helpless to escape the arrows that streaked toward them from above.

The first two ranks of soldiers carried spears, with which they menaced Roran and the other Varden. Roran parried three separate thrusts, cursing the whole while as he realized that he could not reach past the spears with his hammer. Then a soldier stabbed Snowfire in the shoulder, and Roran leaned forward to keep from being thrown as the stallion squealed and reared.

As Snowfire landed on all fours, Roran slid out of the saddle, keeping the stallion between him and the hedge of spear-wielding soldiers. Snowfire bucked as another spear pierced his hide. Before the soldiers could wound him again, Roran pulled on Snowfire’s reins and forced him to prance backward until there was enough room among the other horses for the stallion to turn around. “Yah!” he shouted, and slapped Snowfire on the rump, sending him galloping out of the village.

“Make way!” Roran bellowed, waving at the Varden. They cleared a path for him between their steeds, and he bounded to the forefront of

the fight again, sticking his hammer through his belt as he did.

A soldier jabbed a spear at Roran's chest. He blocked it with his wrist, bruising himself on the hard wooden shaft, and then yanked the spear out of the soldier's hands. The man fell flat on his face. Twirling the weapon, Roran stabbed the man, then lunged forward and lanced two more soldiers. Roran took a wide stance, planting his feet firmly in the rich soil where once he would have sought to raise crops, and shook the spear at his foes, shouting, "Come, you misbegotten bastards! Kill me if you can! I am Roran Stronghammer, and I fear no man alive!"

The soldiers shuffled forward, three men stepping over the bodies of their former comrades to exchange blows with Roran. Dancing to the side, Roran drove his spear into the jaw of the rightmost soldier, shattering his teeth. A pennant of blood trailed the blade as Roran withdrew the weapon and, dropping to one knee, impaled the central soldier through an armpit.

An impact jarred Roran's left shoulder. His shield seemed to double in weight. Rising, he saw a spear buried in the oak planks of his shield and the remaining soldier of the trio rushing at him with a drawn sword. Roran lifted his spear above his head as if he were about to throw it and, when the soldier faltered, kicked him between the fork of his legs. He dispatched the man with a single blow. During the momentary lull in combat that followed, Roran disengaged his arm from the useless shield and cast it and the attached spear under the feet of his enemies, hoping to tangle their legs.

More soldiers shuffled forward, quailing before Roran's feral grin and stabbing spear. A mound of bodies grew before him. When it reached the height of his waist, Roran bounded to the top of the blood-soaked berm, and there he remained, despite the treacherous footing, for the height gave him an advantage. Since the soldiers were forced to climb up a ramp of corpses to reach him, he was able to kill many of them when they stumbled over an arm or a leg or stepped upon the soft neck of one of their predecessors or slipped on a slanting shield.

From his elevated position, Roran could see that the rest of the soldiers had chosen to join the assault, save for a score across the village who were still battling Sand's and Edric's warriors. He realized he would have no more rest until the battle had concluded.

Roran acquired dozens of wounds as the day wore on. Many of his injuries were minor—a cut on the inside of a forearm, a broken finger, a scratch across his ribs where a dagger had shorn through his mail—but others were not. From where he lay on the pile of bodies, a soldier stabbed Roran through his right calf muscle, hobbling him. Soon afterward, a heavyset man smelling of onions and cheese fell against

Roran and, with his dying breath, shoved the bolt of a crossbow into Roran's left shoulder, which thereafter prevented Roran from lifting his arm overhead. Roran left the bolt embedded in his flesh, for he knew he might bleed to death if he pulled it out. Pain became Roran's ruling sensation; every movement caused him fresh agony, but to stand still was to die, and so he kept dealing death-blows, regardless of his wounds and regardless of his weariness.

Roran was sometimes aware of the Varden behind or beside him, such as when they threw a spear past him, or when the blade of a sword would dart around his shoulder to fell a soldier who was about to brain him, but for the most part Roran faced the soldiers alone, because of the pile of bodies he stood on and the restricted amount of space between the overturned wagon and the sides of the houses. Above, the archers who still had arrows maintained their lethal barrage, their gray-goose shafts penetrating bone and sinew alike.

Late in the battle, Roran thrust his spear at a soldier, and as the tip struck the man's armor, the haft cracked and split along its length. That he was still alive seemed to catch the soldier by surprise, for he hesitated before swinging his sword in retaliation. His imprudent delay allowed Roran to duck underneath the length of singing steel and seize another spear from the ground, with which he slew the soldier. To Roran's dismay and disgust, the second spear lasted less than a minute before it too shattered in his grip. Throwing the splintered remains at the soldiers, Roran took a shield from a corpse and drew his hammer from his belt. His hammer, at least, had never failed him.

Exhaustion proved to be Roran's greatest adversary as the last of the soldiers gradually approached, each man waiting his turn to duel him. Roran's limbs felt heavy and lifeless, his vision flickered, and he could not seem to get enough air, and yet he somehow always managed to summon the energy to defeat his next opponent. As his reflexes slowed, the soldiers dealt him numerous cuts and bruises that he could have easily avoided earlier.

When gaps appeared between the soldiers, and through them Roran could see open space, he knew his ordeal was nearly at an end. He did not offer the final twelve men mercy, nor did they ask it of him, even though they could not have hoped to battle their way past him as well as the Varden beyond. Nor did they attempt to flee. Instead, they rushed at him, snarling, cursing, desiring only to kill the man who had slain so many of their comrades before they too passed into the void.

In a way, Roran admired their courage.

Arrows sprouted from the chests of four of the men, downing them. A spear thrown from somewhere behind Roran took a fifth man under the collarbone, and he too toppled onto a bed of corpses. Two more

spears claimed their victims, and then the men reached Roran. The lead soldier hewed at Roran with a spiked ax. Although Roran could feel the head of the crossbow bolt grating against his bone, he threw up his left arm and blocked the ax with his shield. Howling with pain and anger, as well as an overwhelming desire for the battle to end, Roran whipped his hammer around and slew the soldier with a blow to the head. Without pause, Roran hopped forward on his good leg and struck the next soldier twice in the chest before he could defend himself, cracking his ribs. The third man parried two of Roran's attacks, but then Roran deceived him with a feint and slew him as well. The final two soldiers converged on Roran from either side, swinging at his ankles as they climbed to the summit of the piled corpses. His strength flagging, Roran sparred with them for a long and wearisome while, both giving and receiving wounds, until at last he killed one man by caving in his helm and the other by breaking his neck with a well-placed blow.

Roran swayed and then collapsed.

He felt himself being lifted up and opened his eyes to see Harald holding a wineskin to his lips. "Drink this," Harald said. "You'll feel better."

His chest heaving, Roran consumed several draughts between gasps. The sun-warmed wine stung the inside of his battered mouth. He felt his legs steady and said, "It's all right; you can let go of me now."

Roran leaned against his hammer and surveyed the battleground. For the first time he appreciated how high the mound of bodies had grown; he and his companions stood at least twenty feet in the air, which was nearly level with the tops of the houses on either side. Roran saw that most of the soldiers had died of arrows, but even so, he knew that he had slain a vast number by himself.

"How … how many?" he asked Harald.

The blood-spattered warrior shook his head. "I lost count after thirty-two. Perhaps another can say. What you did, Stronghammer … Never have I seen such a feat before, not by a man of human abilities. The dragon Saphira chose well; the men of your family are fighters like no others. Your prowess is unmatched by any mortal, Stronghammer. However many you slew here today, I—"

"It was one hundred and ninety-three!" cried Carn, clambering toward them from below.

"Are you sure?" asked Roran, unbelieving.

Carn nodded as he reached them. "Aye! I watched, and I kept careful count. One hundred and ninety-three, it was—ninety-four if you count the man you stabbed through the gut before the archers finished him off."

The tally astounded Roran. He had not suspected the total was quite

so large. A hoarse chuckle escaped him. “A pity there are no more of them. Another seven and I would have an even two hundred.”

The other men laughed as well.

His thin face furrowed with concern, Carn reached for the bolt sticking out of Roran’s left shoulder, saying, “Here, let me see to your wounds.”

“No!” said Roran, and brushed him away. “There may be others who are more seriously injured than I am. Tend to them first.”

“Roran, several of those cuts could prove fatal unless I stanch the bleeding. It won’t take but a—”

“I’m fine,” he growled. “Leave me alone.”

“Roran, just look at yourself!”

He did and averted his gaze. “Be quick about it, then.” Roran stared into the featureless sky, his mind empty of thought while Carn pulled the bolt out of his shoulder and muttered various spells. In every spot where the magic took effect, Roran felt his skin itch and crawl, followed by a blessed cessation of pain. When Carn had finished, Roran still hurt, but he did not hurt quite so badly, and his mind was clearer than before.

The healing left Carn gray-faced and shaking. He leaned against his knees until his tremors stopped. “I will go …” He paused for breath. “… go help the rest of the wounded now.” He straightened and picked his way down the mound, lurching from side to side as if he were drunk.

Roran watched him go, concerned. Then it occurred to him to wonder about the fate of the rest of their expedition. He looked toward the far side of the village and saw nothing but scattered bodies, some clad in the red of the Empire, others in the brown wool favored by the Varden. “What of Edric and Sand?” he asked Harald.

“I’m sorry, Stronghammer, but I saw nothing beyond the reach of my sword.”

Calling to the few men who still stood on the roofs of the houses, Roran asked, “What of Edric and Sand?”

“We do not know, Stronghammer!” they replied.

Steadying himself with his hammer, Roran slowly picked his way down the tumbled ramp of bodies and, with Harald and three other men by his side, crossed the clearing in the center of the village, executing every soldier they found still alive. When they arrived at the edge of the clearing, where the number of slain Varden surpassed the number of slain soldiers, Harald banged his sword on his shield and shouted, “Is anyone still alive?”

After a moment, a voice came back at them from among the houses: “Name yourself!”

“Harald and Roran Stronghammer and others of the Varden. If you

serve the Empire, then surrender, for your comrades are dead and you cannot defeat us!"

From somewhere between the houses came a crash of falling metal, and then in ones and twos, warriors of the Varden emerged from hiding and limped toward the clearing, many of them supporting their wounded comrades. They appeared dazed, and some were stained with so much blood, Roran at first mistook them for captured soldiers. He counted four-and-twenty men. Among the final group of stragglers was Edric, helping along a man who had lost his right arm during the fighting.

Roran motioned, and two of his men hurried to relieve Edric of his burden. The captain straightened from under the weight. With slow steps, he walked over to Roran and looked him straight in the eye, his expression unreadable. Neither he nor Roran moved, and Roran was aware that the clearing had grown exceptionally quiet.

Edric was the first to speak. "How many of your men survived?"

"Most. Not all, but most."

Edric nodded. "And Carn?"

"He lives.… What of Sand?"

"A soldier shot him during his charge. He died but a few minutes ago." Edric looked past Roran, then toward the mound of bodies. "You defied my orders, Stronghammer."

"I did."

Edric held out an open hand toward him.

"Captain, no!" exclaimed Harald, stepping forward. "If it weren't for Roran, none of us would be standing here. And you should have seen what he did; he slew nearly two hundred by himself!"

Harald's pleas made no impression on Edric, who continued to hold out his hand. Roran remained impassive as well.

Turning to him then, Harald said, "Roran, you know the men are yours. Just say the word, and we will—"

Roran silenced him with a glare. "Don't be a fool."

Between thin lips, Edric said, "At least you are not completely devoid of sense. Harald, keep your teeth shut unless you want to lead the packhorses the whole way back."

Lifting his hammer, Roran handed it to Edric. Then he unbuckled his belt, upon which hung his sword and his dagger, and those too he surrendered to Edric. "I have no other weapons," he said.

Edric nodded, grim, and slung the sword belt over one shoulder. "Roran Stronghammer, I hereby relieve you of command. Have I your word of honor you will not attempt to flee?"

"You do."

"Then you will make yourself useful where you may, but in all else, you will comport yourself as a prisoner." Edric looked around and

pointed at another warrior. “Fuller, you will assume Roran’s position until we return to the main body of the Varden and Nasuada can decide what is to be done about this.”

“Yes, sir,” said Fuller.

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For several hours, Roran bent his back alongside the other warriors as they collected their dead and buried them on the outskirts of the village. During the process, Roran learned that only nine of his eighty-one warriors had died in the battle, while between them, Edric and Sand had lost almost a hundred and fifty men, and Edric would have lost more, except that a handful of his warriors had remained with Roran after he rode to their rescue.

When they finished interring their casualties, the Varden retrieved their arrows, then built a pyre in the center of the village, stripped the soldiers of their gear, dragged them onto the pile of wood, and set it ablaze. The burning bodies filled the sky with a pillar of greasy black smoke that drifted upward for what seemed like miles. Through it, the sun appeared as a flat red disk.

The young woman and the boy the soldiers had captured were nowhere to be found. Since their bodies were not among the dead, Roran guessed the two had fled the village when the fighting broke out, which, he thought, was probably the best thing they could have done. He wished them luck, wherever they had gone.

To Roran’s pleased surprise, Snowfire trotted back into the village minutes before the Varden were to depart. At first the stallion was skittish and standoffish, allowing no one to approach, but by talking to him in a low voice, Roran managed to calm the stallion enough to clean and bandage the wounds in the horse’s shoulder. Since it would be unwise to ride Snowfire until he was fully healed, Roran tied him to the front of the packhorses, which the stallion took an immediate dislike to, flattening his ears, flicking his tail from side to side, and curling his lips to bare his teeth.

“Behave yourself,” said Roran, stroking his neck. Snowfire rolled an eyeball at him and nickered, his ears relaxing slightly.

Then Roran pulled himself onto a gelding that had belonged to one of the dead Varden and took his place at the rear of the line of men assembled between the houses. Roran ignored the many glances they directed at him, although it heartened him when several of the warriors murmured, “Well done.”

As he sat waiting for Edric to give the command to start forward, Roran thought of Nasuada and Katrina and Eragon, and a cloud of dread shadowed his thoughts as he wondered how they would react when they learned of his mutiny. Roran pushed away his worries a

second later. *I did what was right and necessary*, he told himself. *I won't regret it, no matter what may come of it*.

"Move on out!" shouted Edric from the head of the procession.

Roran spurred his steed into a brisk walk, and as one, he and the other men rode west, away from the village, leaving the pile of soldiers to burn itself to extinction.

MESSAGE IN A MIRROR

The morning sun beat down on Saphira, suffusing her with a pleasant warmth.

She lay basking on a smooth shelf of stone several feet above Eragon's empty cloth-shell-tent. The night's activities, flying around scouting the Empire's locations—as she had every night since Nasuada sent Eragon to the big-hollow-mountain-Farthen Dûr—had left her drowsy. The flights were necessary to conceal Eragon's absence, but the routine wore on her, for while the dark held no terrors for her, she was not nocturnal by habit, and she disliked having to do anything with such regularity. Also, since it took the Varden so long to move from place to place, she spent most of her time soaring over much the same landscape every night. The only recent excitement was when she spotted stunted-thoughts-red-scales-Thorn low on the northeastern horizon the previous morning. He had not turned to confront her, however, but had continued on his way, heading deeper into the Empire. When Saphira had reported what she had seen, Nasuada, Arya, and the elves guarding Saphira had reacted like a flock of frightened jays, screaming and yammering at each other while darting every which way. They had even insisted that black-blue-wolf-hair-Blödhgarm fly with her in the guise of Eragon, which of course she had refused to allow. It was one thing to permit the elf to place a water-shadow-ghost of Eragon on her back every time she took off from or landed among the Varden, but she was not about to let anyone other than Eragon ride her unless a battle was imminent, and perhaps not even then.

Saphira yawned and stretched out her right foreleg, spreading the clawed fingers of her paw. Relaxing again, she wrapped her tail around her body and adjusted the position of her head on her paws, visions of deer and other prey drifting through her mind.

Not long afterward, she heard the patter of feet as someone ran through the camp, heading toward Nasuada's folded-wing-red-butterfly-chrysalis-tent. Saphira paid little attention to the sound; messengers were always hurrying to and fro.

Just as she was about to fall asleep, Saphira heard another runner dash past, then, after a brief interval, two more. Without opening her eyes, she extended the tip of her tongue and tasted the air. She detected no unusual odors. Deciding that the disturbance was not worth investigating, she drifted off into dreams of diving for fish in a cool green lake.

Angry shouting woke Saphira.

She did not stir as she listened to a large number of round-ear-two-legs arguing with each other. They were too far away for her to make out the words, but from the tone of their voices, she could tell they were angry enough to kill. Disputes sometimes broke out among the Varden, just as they did in any large herd, but never before had she heard so many two-legs argue for so long and with so much passion.

A dull throbbing formed at the base of Saphira's skull as the two-legs' shouting intensified. She tightened her claws against the stone beneath her, and with sharp cracks, thin wafers of the quartz-laden rock flaked off around the tips of her talons.

I shall count to thirty-three, she thought, *and if they have not stopped by then, they had better hope that whatever upset them was worth disrupting the rest of a daughter-of-the-wind!*

When Saphira reached the count of seven-and-twenty, the two-legs fell silent. *At last!* Shifting to a more comfortable position, she prepared to resume her much-needed slumber.

Metal clinked, plant-cloth-hides swished, skin-paw-coverings thudded against the ground, and the unmistakable scent of dark-skin-warrior-Nasuada wafted over Saphira. *What now*? she wondered, and briefly considered roaring at everyone until they fled in terror and left her alone.

Saphira opened a single eye and saw Nasuada and her six guards striding toward where she lay. At the lower end of the slab of stone, Nasuada ordered her guards to remain behind with Blödhgarm and the other elves—who were sparring with each other on a small expanse of grass—and then she climbed the slab by herself.

"Greetings, Saphira," Nasuada said. She wore a red dress, and the color seemed unnaturally strong against the green leaves of the apple trees behind her. Glints of light from Saphira's scales mottled her face.

Saphira blinked once, feeling no inclination to answer with words.

After glancing around, Nasuada stepped closer to Saphira's head and whispered, "Saphira, I must speak to you in private. You can reach into my mind, but I cannot reach into yours. Can you remain inside me, so I can think what I need to say and you will hear?"

Extending herself toward the woman's tense-hard-tired-consciousness, Saphira allowed her irritation at being kept from her sleep to wash over Nasuada, and then she said, *I can if I so choose, but I would never do so without your permission*.

Of course, Nasuada replied. *I understand*. At first Saphira received nothing but disjointed images and emotions from the woman: a gallows with an empty noose, blood on the ground, snarling faces, dread, weariness, and an undercurrent of grim determination. *Forgive me*, said Nasuada. *I have had a trying morning. If my thoughts wander*

overmuch, please bear with me.

Saphira blinked again. *What is it that has stirred up the Varden so? A group of men roused me from my sleep with their ill-tempered wrangling, and before that, I heard an unusual number of messengers racing through the camp.*

Pressing her lips together, Nasuada turned away from Saphira and crossed her arms, cradling her healing forearms with cupped hands. The coloring of her mind became black as a midnight cloud, full of intimations of death and violence. After an uncharacteristically long pause, she said, *One of the Varden, a man by the name of Othmund, crept into the Urgals' camp last night and killed three of them while they were asleep around their fire. The Urgals failed to catch Othmund at the time, but this morning, he claimed credit for the deed and was boasting of it throughout the army.*

Why did he do this? Saphira asked. *Did the Urgals kill his family?*

Nasuada shook her head. *I almost wish they had, because then the Urgals would not be so upset; revenge, at least, they understand. No, that's the strange part of this affair; Othmund hates the Urgals for no other reason than they are Urgals. They have never wronged him, nor his kin, and yet he loathes Urgals with every fiber of his body. Or so I gather after having spoken with him.*

How will you deal with him?

Nasuada looked at Saphira again, a profound sadness in her eyes. *He will hang for his crimes. When I accepted the Urgals into the Varden, I decreed that anyone who attacked an Urgal would be punished as if he had attacked a fellow human. I cannot go back on my word now.*

Do you regret your promise?

No. The men needed to know I would not condone such acts. Otherwise, they might have turned against the Urgals the very day Nar Garzhvog and I made our pact. Now, however, I must show them I meant what I said. If I don't, there will be even more murders, and then the Urgals will take matters into their own hands, and once again, our two races shall be snapping at each other's throats. It is only right Othmund should die for killing the Urgals and for defying my order, but oh, Saphira, the Varden will not like this. I have sacrificed my own flesh to win their loyalty, but now they will hate me for hanging Othmund.… They will hate me for equating the lives of Urgals with the lives of humans. Lowering her arms, Nasuada tugged at the cuffs of her sleeves. *And I cannot say I like it any more than they will. For all my attempts to treat the Urgals openly and fairly and as equals, as my father would have, I cannot help but remember how they killed him. I cannot help but remember the sight of all those Urgals slaughtering the Varden during the Battle of Farthen Dûr. I cannot help but remember the many stories I heard when I was a child, stories of Urgals sweeping out of the mountains and murdering innocent people in*

their beds. Always Urgals were the monsters to be feared, and here I have joined our fate with theirs. I cannot help but remember all that, Saphira, and I find myself wondering if I have made the right decision.

You cannot help but be human, said Saphira, attempting to comfort Nasuada. *Yet you do not have to be bound by what those around you believe. You can grow beyond the limits of your race if you have the will. If the events of the past can teach us anything, it is that the kings and queens and other leaders who have brought the races closer together are the ones who have accomplished the greatest good in Alagaësia. It is strife and anger we must guard against, not closer relations with those who were once our foes. Remember your distrust of the Urgals, for they have well earned it, but also remember that once dwarves and dragons loved one another no more than humans and Urgals. And once dragons fought against the elves and would have driven their race extinct if we could have. Once those things were true, but no more, because people like you had the courage to set aside past hatreds and forge bonds of friendship where, previously, none existed.*

Nasuada pressed her forehead against the side of Saphira's jaw, then said, *You are very wise, Saphira.*

Amused, Saphira lifted her head off her paws and touched Nasuada on the brow with the tip of her snout. *I speak the truth as I see it, no more. If that is wisdom, then you are welcome to it; however, I believe you already possess all the wisdom you need. Executing Othmund may not please the Varden, but it will take more than this to break their devotion to you. Besides, I am sure you can find a way to mollify them.*

Aye, said Nasuada, wiping the corners of her eyes with her fingers. *I will have to, I think.* Then she smiled and her face was transformed. *But Othmund was not why I came to see you. Eragon just contacted me and asked for you to join him in Farthen Dûr. The dwarves—*

Arching her neck, Saphira roared toward the sky, sending the fire from her belly rippling out through her mouth in a flickering sheet of flame. Nasuada staggered back from her while everyone else within earshot froze and stared at Saphira. Rising to her feet, Saphira shook herself from head to tail, her weariness forgotten, and spread her wings in preparation for flight.

Nasuada's guards started toward her, but she waved them back. A patch of smoke swept over her, and she pressed the underside of a sleeve over her nose, coughing. *Your enthusiasm is commendable, Saphira, but—*

Is Eragon injured or hurt? Saphira asked. Alarm shot through her when Nasuada hesitated.

He's as healthy as ever, Nasuada replied. *However, there was an … incident … yesterday.*

What kind of incident?

He and his guards were attacked.

Saphira held herself motionless while Nasuada recalled for her everything Eragon had said during their conversation. Afterward, Saphira bared her teeth. *Dûrgrimst Az Sweldn rak Anhûin should be grateful I was not with Eragon; I would not have let them escape so easily for attempting to kill him*.

With a small smile, Nasuada said, *For that reason, it is probably better you were here*.

Perhaps, Saphira admitted, and then released a puff of hot smoke and lashed her tail from side to side. *It does not surprise me, though. Always this happens; whenever Eragon and I part, someone attacks him. It's gotten so it makes my scales itch to let him out of my sight for more than a few hours*.

He's more than capable of defending himself.

True, but our enemies are not without skill either. Impatient, Saphira shifted her stance, raising her wings even higher. *Nasuada, I am eager to be gone. Is there anything else I should know?*

No, said Nasuada. *Fly swift and fly true, Saphira, but do not tarry when you arrive in Farthen Dûr. As soon as you leave our camp, we shall have only a few days' grace before the Empire realizes I have not sent you and Eragon on a brief scouting trip. Galbatorix may or may not decide to strike while you are away, but every hour you are absent will increase the possibility. Also, I would much prefer to have the two of you with us when we attack Feinster. We could take the city without you, but it will cost us many more lives. In short, the fate of the entire Varden depends upon your speed.*

We shall be as swift as the storm-driven wind, Saphira assured her.

Then Nasuada bade her farewell and retreated from the stone slab, whereupon Blödhgarm and the other elves rushed to Saphira's side and strapped her uncomfortable-leather-patch-Eragon-seat-saddle onto her and filled the saddlebags with the food and equipment she would normally carry if embarking upon a trip with Eragon. She would not need the supplies—she could not even access them herself—but for the sake of appearances, she had to carry them. Once she was ready, Blödhgarm twisted his hand in front of his chest in the elves' gesture of respect and said in the ancient language, "Fare thee well, Saphira Brightscales. May you and Eragon return to us unharmed."

Fare thee well, Blödhgarm.

Saphira waited while the black-blue-wolf-hair-elf created a water-shadow-ghost of Eragon and the apparition walked out of Eragon's tent and climbed onto her back. She felt nothing as the insubstantial wraith stepped from her left foreleg to the upper part of her leg and then to her shoulder. When Blödhgarm nodded to her, indicating the not-Eragon was in place, she lifted her wings until they touched

overhead, then leaped forward, off the end of the stone slab.

As Saphira fell toward the gray tents below, she drove her wings downward, propelling herself away from the break-bone-ground. She turned in the direction of Farthen Dûr and began climbing up to the layer of thin-cold-air high above, where she hoped to find a steady wind to aid her on her journey.

She circled over the wooded riverbank where the Varden had chosen to stop for the night and wriggled with a fierce joy. No longer did she have to wait while Eragon went off adventuring without her! No longer would she have to spend the entire night flying over the same patches of land again and again! And no longer would those who wished to hurt her partner-of-her-mind-and-heart be able to escape her wrath! Opening her jaws, Saphira roared her joy and confidence to the world, daring whatever gods there might be to challenge *her*, she who was the daughter of Iormûngr and Vervada, two of the greatest dragons of their age.

When she was more than a mile above the Varden and a strong southwestern wind was pressing against her, Saphira aligned herself with the torrent of air and allowed it to propel her forward, soaring over the sun-drenched land below.

Casting her thoughts out before her, she said, *I'm on my way, little one!*

✦ ✦ ✦

FOUR STROKES UPON THE DRUM

Eragon leaned forward, every muscle in his body tense, as the white-haired dwarf woman Hadfala, chief of Dûrgrimst Ebardac, rose from the table where the clanmeet was gathered and uttered a short line in her native language.

Murmuring into Eragon's left ear, Hûndfast translated: "On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Orik as our new king."

Eragon released his pent-up breath. *One*. In order to become ruler of the dwarves, a clan chief had to win a majority of the votes from the other chiefs. If none achieved that feat, then according to Dwarvish law, the clan chief with the least votes would be eliminated from the competition and the meet could adjourn for up to three days before voting again. The process would continue as needed until a clan chief had achieved the necessary majority, at which point, the meet would swear fealty to him or her as their new monarch. Considering how pressed for time the Varden were, Eragon fervently hoped that the voting would not require more than one round, and if it did, that the dwarves would not insist upon taking a recess of more than a few hours. If that happened, he thought he might break the stone table in the center of the room out of frustration.

That Hadfala, the first clan chief to vote, had cast her lot with Orik boded well. Hadfala, as Eragon knew, had been backing Gannel of Dûrgrimst Quan before the attempt on Eragon's life. If Hadfala's allegiances had shifted, then it was also possible that the other member of Gannel's cohort—namely, Grimstborith Ûndin—might also give his vote to Orik.

Next, Gáldhiem of Dûrgrimst Feldûnost rose from the table, although he was so short, he was taller sitting than he was standing. "On behalf of mine clan," he declared, "I vote for Grimstborith Nado as our new king."

Turning his head to one side, Orik looked back at Eragon and said to him in an undertone, "Well, that was as we expected."

Eragon nodded and glanced over at Nado. The round-faced dwarf was stroking the end of his yellow beard, appearing pleased with himself.

Then Manndrâth of Dûrgrimst Ledwonnû said, "On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Orik as our new king." Orik nodded toward him in thanks, and Manndrâth nodded in return, the tip of his long nose bobbing.

As Manndrâth sat, Eragon and everyone else looked at Gannel, and

the room became so quiet, Eragon could not even hear the dwarves breathing. As chief of the religious clan, the Quan, and the high priest of Gûntera, king of the dwarf gods, Gannel carried enormous influence among his race; however he chose, so the crown was likely to go.

"On behalf of mine clan," Gannel said, "I vote for Grimstborith Nado as our new king."

A wave of soft exclamations broke out among the dwarves watching from the perimeter of the circular room, and Nado's pleased expression broadened. Clenching his interlaced hands, Eragon silently cursed.

"Don't give up hope yet, lad," Orik muttered. "We may yet pull through. It's happened before that the grimstborith of the Quan has lost the vote."

"How often does it happen, though?" whispered Eragon.

"Often enough."

"When did it *last* happen?"

Orik shifted and glanced away. "Eight hundred and twenty-four years ago, when Queen—"

He fell silent as Ûndin of Dûrgrimst Ragni Hefthyn proclaimed, "On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Nado as our new king."

Orik crossed his arms. Eragon could only see his face from the side, but it was obvious that Orik was scowling.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Eragon stared at the patterned floor, counting the votes that had been cast, as well as those that remained, trying to determine if Orik could still win the election. Even in the best of circumstances, it would be a close thing. Eragon tightened his grip, his fingernails digging into the back of his hands.

Thordris of Dûrgrimst Nagra stood and draped her long, thick braid over one arm. "On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Orik as our new king."

"That makes three to three," Eragon said in a low voice. Orik nodded.

It was Nado's turn to speak then. Smoothing his beard with the flat of a hand, the chief of Dûrgrimst Knurlcarathn smiled at the assembly, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "On behalf of mine clan, I vote for myself as our new king. If you will have me, I promise to rid our country of the outlanders who have polluted it, and I promise to devote our gold and warriors to protecting our own people, and not the necks of elves, humans, and *Urgals*. This I swear upon mine family's honor."

"Four to three," Eragon noted.

"Aye," said Orik. "I suppose it would have been too much to ask for Nado to vote for anyone but himself."

Setting aside his knife and wood, Freowin of Dûrgrimst Gedthrall

heaved his bulk halfway out of his chair and, keeping his gaze angled downward, said in his whispering baritone, “On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Nado as our new king.” Then he lowered himself back into his seat and resumed carving his raven, ignoring the stir of astonishment that swept through the room.

Nado’s expression changed from pleased to smug.

“Barzûl,” growled Orik, his scowl deepening. His chair creaked as he pressed his forearms down against the armrests, the tendons in his hands rigid with strain. “That false-faced traitor. He promised his vote to me!”

Eragon’s stomach sank. “Why would he betray you?”

“He visits Sindri’s temple twice a day. I should have known he would not go against Gannel’s wishes. Bah! Gannel’s been playing me this whole time. I—” At that moment, the attention of the clanmeet turned to Orik. Concealing his anger, Orik got to his feet and looked around the table at each of the other clan chiefs, and in his own language, he said, “On behalf of mine clan, I vote for myself as our new king. If you will have me, I promise to bring our people gold and glory and the freedom to live above the ground without fear of Galbatorix destroying our homes. This I swear upon mine family’s honor.”

“Five to four,” Eragon said to Orik as he returned to his seat. “And not in our favor.”

Orik grunted. “I can count, Eragon.”

Eragon rested his elbows on his knees, his eyes darting from one dwarf to another. The desire to act gnawed at him. How, he knew not, but with so much at stake, he felt that he ought to find a way to ensure Orik would become king and, thus, that the dwarves would continue to aid the Varden in their struggle against the Empire. For all he tried, however, Eragon could think of nothing to do but sit and wait.

The next dwarf to rise was Havard of Dûrgrimst Fanghur. With his chin tucked against his breastbone, Havard pushed out his lips and tapped the table with the two fingers he still had on his right hand, appearing thoughtful. Eragon inched forward on his seat, his heart pounding. *Will he uphold his bargain with Orik?* Eragon wondered.

Havard tapped the table once more, then slapped the stone with the flat of his hand. Lifting his chin, he said, “On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Orik as our new king.”

It gave Eragon immense satisfaction to watch as Nado’s eyes widened, and then the dwarf gnashed his teeth together, a muscle in his cheek twitching. “Ha!” muttered Orik. “That put a burr in his beard.”

The only two clan chiefs who had yet to vote were Hreidamar and

Íorûnn. Hreidamar, the compact, muscular grimstborith of the Urzhad, appeared uneasy with the situation, while Íorûnn—she of Dûrgrimst Vrenshrrgn, the War Wolves—traced the crescent-shaped scar on her left cheekbone with the tip of a pointed fingernail and smiled like a self-satisfied cat.

Eragon held his breath as he waited to hear what the two of them would say. *If Íorûnn votes for herself*, he thought, *and if Hreidamar is still loyal to her, then the election will have to proceed to a second round. There's no reason for her to do that, however, other than to delay events, and so far as I know, she would not profit from a delay. She cannot hope to become queen at this point; her name would be eliminated from consideration before the beginning of the second round, and I doubt she would be so foolish as to squander the power she has now merely so she can boast to her grandchildren that she was once a candidate for the throne. But if Hreidamar does part ways with her, then the vote will remain tied and we will continue on to a second round regardless….*

Argh! If only I could scry into the future! What if Orik loses? Should I seize control of the clanmeet then? I could seal the chamber so no one could enter or leave, and then … But no, that would be—

Îorûnn interrupted Eragon's thoughts by nodding at Hreidamar and then directing her heavy-lidded gaze toward Eragon, which made him feel as if he were a prize ox she was examining. The rings of his mail hauberk clinking, Hreidamar stood upright and said, "On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Orik as our new king."

Eragon's throat constricted.

Her red lips curving with amusement, Íorûnn rose from her chair with a sinuous motion and in a low, husky voice said, "It seems it falls to me to decide the outcome of today's meet. I have listened most carefully to your arguments, Nado, and your arguments, Orik. While you have both made points I agree with upon a wide range of subjects, the most important issue we must decide is whether to commit ourselves to the Varden's campaign against the Empire. If theirs were merely a war between rival clans, it would not matter to me which side won, and I certainly would not consider sacrificing our warriors for the benefit of outlanders. However, this is not the case. Far from it. If Galbatorix emerges triumphant from this war, not even the Beor Mountains will protect us from his wrath. If our realm is to survive, we must see Galbatorix overthrown. Moreover, it strikes me that hiding in caves and tunnels while others decide the fate of Alagaësia is unbecoming for a race as old and as powerful as ours. When the chronicles of this age are written, shall they say we fought alongside the humans and the elves, as the heroes of old, or that we sat cowering in our halls like frightened peasants while a battle raged outside our doors? I, for one, know mine answer." Íorûnn tossed back

her hair, then said, “On behalf of mine clan, I vote for Grimstborith Orik as our new king!”

The eldest of the five readers-of-law who stood against the circular wall stepped forward and struck the end of his polished staff against the stone floor and proclaimed, “All hail King Orik, the forty-third king of Tronjheim, Farthen Dûr, and every knurla above and below the Beor Mountains!”

“All hail King Orik!” the clanmeet roared, rising to their feet with a loud rustle of clothes and armor. His head swimming, Eragon did likewise, aware that he was now in the presence of royalty. He glanced at Nado, but the dwarf’s face was a dead-eyed mask.

The white-bearded reader-of-law struck his staff against the floor again. “Let the scribes record at once the clanmeet’s decision, and let the news be spread to every person throughout the realm. Heralds! Inform the mages with their scrying mirrors of what has transpired here today, and then seek out the wardens of the mountain and tell them, ‘Four beats upon the drum. Four beats, and swing your mallets as you have never swung them before in all your lives, for we have a new king. Four beats of such strength, Farthen Dûr itself shall ring with the news.’ Tell them this, I charge you. Go!”

After the heralds departed, Orik pushed himself out of his chair and stood looking at the dwarves around him. His expression, to Eragon, seemed somewhat dazed, as if he had not actually expected to win the crown. “For this great responsibility,” he said, “I thank you.” He paused, then continued, “Mine only thought now is for the betterment of our nation, and I shall pursue that goal without faltering until the day I return to the stone.”

Then the clan chiefs came forward, one by one, and they knelt before Orik and swore their fealty to him as his loyal subjects. When the time came for Nado to pledge himself, the dwarf displayed nothing of his sentiments but merely recited the phrases of the oath without inflection, the words dropping from his mouth like bars of lead. A palpable sense of relief rippled through the clanmeet once he had finished.

Upon the conclusion of the oath giving, Orik decreed that his coronation would take place the following morning, and then he and his attendants retired to an adjacent chamber. There Eragon looked at Orik, and Orik looked at Eragon, and neither made a sound until a broad smile appeared on Orik’s face and he broke out laughing, his cheeks turning red. Laughing with him, Eragon grasped him by a forearm and embraced him. Orik’s guards and advisers gathered around them, clapping Orik on the shoulder and congratulating him with hearty exclamations.

Eragon released Orik, saying, “I didn’t think Íorûnn would side with

us."

"Aye. I'm glad she did, but it complicates matters, it does." Orik grimaced. "I suppose I'll have to reward her for her assistance with a place within my council, at the very least."

"It may be for the best!" said Eragon, straining to make himself heard over the commotion. "If the Vrenshrrgn are equal to their name, we shall have great need of them before we reach the gates of Urû'baen."

Orik started to answer, but then a long, low note of portentous volume reverberated throughout the floor and the ceiling and the air of the room, causing Eragon's bones to vibrate with its force. "Listen!" cried Orik, and raised a hand. The group fell silent.

Four times in total the bass note sounded, shaking the room with each repetition, as if a giant were pounding against the side of Tronjheim. Afterward, Orik said, "I never thought to hear the Drums of Derva announce mine kingship."

"How large are the drums?" asked Eragon, awed.

"Close to fifty feet across, if memory serves."

It occurred to Eragon that although the dwarves were the shortest of the races, they built the biggest structures in Alagaësia, which seemed odd to him. *Perhaps*, he thought, *by making such enormous objects, they do not feel so small themselves*. He almost mentioned his theory to Orik but at the last moment decided that it might offend him, so he held his tongue.

Closing ranks around him, Orik's attendants began to consult with him in Dwarvish, often speaking over one another in a loud tangle of voices, and Eragon, who had been about to ask Orik another question, found himself relegated to a corner. He tried to wait patiently for a lull in the conversation, but after a few minutes, it became plain the dwarves were not about to stop plying Orik with questions and advice, for such, he assumed, was the nature of their discourse.

Therefore, Eragon said, "Orik Könungr," and he imbued the ancient language word for *king* with energy, that it would capture the attention of everyone present. The room fell silent, and Orik looked at Eragon and lifted an eyebrow. "Your Majesty, may I have your permission to withdraw? There is a certain … *matter* I would like to attend to, if it is not already too late."

Comprehension brightened Orik's brown eyes. "By all means, make haste! But you need not call me *majesty*, Eragon, nor *sire*, nor by any other title. We are friends and foster brothers, after all."

"We are, Your Majesty," Eragon replied, "but for the time being, I believe it is only proper I should observe the same courtesies as everyone else. You are the king of your race now, and my own king as well, seeing as how I am a member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, and that is

not something I can ignore."

Orik studied him for a moment, as if from a great distance, and then nodded and said, "As you wish, Shadeslayer."

Eragon bowed and left the room. Accompanied by his four guards, he bounded through the tunnels and up the stairs that led to the ground floor of Tronjheim. Once they arrived at the southern branch of the four main hallways that divided the city-mountain, Eragon turned to Thrand, the captain of his guards, and said, "I mean to run the rest of the way. Since you won't be able to keep pace with me, I suggest you stop when you reach the south gate of Tronjheim and wait there for my return."

Thrand said, "Argetlam, please, you should not go alone. Cannot I convince you to slow yourself so we can accompany you? We may not be as fleet as the elves, but we can run from sunup to sundown, and in full armor too."

"I appreciate your concern," said Eragon, "but I would not tarry a minute longer, even if I knew there were assassins hiding behind every pillar. Farewell!"

And with that, he dashed down the broad hallway, dodging around the dwarves who blocked his way.

REUNION

It was nearly a mile from where Eragon started to the south gate of Tronjheim. He covered the distance in only a few minutes, his footsteps loud upon the stone floor. As he ran, he caught glimpses of the rich tapestries that hung above the arched entrances to the corridors on either side and of the grotesque statues of beasts and monsters that lurked between the pillars of blood-red jasper that lined the vaulted avenue. The four-story-high thoroughfare was so large, Eragon had little difficulty evading the dwarves who populated it, although at one point, a line of Knurlcarathn stepped in front of him, and he had no choice but to leap over the dwarves, who ducked, uttering startled exclamations. Eragon savored their looks of astonishment as he sailed over them.

With an easy, loping stride, Eragon ran underneath the massive timber gate that protected the southern entrance to the city-mountain, hearing the guards cry, "Hail, Argetlam!" as he flew past. Twenty yards beyond, for the gate was recessed into the base of Tronjheim, he sped between the pair of giant gold griffins that stared with sightless eyes toward the horizon and then emerged into the open.

The air was cool and moist and smelled like fresh-fallen rain. Though it was morning, gray twilight enveloped the flat disk of land that surrounded Tronjheim, land upon which no grass grew, only moss and lichen and the occasional patch of pungent toadstools. Above, Farthen Dûr rose over ten miles to a narrow opening, through which pale, indirect light entered the immense crater. Eragon had difficulty grasping the scale of the mountain when he gazed upward.

As he ran, he listened to the monotonous pattern of his breathing and to his light, quick footsteps. He was alone, save for a curious bat that swooped overhead, emitting shrill squeaks. The tranquil mood that permeated the hollow mountain comforted him, freed him of his usual worries.

He followed the cobblestone path that extended from Tronjheim's south gate all the way to the two black thirty-foot-high doors set into the southern base of Farthen Dûr. As he drew to a halt, a pair of dwarves emerged from hidden guardrooms and hurried to open the doors, revealing the seemingly endless tunnel beyond.

Eragon continued forward. Marble pillars studded with rubies and amethysts lined the first fifty feet of the tunnel. Past them the tunnel was bare and desolate, the smooth walls broken only by a single flameless lantern every twenty yards and at infrequent intervals by a

closed gate or door. *I wonder where they lead*, Eragon thought. Then he imagined the miles of stone pressing down on him from overhead, and for a moment, the tunnel seemed unbearably oppressive. He quickly pushed the image away.

Halfway through the tunnel, Eragon felt her.

"Saphira!" he shouted, with both his mind and his voice, her name echoing off the stone walls with the force of a dozen yells.

Eragon! An instant later, the faint thunder of a distant roar rolled toward him from the other end of the tunnel.

Redoubling his speed, Eragon opened his mind to Saphira, removing every barrier around who he was, so that they might join together without reservation. Like a flood of warm water, her consciousness rushed into him, even as his rushed into her. Eragon gasped and tripped and nearly fell. They enveloped each other within the folds of their thoughts, holding each other with an intimacy no physical embrace could replicate, allowing their identities to merge once again. Their greatest comfort was a simple one: they were no longer alone. To know that you were with one who cared for you, and who understood every fiber of your being, and who would not abandon you in even the most desperate of circumstances, *that* was the most precious relationship a person could have, and both Eragon and Saphira cherished it.

It was not long before Eragon sighted Saphira hurrying toward him as swiftly as she could without banging her head on the ceiling or scraping her wings against the walls. Her claws screeched on the stone floor as she slid to a stop in front of Eragon, fierce, sparkling, glorious.

Crying out with joy, Eragon leaped upward and, ignoring her sharp scales, wrapped his arms around her neck and hugged her as tightly as he could, his feet dangling several inches in the air. *Little one*, said Saphira, her tone warm. She lowered him to the floor, then snorted and said, *Little one, unless you wish to choke me, you should loosen your arms*.

Sorry. Grinning, he stepped back, then laughed and pressed his forehead against her snout and began to scratch behind both corners of her jaw.

Saphira's low humming filled the tunnel.

You're tired, he said.

I have never flown so far so fast. I stopped only once after I left the Varden, and I would not have stopped at all except I became too thirsty to continue.

Do you mean you haven't slept or eaten for three days? She blinked at him, concealing her brilliant sapphire eyes for an instant.

You must be starving! Eragon exclaimed, worried. He looked her over for signs of injury. To his relief, he found none.

I am *tired*, she admitted, *but not hungry. Not yet. Once I have rested, then I will need to eat. Right now, I do not think I could stomach so much as a rabbit.… The earth is unsteady beneath me; I feel as if I am still flying.*

If they had not been apart for so long, Eragon might have reproached her for being reckless, but as it was, he was touched and grateful that she had pushed herself. *Thank you*, he said. *I would have hated to wait another day for us to be together again*.

As would have I. She closed her eyes and pressed her head against his hands as he continued to scratch behind her jaw. *Besides, I could hardly be late for the coronation, now could I? Who did the clanmeet—*

Before she could finish the question, Eragon sent her an image of Orik.

Ah, she sighed, her satisfaction flowing through him. *He will make a fine king.*

I hope so.

Is the star sapphire ready for me to mend?

If the dwarves have not already finished piecing it together, I'm sure they will have by tomorrow.

That is good. Cracking open an eyelid, she fixed him with her piercing gaze. *Nasuada told me of what Az Sweldn rak Anhûin attempted. Always you get into trouble when I am not with you*.

His smile widened. *And when you are?*

I eat the trouble before it eats you.

So you say. What about when the Urgals ambushed us by Gil'ead and took me captive?

A plume of smoke escaped from between Saphira's fangs. *That does not count. I was smaller then, and not as experienced. It would not happen now. And you are not as helpless as you once were*.

I've never been helpless, he protested. *I just have powerful enemies*.

For some reason, Saphira found his last statement enormously amusing; she started laughing deep within her chest, and soon Eragon was laughing as well. Neither of them was able to stop until Eragon was lying on his back, gasping for air, and Saphira was struggling to contain the darts of flame that kept shooting out of her nostrils. Then Saphira made a sound Eragon had never heard before, a strange jumping growl, and he noticed the oddest feeling through their connection.

Saphira made the sound again, then shook her head, as if trying to rid herself of a swarm of flies. *Oh dear*, she said. *I seem to have the hiccups*.

Eragon's mouth dropped open. He held that pose for a moment, then he doubled over, laughing so hard, tears streamed down his face. Every time he was about to recover, Saphira would hiccup, bobbing

her head forward like a stork, and he would go off into convulsions again. At last he plugged his ears with his fingers and stared at the ceiling and recited the true names of every metal and stone he could remember.

When he finished, he took a deep breath and stood.

Better? Saphira asked. Her shoulders shook as another hiccup racked her.

Eragon bit his tongue. *Better.… Come on, let's go to Tronjheim. You should have some water. That might help. And then you should sleep*.

Cannot you cure hiccups with a spell?

Maybe. Probably. But neither Brom nor Oromis taught me how. Saphira grunted her understanding, and a hiccup followed an instant later. Biting his tongue even harder, Eragon stared at the tips of his boots. *Shall we?*

Saphira extended her right foreleg in invitation. Eragon eagerly climbed up onto her back and settled into the saddle at the base of her neck.

Together, they continued through the tunnel toward Tronjheim, both of them happy, and both of them sharing in each other's happiness.

ASCENSION

The Drums of Derva sounded, summoning the dwarves of Tronjheim to witness the coronation of their new king.

"Normally," Orik had told Eragon the previous night, "when the clanmeet elects a king or queen, the knurla begins their rule at once, but we do not hold the coronation for at least three months, so that all who wish to attend the ceremony may have time to place their affairs in order and to travel to Farthen Dûr from even the most distant parts of our realm. It is not often we crown a monarch, so when we do, it is our custom to make much of the event, with weeks of feasting and song, and with games of wit and strength and contests of skill at forging, carving, and other forms of art.… However, these are hardly normal times."

Eragon stood next to Saphira just outside the central chamber of Tronjheim, listening to the pounding of the giant drums. On either side of the mile-long hall, hundreds of dwarves crowded the archways of each level, peering at Eragon and Saphira with dark gleaming eyes.

Saphira's barbed tongue rasped against her scales as she licked her chops, which she had been doing ever since she finished devouring five full-grown sheep earlier that morning. Then she lifted her left foreleg and rubbed her muzzle against it. The smell of burnt wool clung to her.

Stop fidgeting, said Eragon. *They're looking at us.*

A soft growl emanated from Saphira. *I can't help it. I have wool stuck between my teeth. Now I remember why I hate eating sheep. Horrible, fluffy things that give me hair balls and indigestion.*

I'll help you clean your teeth when we are finished here. Just hold still until then.

Hmph.

Did Blödhgarm pack any fireweed in the saddlebags? That would settle your stomach.

I don't know.

Mmm. Eragon thought for a moment. *If not, I'll ask Orik if the dwarves have any stored in Tronjheim. We ought to—*

He cut himself off as the final note from the drums faded into silence. The crowd shifted, and he heard the soft rustle of clothes and the occasional phrase of murmured Dwarvish.

A fanfare of dozens of trumpets rang forth, filling the city-mountain with its rousing call, and somewhere a choir of dwarves began to chant. The music made Eragon's scalp tingle and prickle and his blood

flow faster, as if he were about to embark upon a hunt. Saphira whipped her tail from side to side, and he knew she felt the same.

Here we go, he thought.

As one, he and Saphira advanced into the central chamber of the city-mountain and took their place among the ring of clan chiefs, guild leaders, and other notables who girded the vast, towering room. In the center of the chamber rested the reconstructed star sapphire, encased within a framework of wooden scaffolding. An hour before the coronation, Skeg had sent a message to Eragon and Saphira, telling them that he and his team of artisans had just finished fitting together the last fragments of the gem and that Isidar Mithrim was ready for Saphira to make whole once more.

The black granite throne of the dwarves had been carried from its customary resting place underneath Tronjheim and placed upon a raised dais next to the star sapphire, facing the eastern branch of the four main hallways that divided Tronjheim, east because it was the direction of the rising sun and that symbolized the dawning of a new age. Thousands of dwarf warriors clad in burnished mail armor stood at attention in two large blocks before the throne, as well as in double rows along either side of the eastern hallway all the way to Tronjheim's eastern gate, a mile away. Many of the warriors carried spears mounted with pennants that bore curious designs. Hvedra, Orik's wife, stood at the forefront of the congregation; after the clanmeet had banished Grimstborith Vermûnd, Orik had sent for her in anticipation of becoming king. She had arrived in Tronjheim only that morning.

For half an hour, the trumpets played and the unseen choir sang as, step by deliberate step, Orik walked from the eastern gate to the center of Tronjheim. His beard was brushed and curled, and he wore buskins of the finest polished leather with silver spurs mounted upon the heels, gray wool leggings, a shirt of purple silk that shimmered in the lantern light, and, over his shirt, a mail hauberk, each link of which was wrought of pure white gold. A long ermine-trimmed cloak embroidered with the insignia of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum flowed over Orik's shoulders and onto the floor behind him. Volund, the war hammer that Korgan, first king of the dwarves, had forged, hung at Orik's waist from a wide, ruby-studded belt. Because of his lavish raiment and his magnificent armor, Orik seemed to glow from within; to look at him dazzled Eragon's eyes.

Twelve dwarf children followed Orik, six male and six female, or so Eragon assumed based upon the cut of their hair. The children were garbed in tunics of red and brown and gold, and they each carried in their cupped hands a polished orb six inches across, every orb a different species of stone.

As Orik entered the center of the city-mountain, the chamber dimmed and a pattern of dappled shadows appeared on everything within. Confused, Eragon glanced upward and was astonished to behold pink rose petals drifting downward from the top of Tronjheim. Like soft, thick snowflakes, the velvety petals settled upon the heads and shoulders of those in attendance, and also upon the floor, suffusing the air with their sweet fragrance.

The trumpets and the choir fell silent as Orik knelt on one knee before the black throne and bowed his head. Behind him, the twelve children stopped and stood motionless.

Eragon placed his hand on Saphira's warm side, sharing his concern and excitement with her. He had no idea what would happen next, for Orik had refused to describe the ceremony past that point.

Then Gannel, clan chief of Dûrgrimst Quan, stepped forward, breaking the ring of people around the chamber, and walked to stand on the right-hand side of the throne. The heavy-shouldered dwarf was appareled in sumptuous red robes, the borders of which gleamed with runes outlined with metal thread. In one hand, Gannel bore a tall staff with a clear, pointed crystal mounted on the top.

Lifting the staff over his head with both hands, Gannel brought it down upon the stone floor with a resounding crack. "Hwatum il skilfz gerdûmn!" he exclaimed. He continued to speak in the tongue of the dwarves for some minutes, and Eragon listened without comprehending, for his translator was not with him. But then the tenor of Gannel's voice shifted, and Eragon recognized his words as belonging to the ancient language, and he realized Gannel was weaving a spell, although it was a spell unlike any Eragon was familiar with. Instead of directing the incantation at an object or an element of the world around them, the priest said, in the language of mystery and power: "Gûntera, creator of the heavens and the earth and the boundless sea, hear now the cry of your faithful servant! We thank you for your magnanimity. Our race flourishes. This and every year, we have offered to you the finest rams of our flocks and also flagons of spiced mead and a portion of our harvests of fruits and vegetables and grain. Your temples are the richest in the land, and none may hope to compete with the glory that is yours. O mighty Gûntera, king of the gods, hear now mine plea and grant me this request: time is for us to name a mortal ruler of our earthly affairs. Will you deign to bestow your blessing upon Orik, Thrifk's son, and to crown him in the tradition of his predecessors?"

At first Eragon thought Gannel's request would go unanswered, for he felt no surge of magic from the dwarf when he finished speaking. However, Saphira nudged him then and said, *Look*.

Eragon followed her gaze and, thirty feet above, saw a disturbance

among the tumbling petals: a gap, a void where the petals would not fall, as if an invisible object occupied the space. The disturbance spread, extending all the way to the floor, and the void outlined by the petals assumed the shape of a creature with arms and legs like a dwarf or a man or an elf or an Urgal, but of different proportions than any race Eragon had knowledge of; the head was nearly the width of the shoulders, the massive arms hung below the knees, and while the torso was bulky, the legs were short and crooked.

Thin, needle-sharp rays of watery light radiated outward from the shape, and there appeared the nebulous image of a gigantic, shaggy-haired male figure of the form the petals had traced. The god, if god he was, wore nothing but a knotted loincloth. His face was dark and heavy and seemed to contain equal amounts of cruelty and kindness, as if he might veer between the extremes of both without warning.

As he noticed those details, Eragon also became aware of the presence of a strange, far-reaching consciousness within the chamber, a consciousness of unreadable thoughts and unfathomable depths, a consciousness that flashed and growled and billowed in unexpected directions, like a summer thunderstorm. Eragon quickly sequestered his mind from the touch of the other. His skin prickled, and a cold shiver ran down him. He did not know what he had felt, but fear gripped him, and he looked at Saphira for comfort. She was staring at the figure, her blue cat eyes sparkling with unusual intensity.

With a single motion, the dwarves sank to their knees.

The god spoke then, and his voice sounded like the grinding of boulders and the sweep of the wind over barren mountain peaks and the slap of waves against a stony shore. He spoke in Dwarvish, and though Eragon knew not what was said, he shrank from the power of the god's speech. Three times the god questioned Orik, and three times Orik replied, his own voice faint in comparison. Apparently pleased with Orik's answers, the apparition extended his glowing arms and placed his forefingers on either side of Orik's bare head.

The air between the god's fingers rippled, and upon Orik's brow materialized the gem-encrusted helm of gold that Hrothgar had worn. The god slapped his belly and uttered a booming chuckle and then faded into oblivion. The rose petals resumed their fall uninterrupted.

"Ûn qroth Gûntera!" Gannel proclaimed. Loud and brassy, the trumpets blared.

Rising from his knee, Orik ascended the dais, turned to face the assembly, and then he sank into the hard black throne.

"Nal, Grimstnzborith Orik!" the dwarves shouted, and struck their shields with their axes and their spears and stamped the floor with their feet. "Nal, Grimstnzborith Orik! Nal, Grimstnzborith Orik!"

"All hail King Orik!" cried Eragon. Arching her neck, Saphira roared

her tribute and released a jet of flame over the heads of the dwarves, incinerating a swath of rose petals. Eragon's eyes watered as a blast of heat washed over him.

Then Gannel knelt before Orik and spoke some more in Dwarvish. When he finished, Orik touched him upon the crown of his head, and then Gannel returned to his place at the edge of the chamber. Nado approached the throne and said many of the same things, and after him, so did Manndrâth and Hadfala and all the other clan chiefs, with the sole exception of Grimstborith Vermûnd, who had been banned from the coronation.

They must be pledging themselves to Orik's service, Eragon said to Saphira.

Did not they already give him their word?

Aye, but not in public. Eragon watched Thordris walk toward the throne before saying, *Saphira, what do you think we just saw? Could that really have been Gûntera, or was it an illusion? His mind seemed real enough, and I do not know how one might fake that, but …*

It may have been an illusion, she said. *The dwarves' gods have never helped them upon the field of battle, nor in any other endeavor I am aware of. Nor do I believe that a true god would come running at Gannel's summons like a trained hound. I would not, and should not a god be greater than a dragon? … But then, there are many inexplicable things in Alagaësia. It is possible we have seen a shade from a long-forgotten age, a pale remnant of what once was that continues to haunt the land, longing for the return of its power. Who can know for sure?*

Once the final clan chief had presented himself to Orik, the guild leaders did the same, and then Orik gestured toward Eragon. With a slow, measured pace, Eragon walked forward between the rows of dwarf warriors until he reached the base of the throne, where he knelt and, as a member of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, acknowledged Orik as his king and swore to serve and protect him. Then, acting as Nasuada's emissary, Eragon congratulated Orik on behalf of Nasuada and the Varden and promised him the Varden's friendship.

Others went to speak with Orik as Eragon withdrew, a seemingly endless train of dwarves eager to demonstrate their loyalty to their new king.

The procession continued for hours, and then the gift giving began. Each of the dwarves brought Orik an offering from their clan or their guild: a goblet of gold filled to the brim with rubies and diamonds, a corselet of enchanted mail that no blade could pierce, a tapestry twenty feet long woven of the soft wool the dwarves combed from the beards of the Feldûnost goats, a tablet of agate inscribed with the names of every one of Orik's ancestors, a curved dagger ground from the tooth of a dragon, and many other treasures. In exchange, Orik

presented the dwarves with rings as tokens of his gratitude.

Eragon and Saphira were the last to go before Orik. Once again kneeling at the base of the dais, Eragon drew from his tunic the gold armband he had begged from the dwarves the previous night. He held it up toward Orik, saying, "Here is my gift, King Orik. I did not make the armlet, but I have set on it spells to protect you. So long as you wear it, you need fear no poison. If an assassin tries to hit or stab you or throw any kind of object at you, the weapon will miss. The band will even shield you from most hostile magic. And it has other properties as well, which you may find of use if your life is in danger."

Inclining his head, Orik accepted the band from Eragon and said, "Your gift is most appreciated, Eragon Shadeslayer." In full view of everyone, Orik slid the band onto his left arm.

Saphira spoke next, projecting her thoughts to everyone who was watching: *My gift is this, Orik*. She walked past the throne, her claws clacking against the floor, and reared up and placed her forefeet upon the edge of the scaffolding around the star sapphire. The stout wood beams creaked under her weight, but held. Minutes passed and nothing happened, but Saphira remained where she was, gazing at the huge gemstone.

The dwarves watched her, never blinking, hardly breathing.

Are you sure you can do this? Eragon asked, reluctant to break her concentration.

I don't know. The few times I used magic before, I didn't pause to consider whether I was casting a spell or not. I just willed the world to change, and it did. It was not a deliberate process.… I suppose I will have to wait until the moment feels right for me to mend Isidar Mithrim.

Let me help. Let me work a spell through you.

No, little one. This is my task, not yours.

A single voice, low and clear, wafted across the chamber, singing a slow, wistful melody. One by one, the other members of the hidden dwarf choir joined in the song, filling Tronjheim with the plaintive beauty of their music. Eragon was going to ask for them to be silent, but Saphira said, *It's all right. Leave them alone*.

Although he did not understand what the choir sang, Eragon could tell from the tone of the music that it was a lamentation for things that had been and were no more, such as the star sapphire. As the song built toward its conclusion, he found himself thinking of his lost life in Palancar Valley, and tears welled in his eyes.

To his surprise, he sensed a similar strain of pensive melancholy from Saphira. Neither sorrow nor regret was a normal part of her personality, so he wondered at it and would have questioned her, except that he also sensed a stirring of something deep within her, like the awakening of some ancient part of her being.

The song ended on a long, wavering note, and as it faded into oblivion, a surge of energy rushed through Saphira—so much energy, Eragon gasped at its magnitude—and she bent and touched the star sapphire with the tip of her snout. The branching cracks within the giant gemstone flared bright as bolts of lightning, and then the scaffolding shattered and fell to the floor, revealing Isidar Mithrim whole and sound again.

But not quite the same. The color of the jewel was a deeper, richer shade of red than before, and the innermost petals of the rose were shot through with streaks of dusky gold.

The dwarves stared in wonder at Isidar Mithrim. Then they leaped to their feet, cheering and applauding Saphira with such enthusiasm, it sounded like the pounding roar of a waterfall. She dipped her head toward the crowd and then walked back to Eragon, crushing rose petals under her feet. *Thank you,* she said to him.

For what?

For helping me. It was your emotions that showed me the way. Without them, I might have stayed there for weeks before I felt inspired to fix Isidar Mithrim.

Lifting his arms, Orik quieted the crowd, and then he said, "On behalf of our entire race, I thank you for your gift, Saphira. Today you have restored the pride of our realm, and we shall not forget your deed. Let it not be said that knurlan are an ungrateful lot; from now until the end of time, your name shall be recited at the winter festivals, along with the lists of Master Makers, and when Isidar Mithrim is returned to its setting at the peak of Tronjheim, your name will be engraved in the collar surrounding the Star Rose, along with that of Dûrok Ornthrond, who first gave shape to the jewel."

To both Eragon and Saphira, Orik said, "Once again you have demonstrated your friendship to mine people. It pleases me that, by your actions, you have vindicated my foster father's decision to adopt you into Dûrgrimst Ingeitum."

After the conclusion of the multitude of rituals that followed the coronation, and after Eragon had helped remove the wool caught between Saphira's teeth—a slippery, slimy, smelly task that left him needing a bath—the two of them attended the banquet held in Orik's honor. The feasting was loud and boisterous and lasted long into the night. Jugglers and acrobats entertained the guests, as well as a troupe of actors who performed a play called *Az Sartosvrenht rak Balmung, Grimstnzborith rak Kvisagûr*, which Hûndfast told Eragon meant *The Saga of King Balmung of Kvisagûr*.

When the celebrations had died down some and most of the dwarves were deep in their cups, Eragon leaned toward Orik, who sat

at the head of the stone table, and said, “Your Majesty.”

Orik waved a hand. “I won’t have you calling me *Your Majesty* all the time, Eragon. It won’t do. Unless the occasion demands it, use mine name as you always have. That’s an order.” He reached for his goblet but missed and nearly knocked the container over. He laughed.

Smiling, Eragon said, “Orik, I have to ask, Was that really Gûntera who crowned you?”

Orik’s chin sank to his chest, and he fingered the stem of the goblet, his expression growing serious. “It was as close to Gûntera as we are ever likely to see on this earth. Does that answer your question, Eragon?”

“I … I think so. Does he always answer when called upon? Has he ever refused to crown one of your rulers?”

The gap between Orik’s eyebrows narrowed. “Have you ever heard of the Heretic Kings and the Heretic Queens before?”

Eragon shook his head.

“They are knurlan who failed to secure Gûntera’s blessing as our next ruler and yet who nevertheless insisted upon taking the throne.” Orik’s mouth twisted. “Without exception, their reigns were short and unhappy ones.”

A band seemed to tighten around Eragon’s chest. “So, even though the clanmeet elected you their leader, if Gûntera had failed to crown you, you would not be king now.”

“That or I would be king of a nation at war with itself.” Orik shrugged. “I was not overly worried about the possibility. With the Varden in the midst of invading the Empire, only a madman would risk tearing our country apart merely to deny me the throne, and while *Gûntera* is many things, he is not mad.”

“But you did not know for certain,” said Eragon.

Orik shook his head. “Not until he placed the helm upon mine head.”

"Sorry," said Eragon as he bumped the basin.

Nasuada frowned, her face shrinking and elongating as a row of ripples ran through the water in the basin. "What for?" she asked. "I should think congratulations are in order. You have accomplished everything I sent you to do and more."

"No, I—" Eragon stopped as he realized she could not see the disturbance in the water. The spell was designed so that Nasuada's mirror would provide her with an unobstructed view of him and Saphira, not the objects they were gazing at. "I struck the basin with my hand, that is all."

"Oh. In that case, let me formally congratulate you, Eragon. By ensuring Orik became king—"

"Even if it was by getting myself attacked?"

Nasuada smiled. "Yes, even if it was by getting yourself attacked, you have preserved our alliance with the dwarves, and that might mean the difference between victory and defeat. The question now becomes, How long until the rest of the dwarves' army will be able to join us?"

"Orik has already ordered the warriors to ready themselves for departure," said Eragon. "It will probably take the clans a few days to muster their forces, but once they do, they'll march immediately."

"It's a good thing too. We can use their assistance as soon as possible. Which reminds me, when can we expect you to return? Three days? Four days?"

Saphira shuffled her wings, her breath hot on the back of Eragon's neck. Eragon glanced at her, and then, choosing his words with care, he said, "That depends. Do you remember what we discussed before I left?"

Nasuada pursed her lips. "Of course I do, Eragon. I—" She looked off to the side of the image and listened as a man addressed her, his voice an unintelligible murmur to Eragon and Saphira. Returning her attention to them, Nasuada said, "Captain Edric's company has just returned. They appear to have suffered heavy casualties, but our watchmen say that Roran survived."

"Was he injured?" asked Eragon.

"I'll let you know once I find out. I would not worry too much, though. Roran has the luck of—" Once again, the voice of an unseen person distracted Nasuada, and she stepped out of view.

Eragon fidgeted while he waited.

“My apologies,” said Nasuada, her visage reappearing in the basin. “We are closing in on Feinster, and we are having to fight off marauding groups of soldiers Lady Lorana sends from the city to harass us.… Eragon, Saphira, we need you for this battle. If the people of Feinster see only men, dwarves, and Urgals gathered outside their walls, they may believe they have a chance of holding the city, and they will fight all the harder because of it. They can’t hold Feinster, of course, but they have yet to realize that. If they see a dragon and Rider leading the charges against them, however, they will lose the will to fight.”

“But—”

Nasuada raised her hand, cutting him off. “There are other reasons for you to return as well. Because of my wounds from the Trial of the Long Knives, I cannot ride into battle with the Varden, as I have before. I need *you* to take my place, Eragon, in order to see that my commands are carried out as I intend and also to prop up the spirits of our warriors. What’s more, rumors of your absence are already coursing through the camp, despite our best efforts to the contrary. If Murtagh and Thorn attack us directly as a result, or if Galbatorix sends them to reinforce Feinster … well, even with the elves by our sides, I doubt we could withstand them. I’m sorry, Eragon, but I cannot allow you to return to Ellesméra right now. It’s too dangerous.”

Pressing his hands against the edge of the cold stone table upon which the basin rested, Eragon said, “Nasuada, please. If not now, then when?”

“Soon. You must be patient.”

“Soon.” Eragon drew a deep breath, tightening his grip on the table. “How soon exactly?”

Nasuada frowned at him. “You cannot expect me to know that. First we must take Feinster, and then we must secure the countryside, and then—”

“And then you intend to march on Belatona or Dras-Leona, and then to Urû’baen,” said Eragon. Nasuada attempted to reply, but he did not allow her the opportunity. “And the closer you get to Galbatorix, the likelier it will be that Murtagh and Thorn will attack you, or even the king himself, and you will be ever more reluctant to let us go.… Nasuada, Saphira and I do not have the skill, the knowledge, nor the strength to kill Galbatorix. You know that! Galbatorix could end this war at any time if he was willing to leave his castle and confront the Varden directly. We *have* to talk with our teachers again. They can tell us where Galbatorix’s power is coming from, and they might be able to show us a trick or two that will allow us to defeat him.”

Nasuada gazed downward, studying her hands. “Thorn and Murtagh could destroy us while you were gone.”

“And if we do not go, Galbatorix will destroy us when we reach Urû’baen.… Could you wait a few days before you attack Feinster?”

“We could, but every day we camp outside the city will cost us lives.” Nasuada rubbed her temples with the heels of her palms. “You are asking a lot in exchange for an uncertain reward, Eragon.”

“The reward may be uncertain,” he said, “but our doom is inevitable unless we try.”

“Is it? I am not so sure. Still …” For an uncomfortably long time, Nasuada was silent, gazing past the edge of the image. Then she nodded once, as if confirming something to herself, and said, “I can delay our arrival at Feinster for two or three days. There are several towns in the area we can seize first. Once we do reach the city, I can pass another two or three days having the Varden build siege engines and prepare fortifications. No one will think strangely of it. After that, though, I will have to set upon Feinster, if for no other reason but that we need their supplies. An army that sits still in enemy territory is an army that starves. At the most, I can give you six days, and perhaps only four.”

As she spoke, Eragon made several quick calculations. “Four days won’t be long enough,” he said, “and six might not be either. It took Saphira three days to fly to Farthen Dûr, and that was without stopping to sleep and without having to carry my weight. If the maps I have seen are accurate, it’s at least as far from here to Ellesméra, maybe farther, and about the same from Ellesméra to Feinster. And with me on her back, Saphira won’t be able to cover the distance as quickly.”

No, I won’t, Saphira said to him.

Eragon continued: “Even under the best of circumstances, it would still take us a week to reach you at Feinster, and that would be without staying for more than a minute in Ellesméra.”

An expression of profound exhaustion crossed Nasuada’s face. “Must you fly all the way to Ellesméra? Wouldn’t it be sufficient to scry with your mentors once you are past the wards along the edge of Du Weldenvarden? The time you would save could be crucial.”

“I don’t know. We can try.”

Nasuada closed her eyes for a moment. In a hoarse voice, she said, “I may be able to delay our arrival at Feinster for four days.… Go to Ellesméra or don’t; I leave the decision up to you. If you do, then stay however long is needed. You’re right; unless you find a way to defeat Galbatorix, we have no hope of victory. Even so, keep you in mind the tremendous risk we are taking, the lives of the Varden I will be sacrificing in order to buy you this time, and how many more of the Varden will die if we lay siege to Feinster without you.”

Somber, Eragon nodded. “I won’t forget.”

“I should hope not. Now go! Do not tarry any longer! Fly. Fly! Fly faster than a diving hawk, Saphira, and do not let anything slow you.” Nasuada touched the tips of her fingers to her lips and then pressed them against the invisible surface of the mirror, where he knew she beheld the moving likeness of him and Saphira. “Luck on your journey, Eragon, Saphira. If we meet again, I fear it will be on the field of battle.”

And then she hurried from their sight, and Eragon released his spell, and the water in the basin cleared.

THE WHIPPING POST

Roran sat bolt upright and stared past Nasuada, his eyes fixed upon a wrinkle in the side of the crimson pavilion.

He could feel Nasuada studying him, but he refused to meet her gaze. During the long, dull silence that enveloped them, he contemplated a host of dire possibilities, and his temples throbbed with a feverish intensity. He wished he could leave the stifling pavilion and breathe the cool air outside.

At last Nasuada said, "What am I going to do with you, Roran?"

He straightened his spine even more. "Whatever you wish, my Lady."

"An admirable answer, Stronghammer, but in no way does it resolve my quandary." Nasuada sipped wine from a goblet. "Twice you defied a direct order from Captain Edric, and yet if you hadn't, neither he nor you nor the rest of your band might have survived to tell the tale. However, your success does not negate the reality of your disobedience. By your own account, you knowingly committed insubordination, and I *must* punish you if I am to maintain discipline among the Varden."

"Yes, my Lady."

Her brow darkened. "Blast it, Stronghammer. If you were anyone else but Eragon's cousin, and if your gambit had been even one whit less effective, I would have you strung up and hanged for your misconduct."

Roran swallowed as he imagined a noose tightening around his neck.

With the middle finger of her right hand, Nasuada tapped the arm of her high-backed chair with increasing speed until, stopping, she said, "Do you wish to continue fighting with the Varden, Roran?"

"Yes, my Lady," he replied without hesitation.

"What are you willing to endure in order to remain within my army?"

Roran did not allow himself to dwell upon the implications of her question. "Whatever I must, my Lady."

The tension in her face eased, and Nasuada nodded, appearing satisfied. "I hoped you would say that. Tradition and established precedent leave me only three choices. One, I can hang you, but I won't … for a multitude of reasons. Two, I can give you thirty lashes and then discharge you from the ranks of the Varden. Or three, I can give you fifty lashes and keep you under my command."

Fifty lashes isn't that many more than thirty, Roran thought, trying to bolster his courage. He wet his lips. "Would I be flogged where all could see?"

Nasuada's eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. "Your pride has no part in this, Stronghammer. The punishment must be severe so that others are not tempted to follow in your footsteps, and it must be held in public so that the whole of the Varden can profit by it. If you are even half as intelligent as you seem, you knew when you defied Edric that your decision would have consequences and that those consequences would most likely be unpleasant. The choice you must now make is simple: will you stay with the Varden, or will you abandon your friends and family and go your own way?"

Roran lifted his chin, angry that she would question his word. "I shall not leave, Lady Nasuada. No matter how many lashes you assign me, they cannot be as painful as losing my home and my father was."

"No," said Nasuada softly. "They could not.… One of the magicians of Du Vrangr Gata will oversee the flogging and attend to you afterward, to ensure that the whip causes you no permanent damage. However, they shall not entirely heal your wounds, nor may you seek out a magician on your own to mend your back."

"I understand."

"Your flogging will be held as soon as Jörmundur can marshal the troops. Until then, you will remain under guard in a tent by the whipping post."

It relieved Roran that he would not have to wait any longer; he did not want to have to labor for days under the shadow of what lay before him. "My Lady," he said, and she dismissed him with a motion of her finger.

Turning on his heel, Roran marched out of the pavilion. Two guards took up positions on either side of him as he emerged. Without looking at or speaking to him, they led Roran through the camp until they arrived at a small, empty tent not far from the blackened whipping post, which stood upon a slight rise just beyond the edge of the camp.

The post was six and a half feet high and had a thick crossbeam near the top, to which prisoners' wrists were tied. Rows of scratches from the fingernails of scourged men covered the crossbeam.

Roran forced himself to look away and then ducked inside the tent. The only piece of furniture inside was a battered wooden stool. He sat and concentrated upon his breathing, determined to remain calm.

As the minutes passed, Roran began to hear the tromp of boots and the clink of mail as the Varden assembled around the whipping post. Roran imagined the thousands of men and women staring at him, including the villagers from Carvahall. His pulse quickened, and sweat

sprang up upon his brow.

After about half an hour, the sorceress Trianna entered the tent and had him strip down to his trousers, which embarrassed Roran, although the woman seemed to take no notice. Trianna examined him all over, and even cast an additional spell of healing on his left shoulder, where the soldier had stabbed him with the bolt of a crossbow. Then she declared him fit to continue and gave him a shirt made of sackcloth to wear in place of his own.

Roran had just pulled the shirt over his head when Katrina pushed her way into the tent. As he beheld her, an equal measure of joy and dread filled Roran.

Katrina glanced between him and Trianna, then curtsied to the sorceress. “May I please speak with my husband alone?”

“Of course. I shall wait outside.”

Once Trianna had departed, Katrina rushed to Roran and threw her arms around him. He hugged her just as fiercely as she hugged him, for he had not seen her since he had returned to the Varden.

“Oh, how I’ve missed you,” Katrina whispered in his right ear.

“And I you,” he murmured.

They drew apart just far enough so that they could gaze into each other’s eyes, and then Katrina scowled. “This is wrong! I went to Nasuada, and I begged her to pardon you, or at least to reduce the number of lashes, but she refused to grant my request.”

Running his hands up and down Katrina’s back, Roran said, “I wish that you hadn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said that I would remain with the Varden, and I will not go back on my word.”

“But this is wrong!” said Katrina, gripping him by his shoulders. “Carn told me what you did, Roran: you slew almost two hundred soldiers by yourself, and if not for your heroism, none of the men with you would have survived. Nasuada ought to be plying you with gifts and praise, not having you whipped like a common criminal!”

“It does not matter whether this is right or wrong,” he told her. “It is necessary. If I were in Nasuada’s position, I would have given the same order myself.”

Katrina shuddered. “Fifty lashes, though.… Why does it have to be so many? Men have died from being whipped that many times.”

“Only if they had weak hearts. Don’t be so worried; it will take more than that to kill me.”

A false smile flickered across Katrina’s lips, and then a sob escaped her and she pressed her face against his chest. He cradled her in his arms, stroking her hair and reassuring her as best he could, even though he felt no better than she. After several minutes, Roran heard a

horn being winded outside the tent, and he knew that their time together was drawing to a close. Extricating himself from Katrina's embrace, he said, "There is something I want you to do for me."

"What?" she asked, dabbing at her eyes.

"Go back to our tent and do not leave it until after my flogging."

Katrina appeared shocked by his request. "No! I shall not leave you … not now."

"Please," he said, "you should not have to see this."

"And you should not have to endure it," she retorted.

"Leave that. I know you wish to stay by my side, but I can bear this better if I know that you aren't here watching me.… I brought this upon myself, Katrina, and I do not want you to suffer because of it as well."

Her expression became strained. "The knowledge of your fate shall pain me regardless of where I am standing. However … I shall do as you ask, but only because it will help you through this ordeal.… You know that I would have the whip fall upon my own body instead of yours, if I could."

"And you know," he said, kissing her on both cheeks, "that I would refuse to let you take my place."

Tears welled up in her eyes again, and she pulled him closer, hugging him so tightly, he had difficulty breathing.

They were still wrapped in each other's arms when the entrance flap to the tent was swept back and Jörmundur entered, along with two of the Nighthawks. Katrina disengaged herself from Roran, curtsied to Jörmundur, and then, without a word, slipped out of the tent.

Jörmundur extended a hand toward Roran. "It's time."

Nodding, Roran rose and allowed Jörmundur and the guards to escort him to the whipping post outside. Row after row of the Varden boxed in the area around the post, every man, woman, dwarf, and Urgal standing with stiff spines and squared shoulders. After his initial glimpse of the assembled army, Roran gazed off toward the horizon and did his best to ignore the onlookers.

The two guards lifted Roran's arms above his head and secured his wrists to the crossbeam of the whipping post. While they did, Jörmundur walked around in front of the post and held up a leather-wrapped dowel. "Here, bite down on this," he said in a low voice. "It will keep you from hurting yourself." Grateful, Roran opened his mouth and allowed Jörmundur to fit the dowel between his teeth. The tanned leather tasted bitter, like green acorns.

Then a horn and a drumroll sounded, and Jörmundur read out the charges against Roran, and the guards cut off Roran's sackcloth shirt.

He shivered as the cold air washed across his bare torso.

An instant before it struck, Roran heard the whip whistling through

the air.

It felt as if a rod of hot metal had been laid across his flesh. Roran arched his back and bit down on the dowel. An involuntary groan escaped him, although the dowel muffled the sound so he thought no one else heard.

"One," said the man wielding the whip.

The shock of the second blow caused Roran to groan again, but thereafter he remained silent, determined not to appear weak before the whole of the Varden.

The whipping was as painful as any of the numerous wounds Roran had suffered over the past few months, but after a dozen or so blows, he gave up trying to fight the pain and, surrendering to it, entered a bleary trance. His field of vision narrowed until the only thing he saw was the worn wood in front of him; at times, his sight flickered and went blank as he drifted into brief spates of unconsciousness.

After an interminable time, he heard the dim and faraway voice intone, "Thirty," and despair gripped him as he wondered, *How can I possibly withstand another twenty lashes?* Then he thought of Katrina and their unborn child, and the thought gave him strength.

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Roran woke to find himself lying on his stomach on the cot inside the tent he and Katrina shared. Katrina was kneeling next to him, stroking his hair and murmuring in his ear, while someone daubed a cold, sticky substance over the stripes on his back. He winced and stiffened as the anonymous person poked a particularly sensitive spot.

"That is *not* how I would treat a patient of mine," he heard Trianna say in a haughty tone.

"If you treat all of your patients as you were treating Roran," another woman replied, "I'm amazed that any survived your attentions." After a moment, Roran recognized the second voice as belonging to the strange, bright-eyed herbalist Angela.

"I beg your pardon!" said Trianna. "I will not stand here and be insulted by a lowly *fortuneteller* who struggles to cast even the most basic spell."

"Sit, then, if it pleases you, but whether you sit or stand, I will continue to insult you until you admit that his back muscle attaches *here* and not *there.*" Roran felt a finger touch him in two different places, each a half inch apart.

"Oh!" said Trianna, and left the tent.

Katrina smiled at Roran, and for the first time, he noticed the tears streaking her face. "Roran, do you understand me?" she asked. "Are you awake?"

"I … I think so," he said, his voice raspy. His jaw ached from biting

the dowel so hard for so long. He coughed, then grimaced as every one of the fifty stripes on his back throbbed in unison.

"There we go," said Angela. "All finished."

"It's amazing. I didn't expect you and Trianna to do so much," said Katrina.

"On Nasuada's orders."

"Nasuada? … Why would—"

"You'll have to ask her yourself. Tell him to stay off his back if he can help it. And he ought to be careful twisting from side to side, or he might tear open the scabs."

"Thank you," Roran mumbled.

Behind him, Angela laughed. "Think nothing of it, Roran. Or rather, think something of it, but do not consider it overly important. Besides, it amuses me to have tended injuries on both your back and Eragon's. Right, then, I'll be off. Watch out for ferrets!"

When the herbalist had gone, Roran closed his eyes again. Katrina's smooth fingers stroked his forehead. "You were very brave," she said.

"Was I?"

"Aye. Jörmundur and everyone else I spoke to said that you never cried out or begged for the flogging to stop."

"Good." He wanted to know how serious his wounds were, but he was reluctant to force her to describe the damage to his back.

Katrina seemed to sense his desire, however, for she said, "Angela believes that with a bit of luck, you won't scar too badly. In either case, once you're completely healed, Eragon or another magician can remove the scars from your back and it will be as if you were never whipped in the first place."

"Mmh."

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked. "I have a pot of yarrow tea steeping."

"Yes, please."

As Katrina rose, Roran heard another person enter the tent. He opened one eye and was surprised to see Nasuada standing next to the pole at the front of the tent.

"My Lady," Katrina said, her voice razor-sharp.

In spite of the lances of pain from his back, Roran pushed himself partially up and, with Katrina's help, swung himself into a sitting position. Leaning on Katrina, he started to stand, but Nasuada lifted a hand. "Please don't. I do not wish to cause you any more distress than I already have."

"Why have you come, Lady Nasuada?" asked Katrina. "Roran needs to rest and recover, not to spend his time talking when he does not have to."

Roran placed a hand on Katrina's left shoulder. "I can talk if I

must," he said.

Moving farther into the tent, Nasuada lifted the hem of her green dress and sat on the small chest of belongings Katrina had brought with her from Carvahall. After arranging the folds of her skirt, she said, "I have another mission for you, Roran: a small raid similar to those you have already participated in."

"When will I leave?" he asked, puzzled that she would bother to inform him in person of such a simple assignment.

"Tomorrow."

Katrina's eyes widened. "Are you mad?" she exclaimed.

"Katrina …," Roran murmured, attempting to placate her, but she shrugged off his hand and said, "The last trip you sent him on nearly killed him, and you've just had him whipped within an inch of his life! You can't order him back into combat so soon; he wouldn't last more than a minute against Galbatorix's soldiers!"

"I can, and I must!" said Nasuada with such authority, Katrina held her tongue and waited to hear Nasuada's explanation, although Roran could tell that her anger had not subsided. Gazing at him intensely, Nasuada said, "Roran, as you may or may not be aware, our alliance with the Urgals is upon the verge of collapse. One of our own murdered three of the Urgals while you were serving under Captain Edric, who, you may be pleased to know, is a captain no more. Anyway, I had the miserable wretch who killed the Urgals hanged, but ever since, our relations with Garzhvog's rams have become increasingly precarious."

"What does this have to do with Roran?" Katrina demanded.

Nasuada pressed her lips together, then said, "I need to convince the Varden to accept the presence of the Urgals without further bloodshed, and the best way I can do that is to *show* the Varden that our two races can work together in peaceful pursuit of a common goal. Toward that end, the group you shall be traveling with will contain equal numbers of both humans and Urgals."

"But that still doesn't—" Katrina started to say.

"And I am placing the whole lot of them under your command, Stronghammer."

"Me?" Roran rasped, astonished. "Why?"

With a wry smile, Nasuada said, "Because you will do whatever you have to in order to protect your friends and family. In this, you are like me, although my family is larger than yours, for I consider the whole of the Varden my kin. Also, because you are Eragon's cousin, I cannot afford to have you commit insubordination again, for then I will have no choice but to execute you or expel you from the Varden. Neither of which I wish to do.

"Therefore, I am giving you your own command so that there is no

one above you to disobey, except me. If you ignore *my* orders, it had better be to kill Galbatorix; no other reason will save you from far worse than the lashes you earned today. And I am giving you *this* command, because you have proven that you are able to convince others to follow you, even in the face of the most daunting circumstances. You have as good a chance as any of maintaining control over a group of Urgals and humans. I would send Eragon if I could, but since he is not here, the responsibility falls to you. When the Varden hear that Eragon's own cousin, Roran Stronghammer—he who slew nigh on two hundred soldiers by himself—went on a mission with Urgals and that the mission was a success, then we may yet keep the Urgals as our allies for the duration of this war. *That* is why I had Angela and Trianna heal you more than is customary: not to spare you your punishment, but because I need you fit to command. Now, what say you, Stronghammer? Can I count on you?"

Roran looked at Katrina. He knew she desperately wished he would tell Nasuada that he was incapable of leading the raid. Dropping his gaze so he did not have to see her distress, Roran thought of the immense size of the army that opposed the Varden, and then, in a hoarse whisper, he said:

"You may count on me, Lady Nasuada."

AMONG THE CLOUDS

From Tronjheim, Saphira flew the five miles to Farthen Dûr's inner wall, then she and Eragon entered the tunnel that burrowed east, miles through Farthen Dûr's base. Eragon could have run the length of the tunnel in about ten minutes, but since the height of the ceiling prevented Saphira from flying or jumping, she would not have been able to keep up, so he limited himself to a brisk walk.

An hour later, they emerged in Odred Valley, which ran north to south. Nestled among the foothills at the head of the narrow, fern-filled valley was Fernoth-mérna, a fair-sized lake that was like a drop of dark ink between the towering mountains of the Beor range. From the northern end of Fernoth-mérna flowed the Ragni Darmn, which wound its way up the valley until it joined with the Az Ragni by the flanks of Moldûn the Proud, the northernmost mountain of the Beors.

They had departed Tronjheim well before dawn, and although the tunnel had slowed them, it was still early morning. The ragged strip of sky overhead was barred with rays of pale yellow where sunlight streamed between the peaks of the towering mountains. Within the valley below, ridges of heavy clouds clung to the sides of the mountains like vast gray snakes. Coils of white mist drifted up from the glassy surface of the lake.

Eragon and Saphira stopped at the edge of Fernoth-mérna to drink and to replenish their waterskins for the next leg of their journey. The water came from melted snow and ice high in the mountains. It was so cold, it made Eragon's teeth hurt. He screwed up his eyes and stamped the ground, groaning as a spike of cold-induced pain shot through his skull.

As the throbbing subsided, he gazed across the lake. Between the curtains of shifting mist, he spotted the ruins of a sprawling castle built upon a bare stone spur on one mountain. Thick ropes of ivy strangled the crumbling walls, but aside from that, the structure appeared lifeless. Eragon shivered. The abandoned building seemed gloomy, ominous, as if it were the decaying carcass of some foul beast.

Ready? Saphira asked.

Ready, he said, and climbed into the saddle.

From Fernoth-mérna, Saphira flew northward, following Odred Valley out of the Beor Mountains. The valley did not lead directly toward Ellesméra, which was farther west, yet they had no choice but to remain in the valley, as the passes between the mountains were over

five miles high.

Saphira flew at as lofty an altitude as Eragon could endure because it was easier for her to traverse long distances in the rarefied upper atmosphere than in the thick, moist air near the ground. Eragon protected himself against the freezing temperatures by wearing several layers of clothes and by shielding himself from the wind with a spell that split the stream of freezing air so it flowed harmlessly to either side.

Riding Saphira was far from restful, but since she flapped in a slow and steady rhythm, Eragon did not have to concentrate upon maintaining his balance as he did when she turned or dove or engaged in other, more elaborate maneuvers. For the most part, he divided his time between talking with Saphira, thinking back upon the events of the past few weeks, and studying the ever-changing vista below them.

You used magic without the ancient language when the dwarves attacked you, said Saphira. *That was a dangerous thing to do*.

I know, but I didn't have time to think of the words. Besides, you never use the ancient language when you *cast a spell*.

That's different. I'm a dragon. We do not need the ancient language to state our intentions; we know what we want, and we do not change our minds as easily as elves or humans.

The orange sun was a handsbreadth above the horizon when Saphira sailed through the mouth of the valley and out over the flat, empty grasslands that abutted the Beor Mountains. Straightening in the saddle, Eragon gazed around them and shook his head, amazed by how much distance they had covered. *If only we could have flown to Ellesméra the first time*, he said. *We would have had so much more time to spend with Oromis and Glaedr*. Saphira indicated her agreement with a silent mental nod.

Saphira flew until the sun had set and the stars covered the sky and the mountains were a dark purple smudge behind them. She would have continued on until morning, but Eragon insisted they stop to rest. *You are still tired from your trip to Farthen Dûr. We can fly through the night tomorrow, and the day after as well, if necessary, but tonight you must sleep*.

Although Saphira did not like his proposal, she agreed to it and landed by a patch of willow trees growing alongside a stream. As he dismounted, Eragon discovered his legs were so stiff, he had difficulty remaining on his feet. He unsaddled Saphira, then spread his bedroll on the ground next to her and curled up with his back against her warm body. He had no need of a tent, for she sheltered him with a wing, like a mother hawk protecting her brood. The two of them soon sank into their respective dreams, which mingled in strange and

wonderful ways, for their minds remained linked even then.

As soon as the first hint of light appeared in the east, Eragon and Saphira continued on their way, soaring high above the verdant plains.

A fierce headwind sprang up in midmorning, which slowed Saphira to half her normal speed. Try as she might, she could not rise above the wind. All day she fought against the rushing air. It was arduous work, and although Eragon gave her as much of his strength as he dared, by afternoon her exhaustion was profound. She swooped down and alighted on a knoll in the grasslands and sat there with her wings draped across the ground, panting and trembling.

We should stay here for the night, Eragon said.

No.

Saphira, you're in no condition to go on. Let's make camp until you recover. Who knows, the wind might die down by evening.

He heard the wet rasp of her tongue as she licked her chops and then the heave of her lungs as she resumed panting.

No, she said. *On these plains, it might blow for weeks or even months on end. We cannot wait for calm*.

But—

I will not give up merely because I hurt, Eragon. Too much is at stake….

Then let me give you energy from Aren. There is more than enough in the ring to sustain you from here to Du Weldenvarden.

No, she repeated again. *Save Aren for when we have no other recourse. I can rest and recover in the forest. Aren, however, we may have need of at any moment; you should not deplete it merely to ease my discomfort*.

I hate to see you in such pain, though.

A faint growl escaped her. *My ancestors, the wild dragons, would not have shrunk from a puny breeze like this, and neither will I*.

And with that, she jumped back into the air, carrying him with her as she drove herself into the gale.

As the day was drawing to an end and the wind still howled around them, pushing against Saphira as if fate were determined to keep them from reaching Du Weldenvarden, Eragon thought of the dwarf woman Glûmra and of her faith in the dwarven gods, and for the first time in his life, he felt the desire to pray. Withdrawing from his mental contact with Saphira—who was so tired and preoccupied, she did not notice—Eragon whispered, "Gûntera, king of the gods, if you exist, and if you can hear me, and if you have the power, then, please, still this wind. I know I'm not a dwarf, but King Hrothgar adopted me into his clan, and I think that gives me the right to pray to you. Gûntera, please, we have to get to Du Weldenvarden as fast as possible, not only for the good of the Varden but also for the good of your people,

the knurlan. Please, I beg of you, still this wind. Saphira cannot keep this up much longer." Then, feeling slightly foolish, Eragon extended himself toward Saphira's consciousness, wincing in sympathy as he felt the burning within her muscles.

Late that night, when all was cold and black, the wind abated and, thereafter, only occasionally buffeted them with a gust.

When morning came, Eragon looked down and saw the hard, dry land of the Hadarac Desert. *Blast it*, he said, for they had not come as far as he had hoped. *We won't make it to Ellesméra today, will we?*

Not unless the wind decides to blow in the opposite direction and carry us there upon its back. Saphira labored in silence for another few minutes, then added, *However, barring any other unpleasant surprises, we should arrive at Du Weldenvarden by evening*.

Eragon grunted.

They landed only twice that day. Once, while they were on the ground, Saphira devoured a brace of ducks that she caught and killed with a burst of fire, but other than that, she went without food. To save time, Eragon ate his own meals in the saddle.

As Saphira had predicted, Du Weldenvarden came into sight even as the sun neared setting. The forest appeared before them as an endless expanse of green. Deciduous trees—oaks and beeches and maples—dominated the outer parts of the forest, but farther in, Eragon knew, they gave way to the forbidding pine trees that formed the bulk of the woods.

Dusk had settled over the countryside by the time they arrived at the edge of Du Weldenvarden, and Saphira glided to a soft landing under the outstretched branches of a massive oak. She folded her wings and sat still for a while, too tired to continue. Her crimson tongue hung loose from her mouth. While she rested, Eragon listened to the rustle of leaves overhead and to the hoot of owls and the chirp of evening insects.

When she was sufficiently recovered, Saphira walked forward and passed between two giant, moss-covered oak trees and so crossed into Du Weldenvarden on foot. The elves had made it impossible for anyone or anything to enter the forest by means of magic, and since dragons did not rely upon their bodies alone to fly, Saphira could not enter while in the air, else her wings would fail her and she would fall from the sky.

That should be far enough, Saphira said, stopping in a small meadow several hundred feet from the perimeter of the forest.

Eragon unbuckled the straps from around his legs and slid down Saphira's side. He searched the meadow until he found a bare patch of earth. With his hands, he scooped out a shallow hole a foot and a half

wide. He summoned forth water to fill the hole, then uttered a spell of scrying.

The water shimmered and acquired a soft yellow glow as Eragon beheld the interior of Oromis's hut. The silver-haired elf was sitting at his kitchen table, reading a tattered scroll. Oromis looked up at Eragon and nodded with unsurprised recognition.

"Master," Eragon said, and twisted his hand over his chest.

"Greetings, Eragon. I have been expecting you. Where are you?"

"Saphira and I just reached Du Weldenvarden.… Master, I know we promised to return to Ellesméra, but the Varden are only a few days away from the city of Feinster, and they are vulnerable without us. We don't have the time to fly all the way to Ellesméra. Could you answer our questions here, through the scrying pool?"

Oromis leaned back in his chair, his angled face grave and pensive. Then he said, "I will not instruct you at a distance, Eragon. I can guess at some of the things you wish to ask me, and they are subjects we must discuss in person."

"Master, please. If Murtagh and Thorn—"

"No, Eragon. I understand the reason for your urgency, but your studies are just as important as protecting the Varden, maybe even more so. We must do this properly, or not at all."

Eragon sighed and slumped forward. "Yes, Master."

Oromis nodded. "Glaedr and I will be waiting for you. Fly safe and fly fast. We have much to talk about."

"Yes, Master."

Feeling numb and worn-out, Eragon ended the spell. The water soaked back into the ground. He held his head in his hands, staring at the patch of moist dirt between his feet. Saphira's heavy breathing was loud beside him. *I guess we have to keep going*, he said. *I'm sorry*.

Her breathing paused for a moment as she licked her chops. *It's all right. I'm not about to collapse*.

He looked up at her. *Are you sure?*

Yes.

Eragon reluctantly hoisted himself upright and climbed onto her back. *As long as we're going to Ellesméra*, he said, tightening the straps around his legs, *we should visit the Menoa tree again. Maybe we can finally figure out what Solembum meant. I could certainly use a new sword*.

When Eragon had first met Solembum in Teirm, the werecat had told him, *When the time comes and you need a weapon, look under the roots of the Menoa tree. Then, when all seems lost and your power is insufficient, go to the Rock of Kuthian and speak your name to open the Vault of Souls*. Eragon still did not know where the Rock of Kuthian was, but during their first stay in Ellesméra, he and Saphira had had

several chances to examine the Menoa tree. They had discovered no clue as to the exact whereabouts of the supposed weapon. Moss, dirt, bark, and the occasional ant were the only things they had seen among the roots of the Menoa tree, and none of them indicated where to excavate.

Solembum might not have meant a sword, Saphira pointed out. *Werecats love riddles nearly as much as dragons do. If it even exists, this weapon might be a scrap of parchment with a spell inscribed on it, or a book, or a painting, or a sharp piece of rock, or any other dangerous thing.*

Whatever it is, I hope we can find it. Who knows when we will have the chance to return to Ellesméra again?

Saphira raked aside a fallen tree that lay before her, then crouched and unfurled her velvety wings, her massive shoulder muscles bunching. Eragon yelped and grabbed the front of his saddle as she surged up and forward with unexpected force, rising above the tops of the trees in a single vertiginous bound.

Wheeling over the sea of shifting branches, Saphira oriented herself in a northwesterly direction and then set out toward the elves' capital, the beats of her wings slow and heavy.

BUTTING HEADS

The raid on the supply train went almost exactly as Roran had planned: three days after leaving the main body of the Varden, he and his fellow horsemen rode down from the lip of a ravine and struck the meandering line of wagons broadside. Meanwhile, the Urgals sprang out from behind boulders scattered across the floor of the ravine and attacked the supply train from the front, stopping the procession in its tracks. The soldiers and wagoners put up a brave fight, but the ambush had caught them while sleepy and disorganized, and Roran's force soon overwhelmed them. None of the humans or Urgals died in the attack, and only three suffered wounds: two humans and one Urgal.

Roran killed several of the soldiers himself, but for the most part, he hung back and concentrated upon directing the assault, as was his responsibility now. He was still stiff and sore from the flogging he had endured, and he did not want to exert himself any more than necessary, for fear of cracking the mat of scabs that covered his back.

Until that point, Roran had had no difficulty maintaining discipline among the twenty humans and twenty Urgals. Although it was obvious that neither group liked nor trusted the other—an attitude he shared, for he regarded the Urgals with the same degree of suspicion and distaste as would any man who had been raised in proximity to the Spine—they had succeeded in working together during the past three days with nary a raised voice. That both groups had managed to cooperate so well had, he knew, little to do with his prowess as a commander. Nasuada and Nar Garzhvog had taken great care in picking the warriors who were to travel with him, selecting only those with a reputation for a quick blade, sound judgment, and, above all, a calm and even disposition.

However, in the aftermath of the attack on the supply train, as his men were busy dragging the bodies of the soldiers and the wagoners into a pile, and Roran was riding up and down the line of wagons overseeing the work, he heard an agonized howl from somewhere by the far end of the train. Thinking that perhaps another contingent of soldiers had chanced upon them, Roran shouted to Carn and several other men to join him and then touched his spurs to Snowfire's flanks and galloped toward the rear of the wagons.

Four Urgals had tied an enemy soldier to the trunk of a gnarled willow tree and were amusing themselves by poking and prodding him with their swords. Swearing, Roran jumped down from Snowfire

and, with a single blow of his hammer, put the man out of his misery.

A swirling cloud of dust swept over the group as Carn and four other warriors galloped up to the willow tree. They reined in their steeds and spread out on either side of Roran, holding their weapons at the ready.

The largest Urgal, a ram named Yarbog, stepped forward. "Stronghammer, why did you stop our sport? He would have danced for us for many more minutes."

From between clenched teeth, Roran said, "So long as you are under my command, you will not torture captives without cause. Am I understood? Many of these soldiers have been forced to serve Galbatorix against their will. Many of them are our friends or family or neighbors, and while we must fight them, I will not have you treat them with unnecessary cruelty. If not for the whims of fate, any one of us humans might be standing in their place. They are not our enemy; Galbatorix is, as he is yours."

The Urgal's heavy brow beetled, nearly obscuring his deep-set yellow eyes. "But you will still kill them, yes? Why cannot we enjoy seeing them wriggle and dance first?"

Roran wondered if the Urgal's skull was too thick to crack with his hammer. Struggling to restrain his anger, he said, "Because it is wrong, if nothing else!" Pointing at the dead soldier, he said, "What if *he* had been one of your own race who had been enthralled by the Shade, Durza? Would you have tormented him as well?"

"Of course," said Yarbog. "They would want us to tickle them with our swords so that they would have an opportunity to prove their bravery before they died. Is it not the same with you hornless humans, or have you no stomach for pain?"

Roran was not sure how serious an insult it was among the Urgals to call another *hornless*, but even so, he had no doubt that questioning someone's courage was as offensive to Urgals as it was to humans, if not more so. "Any one of us could withstand more pain without crying out than you, Yarbog," he said, tightening his grip on his hammer and shield. "Now, unless you wish to experience agony the likes of which you cannot imagine, surrender your sword to me, then untie that poor wretch and carry him over to the rest of the bodies. After that, go see to the packhorses. They are yours to care for until we return to the Varden."

Without waiting for an acknowledgment from the Urgal, Roran turned and grasped Snowfire's reins and prepared to climb back onto the stallion.

"No," growled Yarbog.

Roran froze with one foot in a stirrup and silently swore to himself. He had hoped that just such a situation would not arise during the

trip. Swinging around, he said, “No? Are you refusing to obey my orders?”

Drawing back his lips to expose his short fangs, Yarbog said, “No. I challenge you for leadership of this tribe, Stronghammer.” And the Urgal threw back his massive head and bellowed so loudly that the rest of the humans and Urgals stopped what they were doing and ran toward the willow tree until all forty of them were clustered around Yarbog and Roran.

“Shall we attend to this creature for you?” Carn asked, his voice ringing out.

Wishing that there were not so many onlookers, Roran shook his head. “No, I shall deal with him myself.” Despite his words, he was glad to have his men beside him, opposite the line of hulking, gray-skinned Urgals. The humans were smaller than the Urgals, but all except Roran were mounted on horses, which would give them a slight advantage if there were a fight between the two groups. If that came to pass, Carn’s magic would be of little help, for the Urgals had a spellcaster of their own, a shaman named Dazhgra, and from what Roran had seen, Dazhgra was the more powerful magician, if not as skilled in the nuances of their arcane art.

To Yarbog, Roran said, “It is not the custom of the Varden to award leadership based upon trial by combat. If you wish to fight, I will fight, but you will gain nothing by it. If I lose, Carn will assume my command, and you will answer to him instead of me.”

“Bah!” said Yarbog. “I do not challenge you for the right to lead your own race. I challenge you for the right to lead us, the fighting rams of the Bolvek tribe! You have not proven yourself, Stronghammer, so you cannot claim the position of chieftain. If you lose, I will become chieftain here, and we shall not lift our chins to you, Carn, or any other creature too weak to earn our respect!”

Roran pondered his situation before accepting the inevitable. Even if it cost him his life, he had to try to maintain his authority over the Urgals, else the Varden would lose them as allies. Taking a breath, he said, “Among my race, it is customary for the person who has been challenged to choose the time and place for the fight, as well as the weapons both parties will use.”

Chortling deep in his throat, Yarbog said, “The time is now, Stronghammer. The place is here. And among my race, we fight in a loincloth and without weapons.”

“That is hardly fair, since I have no horns,” Roran pointed out. “Will you agree to let me use my hammer to compensate for my lack?”

Yarbog thought about it, then said, “You may keep your helmet and shield, but no hammer. Weapons are not allowed when we fight to be chief.”

“I see.… Well, if I can’t have my hammer, I will forgo my helmet and shield as well. What are the rules of combat, and how shall we decide the winner?”

“There is only one rule, Stronghammer: if you flee, you forfeit the match and are banished from your tribe. You win by forcing your rival to submit, but since I will never submit, we will fight to the death.”

Roran nodded. *That might be what he intends to do, but I won’t kill him if I can help it.* “Let us begin,” he cried, and banged his hammer against his shield.

At his direction, the men and Urgals cleared a space in the middle of the ravine and pegged out a square, twelve paces by twelve paces. Then Roran and Yarbog stripped, and two Urgals slathered bear grease over Yarbog’s body while Carn and Loften, another human, did the same for Roran.

“Rub as much as you can into my back,” Roran murmured. He wanted his scabs to be as soft as possible so as to minimize the number of places they would crack.

Leaning close to him, Carn said, “Why did you refuse the shield and helmet?”

“They would only slow me. I’ll have to be as fast as a frightened hare if I’m to avoid being crushed by him.” As Carn and Loften worked their way down his limbs, Roran studied his opponent, searching for any vulnerability that would help him defeat the Urgal.

Yarbog stood well over six feet tall. His back was broad, his chest deep, and his arms and legs covered with knotted muscles. His neck was as thick as a bull’s, as it had to be in order to sustain the weight of his head and his curled horns. Three slanting scars marked the left side of his waist, where he had been clawed by an animal. Sparse black bristles grew over the whole of his hide.

At least he’s not a Kull, thought Roran. He was confident of his own strength, but even so, he did not believe that he could overpower Yarbog with sheer force. Rare was the man who could hope to match the physical prowess of a healthy Urgal ram. Also, Roran knew that Yarbog’s large black fingernails, his fangs, his horns, and his leathery hide would all provide Yarbog with considerable advantages in the unarmed combat they were about to engage in. *If I can, I will*, Roran decided, thinking of all the low tricks he could use against the Urgal, for fighting Yarbog would not be like wrestling with Eragon or Baldor or any other man from Carvahall; rather, Roran was sure that it would be like the ferocious and unrestrained brawling between two wild beasts.

Again and again, Roran’s eyes returned to Yarbog’s immense horns, for those, he knew, were the most dangerous of the Urgal’s features. With them, Yarbog could butt and gore Roran with impunity, and they

would also protect the sides of Yarbog's head from any blows Roran could deliver with his bare hands, although they limited the Urgal's peripheral vision. Then it occurred to Roran that just as the horns were Yarbog's greatest natural gift, so too they might be his undoing.

Roran rolled his shoulders and bounced on the balls of his feet, eager for the contest to be over.

When both Roran and Yarbog were completely covered with bear grease, their seconds retreated and they stepped into the confines of the square pegged out on the ground. Roran kept his knees partially flexed, ready to leap in any direction at the slightest hint of movement from Yarbog. The rocky soil was cold, hard, and rough beneath the soles of his bare feet.

A slight gust stirred the branches of the nearby willow tree. One of the oxen harnessed to the wagons pawed at a clump of grass, his tack creaking.

With a rippling bellow, Yarbog charged Roran, covering the distance between them with three thundering steps. Roran waited until Yarbog was nearly upon him, then jumped to the right. He underestimated Yarbog's speed, however. Lowering his head, the Urgal rammed his horns into Roran's left shoulder and tossed him sprawling across the square.

Sharp rocks poked into Roran's side as he landed. Lines of pain flashed across his back, tracing the paths of his half-healed wounds. He grunted and rolled upright, feeling several scabs break open, exposing his raw flesh to the stinging air. Dirt and small pebbles clung to the film of grease on his body. Keeping both feet on the ground, he shuffled toward Yarbog, never taking his eyes off the snarling Urgal.

Again Yarbog charged him, and again Roran attempted to jump out of the way. This time his maneuver succeeded, and he slipped past the Urgal with inches to spare. Whirling around, Yarbog ran at him for a third time, and once more, Roran managed to evade him.

Then Yarbog changed tactics. Advancing sideways, like a crab, he thrust out his large, hooked hands to catch Roran and pull him into his deadly embrace. Roran flinched and retreated. Whatever happened, he had to avoid falling into Yarbog's clutches; with his immense strength, the Urgal could soon dispatch him.

The men and Urgals gathered around the square were silent, their faces impassive as they watched Roran and Yarbog scuffle back and forth in the dirt.

For several minutes, Roran and Yarbog exchanged quick glancing blows. Roran avoided closing with the Urgal wherever possible, trying to wear him out from a distance, but as the fight dragged on and Yarbog seemed no more tired than when they had begun, Roran realized that time was not his friend. If he was going to win, he had to

end the fight without further delay.

Hoping to provoke Yarbog into charging again—for his strategy depended upon just that—Roran withdrew to the far corner of the square and began to taunt him, saying, “Ha! You are as fat and slow as a milk cow! Can’t you catch me, Yarbog, or are your legs made of lard? You should cut off your horns in shame for letting a human make a fool of you. What will your prospective mates think when they hear of this? Will you tell them—”

Yarbog drowned out Roran’s words with a roar. The Urgal sprinted toward him, turning slightly, so as to crash into Roran with his full weight. Skipping out of the way, Roran reached out for the tip of Yarbog’s right horn but missed his mark and fell stumbling into the middle of the square, skinning both knees. He cursed to himself as he regained his footing.

Checking his headlong rush just before momentum carried him beyond the boundaries of the square, Yarbog turned back, his small yellow eyes searching for Roran. “Yah!” shouted Roran. He stuck out his tongue and made every rude gesture he could think of. “You couldn’t hit a tree even if it was in front of you!”

“Die, puny human!” Yarbog growled, and sprang at Roran, arms outstretched.

Two of Yarbog’s nails carved bloody furrows across Roran’s ribs as Roran darted to his left, but he still managed to grasp and hang on to one of the Urgal’s horns. Roran grabbed the other horn as well before Yarbog could throw him off. Using the horns as handles, Roran wrenched Yarbog’s head to one side and, straining every muscle, cast the Urgal to the ground. Roran’s back flared in angry protest at the motion.

As soon as Yarbog’s chest touched the dirt, Roran placed a knee on top of his right shoulder, pinning him in place. Yarbog snorted and bucked, trying to break Roran’s grip, but Roran refused to let go. He braced his feet against a rock and twisted the Urgal’s head as far around as it would go, pulling so hard he would have broken the neck of any human. The grease on his palms made it difficult to hold on to Yarbog’s horns.

Yarbog relaxed for a moment, then pushed himself off the ground with his left arm, lifting Roran as well, and scrabbled with his legs in an effort to get them underneath his body. Roran grimaced and leaned against Yarbog’s neck and shoulder. After a handful of seconds, Yarbog’s left arm buckled and he fell flat on his stomach again.

Both Roran and Yarbog were panting as heavily as if they had run a race. Where they touched, the bristles on the Urgal’s hide poked Roran like pieces of stiff wire. Dust coated their bodies. Thin streams of blood ran down from the scratches on Roran’s side and from his

aching back.

Yarbog resumed kicking and flailing once he had regained his breath, flopping around in the dirt like a hooked fish. It took all of Roran's strength, but he hung on, trying to ignore the stones that cut his feet and legs. Unable to free himself by those methods, Yarbog let his limbs go limp and then began to flex his neck again and again, in an attempt to exhaust Roran's arms.

They lay there, neither of them moving more than a few inches as they struggled against each other.

A fly buzzed over them and landed on Roran's ankle.

Oxen lowed.

After nearly ten minutes, sweat drenched Roran's face. He could not seem to get enough air into his lungs. His arms seared with agony. The stripes on his back felt as if they were about to tear asunder. His ribs throbbed where Yarbog had clawed him.

Roran knew he could not continue for much longer. *Blast it!* he thought. *Won't he ever give up?*

Just then, Yarbog's head quivered as a muscle in the Urgal's neck cramped. Yarbog grunted, the first sound he had made in over a minute, and in an undertone, he muttered, "Kill me, Stronghammer. I cannot best you."

Adjusting his grip on Yarbog's horns, Roran growled in an equally low tone, "No. If you want to die, find someone else to kill you. I have fought by your rules, now you will accept defeat according to mine. Tell everyone that you submit to me. Say you were wrong to challenge me. Do that, and I'll let you go. If not, I'll keep you here until you change your mind, no matter how long it takes."

Yarbog's head twitched under Roran's hands as the Urgal tried once more to free himself. He huffed, blowing a small cloud of dust into the air, then rumbled, "The shame would be too great, Stronghammer. Kill me."

"I don't belong to your race, and I won't abide by your customs," said Roran. "If you are so worried about your honor, tell those who are curious that you were defeated by the cousin of Eragon Shadeslayer. Surely there is no shame in that." When several minutes had passed and Yarbog still had not replied, Roran yanked on Yarbog's horns and growled, "Well?"

Raising his voice so that all of the men and Urgals could hear, Yarbog said, "Gar! Svarvok curse me; I submit! I should not have challenged you, Stronghammer. You are worthy to be chief, and I am not."

As one, the men cheered and shouted, banging the pommels of their swords on their shields. The Urgals shifted in place and said nothing.

Satisfied, Roran released Yarbog's horns and rolled away from the

gray Urgal. Feeling almost as if he had endured another flogging, Roran slowly got to his feet and hobbled out of the square to where Carn was waiting.

Roran winced as Carn draped a blanket over his shoulders and the fabric rubbed against his abused skin. Grinning, Carn handed him a wineskin. “After he knocked you down, I thought for sure he would kill you. I should have learned by now to never count you out, eh, Roran? Ha! That was just about the finest fight I’ve ever seen. You must be the only man in history to have wrestled an Urgal.”

“Maybe not,” Roran said between sips of wine. “But I might be the only man who has survived the experience.” He smiled as Carn laughed. Roran looked over at the Urgals, who were clustered around Yarbog, talking with him in low grunts while two of their brethren wiped the grease and grime from Yarbog’s limbs. Although the Urgals appeared subdued, they did not seem angry or resentful, so far as he was able to judge, and he was confident that he would have no more trouble from them.

Despite the pain of his wounds, Roran felt pleased with the outcome of the match. *This won’t be the last fight between our two races*, he thought, *but as long as we can return safely to the Varden, the Urgals won’t break off our alliance, at least not on account of me*.

After taking one last sip, Roran stoppered the wineskin and handed it back to Carn, then shouted, “Right, now stop standing around yammering like sheep and finish drawing up a list of what’s in those wagons! Loften, round up the soldiers’ horses, if they haven’t already wandered too far away! Dazhgra, see to the oxen. Make haste! Thorn and Murtagh could be flying here even now. Go on, snap to!

“And, Carn, where the blazes are my clothes?”

✦ ✦ ✦

GENEALOGY

On the fourth day after leaving Farthen Dûr, Eragon and Saphira arrived in Ellesméra.

The sun was clear and bright overhead when the first of the city's buildings—a narrow, twisting turret with glittering windows that stood between three tall pine trees and was grown out of their intermingled branches—came into view. Beyond the bark-sheathed turret, Eragon spotted the seemingly random collection of clearings that marked the location of the sprawling city.

As Saphira planed over the uneven surface of the forest, Eragon quested with his mind for the consciousness of Gilderien the Wise, who, as the wielder of the White Flame of Vándil, had protected Ellesméra from the elves' enemies for over two and a half millennia. Projecting his thoughts toward the city, Eragon said in the ancient language, *Gilderien-elda, may we pass?*

A deep, calm voice sounded in Eragon's mind. *You may pass, Eragon Shadeslayer and Saphira Brightscales. So long as you keep the peace, you are welcome to stay in Ellesméra.*

Thank you, Gilderien-elda, said Saphira.

Her claws brushed the crowns of the dark-needled trees, which rose over three hundred feet above the ground, as she glided across the pinewood city and headed toward the slope of inclined land on the other side of Ellesméra. Between the latticework of branches below, Eragon caught brief glimpses of the flowing shapes of buildings made of living wood, colorful beds of blooming flowers, rippling streams, the auburn glow of a flameless lantern, and, once or twice, the pale flash of an elf's upturned face.

Tilting her wings, Saphira soared up the slope of land until she reached the Crags of Tel'naeír, which dropped over a thousand feet to the rolling forest at the base of the bare white cliff and extended for a league in either direction. Then she turned right and flew north along the ridge of stone, flapping twice to maintain her speed and altitude.

A grass-covered clearing appeared at the edge of the cliff. Set against the backdrop of the surrounding trees was a modest, single-story house grown out of four different pines. A chuckling, gurgling stream wandered out of the mossy forest and passed underneath the roots of one of the pines before disappearing into Du Weldenvarden once again. And curled up next to the house, there lay the golden dragon Glaedr, massive, glittering, his ivory teeth as thick around as Eragon's chest, his claws like scythes, his folded wings soft as suede,

his muscled tail nearly as long as all of Saphira, and the striations of his one visible eye sparkling like the rays within a star sapphire. The stump of his missing foreleg was concealed on the other side of his body. A small round table and two chairs had been placed in front of Glaedr. Oromis sat in the chair closest to him, the elf's silver hair gleaming like metal in the sunlight.

Eragon leaned forward in his saddle as Saphira reared upright, slowing herself. She descended with a jolt upon the sward of green grass and ran forward several steps, raking her wings backward before she came to a halt.

His fingers clumsy from exhaustion, Eragon loosened the slipknots that bound the straps around his legs and then attempted to climb down Saphira's right front leg. As he lowered himself, his knees buckled and he fell. He raised his hands to protect his face and landed upon all fours, scraping his shin on a rock hidden within the grass. He grunted with pain and, feeling as stiff as an old man, started to push himself onto his feet.

A hand entered his field of vision.

Eragon looked up and saw Oromis standing over him, a faint smile upon his timeless face. In the ancient language, Oromis said, "Welcome back to Ellesméra, Eragon-finiarel. And you as well, Saphira Brightscales, welcome. Welcome, both of you."

Eragon took his hand, and Oromis pulled him upright without apparent effort. At first Eragon was unable to find his tongue, for he had barely spoken aloud since they had left Farthen Dûr and because fatigue blurred his mind. He touched the first two fingers of his right hand to his lips and, also in the ancient language, said, "May good fortune rule over you, Oromis-elda," and then he twisted his hand over his sternum in the gesture of courtesy and respect the elves used.

"May the stars watch over you, Eragon," replied Oromis.

Then Eragon repeated the ceremony with Glaedr. As always, the touch of the dragon's sanguine consciousness awed and humbled Eragon.

Saphira did not greet either Oromis or Glaedr; she remained where she was, her neck drooping until her nose brushed the ground and her shoulders and haunches trembling as if with cold. Dry yellow foam encrusted the corners of her open mouth. Her barbed tongue hung limp from between her fangs.

By way of explanation, Eragon said, "We ran into a headwind the day after we left Farthen Dûr, and …" He fell silent as Glaedr lifted his giant head and swung it across the clearing until he was looking down upon Saphira, who made no attempt to acknowledge his presence. Then Glaedr breathed out upon her, fingers of flame burning within the pits of his nostrils. A sense of relief washed over Eragon as he felt

energy pour into Saphira, stilling her tremors and strengthening her limbs.

The flames in Glaedr's nostrils vanished with a wisp of smoke. *I went hunting this morning*, he said, his mental voice resonating throughout Eragon's being. *You will find what is left of my kills by the tree with the white branch at the far end of the field. Eat what you want*.

Silent gratitude emanated from Saphira. Dragging her limp tail across the grass, she crawled over to the tree Glaedr had indicated and then settled down and began to tear at the carcass of a deer.

"Come," said Oromis, and gestured toward the table and chairs. On the table was a tray with bowls of fruit and nuts, half a round of cheese, a loaf of bread, a decanter of wine, and two crystal goblets. As Eragon sat, Oromis indicated the decanter and asked, "Would you care for a drink to wash the dust from your throat?"

"Yes, please," said Eragon.

With an elegant motion, Oromis unstoppered the decanter and filled both goblets. He handed one to Eragon and then settled back into his chair, arranging his white tunic with long, smooth fingers.

Eragon sipped the wine. It was mellow and tasted of cherries and plums. "Master, I—"

An upraised finger from Oromis stopped him. "Unless it is unbearably urgent, I would wait until Saphira joins us before we discuss what has brought you here. Are you agreed?"

After a moment's hesitation, Eragon nodded and concentrated upon eating, savoring the flavor of the fresh fruit. Oromis seemed content to sit beside him in silence, drinking his wine and gazing out over the edge of the Crags of Tel'naeír. Behind him, Glaedr watched over the proceedings like a living statue of gold.

The better part of an hour passed before Saphira rose from her meal, crawled over to the stream, and lapped the water for another ten minutes. Drops of water still clung to her jaws when she turned away from the stream and, with a sigh, sprawled next to Eragon, her eyes heavy-lidded. She yawned, her teeth flashing, then exchanged salutations with Oromis and Glaedr. *Talk as you want*, she said. *However, do not expect me to say much. I may fall asleep at any moment*.

If you do, we shall wait for you to wake before we continue, said Glaedr.

That is most … kind, replied Saphira, and her eyelids drifted even lower.

"More wine?" Oromis asked, and lifted the decanter an inch off the table. When Eragon shook his head, Oromis replaced the decanter, then pressed the tips of his fingers together, his round fingernails like polished opals. He said, "You do not need to tell me what has befallen you these past weeks, Eragon. Since Islanzadí left the forest, Arya has

kept her informed of the news of the land, and every three days, Islanzadí sends a runner from our army back to Du Weldenvarden. Thus, I know of your duel with Murtagh and Thorn on the Burning Plains. I know of your trip to Helgrind and how you punished the butcher from your village. And I know you attended the dwarves' clanmeet in Farthen Dûr and the outcome thereof. Whatever you wish to say, then, you may say without fear of having to educate me about your recent doings."

Eragon rolled a plump blueberry in the palm of his hand. "Do you know of Elva and what happened when I tried to free her of my curse?"

"Yes, even that. You may not have succeeded in removing the whole of the spell from her, but you paid your debt to the child, and that is what a Dragon Rider is supposed to do: fulfill his obligations, no matter how small or difficult they be."

"She still feels the pain of those around her."

"But now it is by her own choice," said Oromis. "No longer does your magic force it upon her.… You did not come here to seek my opinion concerning Elva. What is it that weighs upon your heart, Eragon? Ask what you will, and I promise I shall answer all of your questions to the best of my knowledge."

"What," said Eragon, "if I don't know the right questions to ask?"

A twinkle appeared in Oromis's gray eyes. "Ah, you begin to think like an elf. You must trust us as your mentors to teach you and Saphira those things of which you are ignorant. And you must also trust us to decide when it is appropriate to broach those subjects, for there are many elements of your training that should not be spoken of out of turn."

Eragon placed the blueberry in the precise center of the tray, then in a quiet but firm voice said, "It seems as if there is much you have not spoken of."

For a moment, the only sounds were the rustle of branches and the burble of the stream and the chatter of distant squirrels.

If you have a quarrel with us, Eragon, said Glaedr, *then give voice to it and do not gnaw on your anger like a dry old bone*.

Saphira shifted her position, and Eragon imagined he heard a growl from her. He glanced at her, and then, fighting to control the emotions coursing through him, he asked, "When I was last here, did you know who my father was?"

Oromis nodded once. "We did."

"And did you know that Murtagh was my brother?"

Oromis nodded once more. "We did, but—"

"Then why didn't you tell me!" exclaimed Eragon, and jumped to his feet, knocking over his chair. He pounded a fist against his hip,

strode several feet away, and stared at the shadows within the tangled forest. Whirling around, Eragon's anger swelled as he saw that Oromis appeared as calm as before. "Were you ever going to tell me? Did you keep the truth about my family a secret because you were afraid it would distract me from my training? Or was it that you were afraid I would become like my father?" A worse thought occurred to Eragon. "Or did you not even consider it important enough to mention? And what of Brom? Did he know? Did he choose Carvahall to hide in because of me, because I was the son of his enemy? You can't expect me to believe it was coincidence he and I happened to be living only a few miles apart and that Arya just *happened* to send Saphira's egg to me in the Spine."

"What Arya did was an accident," asserted Oromis. "She had no knowledge of you then."

Eragon gripped the pommel of his dwarf sword, every muscle in his body as hard as iron. "When Brom first saw Saphira, I remember he said something to himself about being unsure whether 'this' was a farce or a tragedy. At the time, I thought he was referring to the fact that a common farmer like myself had become the first new Rider in over a hundred years. But that's not what he meant, was it? He was wondering whether it was a farce or a tragedy that Morzan's youngest son should be the one to take up the Riders' mantle!

"Is that why you and Brom trained me, to be nothing more than a weapon against Galbatorix so that I may atone for the villainy of my father? Is that all I am to you, a balancing of the scales?" Before Oromis could respond, Eragon swore and said, "My whole life has been a lie! Since the moment I was born, no one but Saphira has wanted me: not my mother, not Garrow, not Aunt Marian, not even Brom. Brom showed interest in me only because of Morzan and Saphira. I have always been an inconvenience. Whatever you think of me, though, I am *not* my father, nor my brother, and I refuse to follow in their footsteps." Placing his hands on the edge of the table, Eragon leaned forward. "I'm not about to betray the elves or the dwarves or the Varden to Galbatorix, if that's what you are worried about. I will do what I must, but from now on, you have neither my loyalty nor my trust. I will not—"

The ground and the air shook as Glaedr growled, his upper lip pulling back to reveal the full length of his fangs. *You have more reason to trust us than anyone else, hatchling,* he said, his voice thundering in Eragon's mind. *If not for our efforts, you would be long dead.*

Then, to Eragon's surprise, Saphira said to Oromis and Glaedr, *Tell him*, and it alarmed him to feel the distress in her thoughts.

Saphira? he asked, puzzled. *Tell me what?*

She ignored him. *This arguing is without cause. Do not prolong*

Eragon's discomfort anymore.

One of Oromis's slanted eyebrows rose. "You know?"

I know.

"You know what?" Eragon bellowed, on the verge of tearing his sword from its sheath and threatening all of them until they explained themselves.

With one slim finger, Oromis pointed toward the fallen chair. "Sit." When Eragon remained standing, too angry and full of resentment to obey, Oromis sighed. "I understand this is difficult for you, Eragon, but if you insist upon asking questions and then refuse to listen to the answers, frustration will be your only reward. Now, please sit, so we can talk about this in a civilized manner."

Glaring, Eragon righted the chair and dropped into it. "Why?" he asked. "Why didn't you tell me that my father was Morzan, the first of the Forsworn?"

"In the first place," said Oromis, "we shall be fortunate if you are anything like your father, which, indeed, I believe you are. And, as I was about to say before you interrupted me, Murtagh is not your brother, but rather your half brother."

The world seemed to tilt around Eragon; the sensation of vertigo was so intense, he had to grab the edge of the table to steady himself. "My half brother … But then, who …?"

Oromis plucked a blackberry from a bowl, contemplated it for a moment, and then ate it. "Glaedr and I did not wish to keep this a secret from you, but we had no choice. We both promised, with the most binding of oaths, that we would never reveal to you the identity of your father or of your half brother, nor discuss your lineage, unless you had discovered the truth on your own or unless the identity of your relatives had placed you in danger. What transpired between you and Murtagh during the Battle of the Burning Plains satisfies enough of those requirements that we can now speak freely on this topic."

Trembling with barely restrained emotion, Eragon said, "Oromis-elda, if Murtagh is my half brother, then who is my father?"

Look into your heart, Eragon, said Glaedr. *You already know who he is, and you have known for a long time*.

Eragon shook his head. "I don't know! I don't know! Please …"

A gout of smoke and flame jetted from Glaedr's nostrils as he snorted. *Is it not obvious? Your father is Brom*.

Eragon gaped at the gold dragon.

"But how?" he exclaimed. Before either Glaedr or Oromis could respond, Eragon whirled toward Saphira and, with both his mind and his voice, he said, "You knew? You knew, and yet you let me believe Morzan was my father this whole time, even though it … even though I—I …" His chest heaving, Eragon stuttered and trailed off, unable to speak coherently. Unbidden, memories of Brom flooded through him, washing away his other thoughts. He reconsidered the meaning of Brom's every word and expression, and in that instant, a sense of rightness settled over Eragon. He still wanted explanations, but he did not need them in order to determine the veracity of Glaedr's claim, for in his bones, Eragon felt the truth of what Glaedr had said.

Eragon started as Oromis touched him on the shoulder. "Eragon, you need to calm yourself," said the elf in a soothing tone. "Remember the techniques I taught you for meditating. Control your breathing, and concentrate upon letting the tension drain out of your limbs into the ground beneath you.… Yes, like that. Now again, and breathe deeply."

Eragon's hands grew still and his heartbeat slowed as he followed Oromis's instructions. Once his thoughts had cleared, he looked at Saphira again and in a soft voice said, "You knew?"

Saphira lifted her head from the ground. *Oh, Eragon, I wanted to tell you. It pained me to see how Murtagh's words tormented you and yet to be unable to help you. I tried to help—I tried so many times—but like Oromis and Glaedr, I too swore in the ancient language to keep Brom's identity a secret from you, and I could not break my oath*.

"Wh-when did he tell you?" Eragon asked, so agitated that he continued speaking out loud.

The day after the Urgals attacked us outside of Teirm, while you were still unconscious.

"Was that also when he told you how to contact the Varden in Gil'ead?"

Yes. Before I knew what Brom wished to say, he had me swear to never speak of this with you unless you found out on your own. To my regret, I agreed.

"Is there anything else he told you?" demanded Eragon, his anger rising again. "Any other secrets I ought to know, like that Murtagh isn't my only sibling, or perhaps how to defeat Galbatorix?"

During the two days Brom and I spent hunting the Urgals, Brom

recounted the details of his life to me so that if he died, and if ever you learned of your relation to him, his son could know what kind of a man he was and why he had acted as he did. Also, Brom gave me a gift for you.

A gift?

A memory of him speaking to you as your father and not as Brom the storyteller.

"Before Saphira shares this memory with you, however," said Oromis, and Eragon realized she had allowed the elf to hear her words, "it would be best, I think, if you knew how this came to pass. Will you listen to me for a while, Eragon?"

Eragon hesitated, unsure of what he wanted, then nodded.

Lifting his crystal goblet, Oromis drank of his wine, then returned the goblet to the table and said: "As you know, both Brom and Morzan were my apprentices. Brom, who was the younger by three years, held Morzan in such high esteem, he allowed Morzan to belittle him, order him about, and otherwise treat him most shamefully."

In a raspy voice, Eragon said, "It's hard to imagine Brom letting anyone order him about."

Oromis inclined his head in a quick, birdlike dip. "And yet, so it was. Brom loved Morzan as a brother, despite his behavior. It was only once Morzan betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix and the Forsworn killed Saphira, Brom's dragon, that Brom realized the true nature of Morzan's character. As strong as Brom's affection for Morzan had been, it was like a candle before an inferno compared with the hatred that replaced it. Brom swore to thwart Morzan however and wherever he could, to undo his accomplishments and reduce his ambitions to bitter regrets. I cautioned Brom against a path so full of hate and violence, but he was mad with grief from the death of Saphira, and he would not listen to me.

"In the decades that followed, Brom's hatred never weakened, nor did he falter in his efforts to depose Galbatorix, kill the Forsworn, and, above all else, to repay Morzan the hurts he had suffered. Brom was persistence embodied, his name a nightmare for the Forsworn and a beacon of hope for those who still had the spirit to resist the Empire." Oromis looked toward the white line of the horizon and took another draught of his wine. "I am rather proud of what he achieved on his own and without the aid of his dragon. It is always heartening for a teacher to see one of his students excel, however it might be.… But I digress. It so happened, then, that some twenty years ago, the Varden began to receive reports from their spies within the Empire about the activities of a mysterious woman known only as the Black Hand."

"My mother," said Eragon.

"Your mother and Murtagh's," said Oromis. "At first the Varden knew nothing about her, save that she was extremely dangerous and

that she was loyal to the Empire. In time, and after a great deal of bloodshed, it became apparent that she served Morzan, and Morzan alone, and that he had come to depend upon her to carry out his will throughout the Empire. Upon learning of this, Brom set out to kill the Black Hand and so to strike at Morzan. Since the Varden could not predict where your mother might appear next, Brom traveled to Morzan's castle and spied upon it until he was able to devise a means of infiltrating the hold."

"Where was Morzan's castle?"

"*Is*, not *was*; the castle still stands. Galbatorix uses it for himself now. It is situated among the foothills of the Spine, near the northwestern shore of Leona Lake, hidden well away from the rest of the land."

Eragon said, "Jeod told me that Brom snuck into the castle by pretending to be one of the servants."

"He did, and it was no easy task. Morzan had impregnated his fortress with hundreds of spells designed to protect him from his enemies. He also forced everyone who served him to swear oaths of fealty, and often with their true names. However, after much experimentation, Brom managed to find a flaw in Morzan's wards that allowed him to procure a position as a gardener on his estate, and it was in that guise he first met your mother."

Glancing down at his hands, Eragon said, "And then he seduced her to hurt Morzan, I suppose."

"Not at all," replied Oromis. "That may have been his intention to begin with, but then something happened neither he nor your mother anticipated: they fell in love. Whatever affection your mother once had for Morzan had vanished by then, expunged by his cruel treatment of her and their newborn child, Murtagh. I do not know the exact sequence of events, but at some point Brom revealed his true identity to your mother. Instead of betraying him, she began to supply the Varden with information about Galbatorix, Morzan, and the rest of the Empire."

"But," said Eragon, "didn't Morzan have her swear oaths of fealty to him in the ancient language? How could she turn against him?"

A smile appeared on Oromis's thin lips. "She could because Morzan allowed her somewhat more freedom than his other servants so that she could use her own ingenuity and initiative while carrying out his orders. In his arrogance, Morzan believed that her love for him would ensure her loyalty better than any oath. Also, she was not the same woman who had bound herself to Morzan; becoming a mother and meeting Brom altered her character to such a degree that her true name changed, which released her from her previous commitments. If Morzan had been more careful—if, for example, he had cast a spell

that would alert him if ever she failed to abide by her promises—he would have known the moment he lost control over her. But that was always a shortcoming of Morzan's; he would devise a cunning spell, but then it would fail because, in his impatience, he overlooked some crucial detail."

Eragon frowned. "Why didn't my mother leave Morzan once she had the chance?"

"After all she had done in Morzan's name, she felt it was her duty to help the Varden. But more importantly, she could not bring herself to abandon Murtagh to his father."

"Couldn't she have taken him with her?"

"If it had been within her power, I am sure she would have. Morzan realized that the child gave him a vast amount of control over your mother. He forced her to surrender Murtagh to a wet nurse and only allowed her to visit him at infrequent intervals. What Morzan did not know is that, during those intervals, she also visited Brom."

Oromis turned to watch a pair of swallows cavorting in the blue sky. In profile, his delicate, slanted features reminded Eragon of a hawk or a sleek cat. Still gazing at the swallows, Oromis said, "Not even your mother could anticipate where Morzan would send her next, nor when she could return to his castle. Therefore, Brom had to remain on Morzan's estate for extended lengths of time if he wished to see her. For nigh on three years, Brom served as one of Morzan's gardeners. Now and then, he would slip away to send a message to the Varden or to communicate with his spies throughout the Empire, but other than that, he did not leave the castle grounds."

"Three years! Wasn't he afraid that Morzan might see him and recognize him?"

Oromis lowered his gaze from the heavens, returning it to Eragon. "Brom was most adept at disguising himself, and it had been many years since he and Morzan had last stood face to face."

"Ah." Eragon twisted his goblet between his fingers, studying how the light refracted through the crystal. "Then what happened?"

"Then," said Oromis, "one of Brom's agents in Teirm made contact with a young scholar by the name of Jeod who wished to join the Varden and who claimed to have discovered evidence of a hitherto-secret tunnel that led into the elf-built portion of the castle in Urû'baen. Brom rightly felt that Jeod's discovery was too important to ignore, so he packed his bags, made his excuses to his fellow servants, and then departed for Teirm with all possible haste."

"What of my mother?"

"She had left a month before on another of Morzan's missions."

Struggling to weld a cohesive whole out of the fragmented accounts he had heard from various people, Eragon said, "So then … Brom met

with Jeod, and once he was convinced the tunnel was real, he arranged for one of the Varden to attempt to steal the three dragon eggs Galbatorix was holding in Urû'baen."

Oromis's face darkened. "Unfortunately, for reasons that have never become entirely clear, the man they selected for the task, a certain Hefring of Furnost, succeeded in filching only one egg—Saphira's—from Galbatorix's treasury, and once he had possession of it, he fled from both the Varden and Galbatorix's servants. Because of his betrayal, Brom had to spend the next seven months chasing Hefring back and forth across the land in a desperate attempt to recapture Saphira."

"And during that time, my mother traveled in secret to Carvahall, where she gave birth to me five months later?"

Oromis nodded. "You were conceived just before your mother set forth upon her last mission. As a result, Brom knew nothing of her condition while he was pursuing Hefring and Saphira's egg.… When Brom and Morzan finally confronted each other in Gil'ead, Morzan asked Brom whether he had been responsible for the disappearance of his Black Hand. It is understandable that Morzan would suspect Brom's involvement, since Brom had arranged the deaths of several of the Forsworn. Brom, of course, immediately concluded that something terrible had befallen your mother. He later told me it was that belief which gave him the strength and fortitude he needed to kill Morzan and his dragon. Once they were dead, Brom took Saphira's egg from Morzan's corpse—for Morzan had already located Hefring and seized the egg from him—and then Brom left the city, pausing only long enough to hide Saphira where he knew the Varden would eventually find her."

"So that's why Jeod thought Brom died in Gil'ead," said Eragon.

Again Oromis nodded. "Stricken by fear, Brom dared not wait for his companions. Even if your mother was alive and well, Brom worried that Galbatorix would decide to make Selena his own Black Hand and that she would never again have the chance to escape her service to the Empire."

Eragon felt tears wet his eyes. *How Brom must have loved her, to leave everyone behind as soon as he knew she was in danger*.

"From Gil'ead, Brom rode straight to Morzan's estate, stopping only to sleep. For all his speed, however, he was still too slow. When he reached the castle, he discovered that your mother had returned a fortnight prior, sick and weary from her mysterious journey. Morzan's healers tried to save her, but in spite of their efforts, she had passed into the void just hours before Brom arrived at the castle."

"He never saw her again?" Eragon asked, his throat tightening.

"Never again." Oromis paused, and his expression softened. "Losing

her was, I think, almost as difficult for Brom as losing his dragon, and it quenched much of the fire within his soul. He did not give up, though, nor did he go mad as he had for a time when the Forsworn slew Saphira's namesake. Instead, he decided to discover the reason for your mother's death and to punish those who were responsible if he could. He questioned Morzan's healers and forced them to describe your mother's ailments. From what they said, and also from gossip he heard among the servants on the estate, Brom guessed the truth about your mother's pregnancy. Possessed of that hope, he rode to the one place he knew to look: your mother's home in Carvahall. And there he found you in the care of your aunt and uncle.

"Brom did not stay in Carvahall, however. As soon as he assured himself that no one in Carvahall knew your mother had been the Black Hand and that you were in no imminent danger, Brom returned in secret to Farthen Dûr, where he revealed himself to Deynor, who was the leader of the Varden at that time. Deynor was astounded to see him, for until that moment, everyone had believed that Brom had perished in Gil'ead. Brom convinced Deynor to keep his presence a secret from all but a select few, and then—"

Eragon raised a finger. "But why? Why pretend to be dead?"

"Brom wanted to live long enough to help instruct the new Rider, and he knew the only way he could avoid being assassinated in retaliation for killing Morzan would be if Galbatorix believed he was already dead and buried. Also, Brom hoped to avoid attracting unwarranted attention to Carvahall. He intended to settle there in order to be close to you, as indeed he did, but he was determined that the Empire should not learn of your existence as a result.

"While in Farthen Dûr, Brom helped the Varden negotiate the agreement with Queen Islanzadí over how the elves and the humans would share custody of the egg and how the new Rider would be trained, if and when the egg should hatch. Then Brom accompanied Arya as she carried the egg from Farthen Dûr to Ellesméra. When he arrived, he told Glaedr and me what I have now told you, so that the truth about your parentage would not be forgotten if he should die. That was the last time I ever saw him. From here, Brom returned to Carvahall, where he introduced himself as a bard and storyteller. What happened thereafter, you know better than I."

Oromis fell silent, and for a time, no one spoke.

Staring at the ground, Eragon reviewed everything Oromis had told him and tried to sort out his feelings. At last he said, "And Brom really is my father, not Morzan? I mean, if my mother was Morzan's consort, then …" He trailed off, too embarrassed to continue.

"You are your father's son," Oromis said, "and your father is Brom. Of that there is no doubt."

"No doubt whatsoever?"

Oromis shook his head. "None."

A sense of giddiness gripped Eragon, and he realized he had been holding his breath. Exhaling, he said, "I think I understand why"—he paused to fill his lungs—"why Brom didn't say anything about this before I found Saphira's egg, but why didn't he tell me afterward? And why did he swear you and Saphira to such secrecy? … Didn't he want to claim me as his son? Was he ashamed of me?"

"I cannot pretend to know the reasons for everything Brom did, Eragon. However, of this much I am confident: Brom wanted nothing more than to name you his son and to raise you, but he dared not reveal that you were related, lest the Empire should find out and try to hurt him through you. His prudence was warranted too. Look how Galbatorix strove to capture your cousin so that he could use Roran to force you to surrender."

"Brom could have told my uncle," Eragon protested. "Garrow wouldn't have betrayed Brom to the Empire."

"Think, Eragon. If you had been living with Brom, and if word of Brom's survival had reached the ears of Galbatorix's spies, you both would have had to flee Carvahall for fear of your lives. By keeping the truth hidden from you, Brom hoped to protect you from those dangers."

"He didn't succeed. We had to flee Carvahall anyway."

"Yes," said Oromis. "Brom's mistake, as it were, although I judge it has yielded more good than ill, was that he could not bear to separate himself entirely from you. If he had had the strength to refrain from returning to Carvahall, you never would have found Saphira's egg, the Ra'zac would not have killed your uncle, and many things that were not, would have been; and many things that are, would not be. He could not cut you out of his heart, though."

Eragon clenched his jaw as a tremor coursed through him. "And after he learned Saphira had hatched for me?"

Oromis hesitated, and his calm expression became somewhat troubled. "I am not sure, Eragon. It may have been that Brom was still trying to protect you from his enemies, and he did not tell you for the same reason he did not bring you to the Varden straightaway: because it would have been more than you were ready for. Perhaps he was planning to tell you just before you went to the Varden. If I had to guess, though, I would guess that Brom held his tongue not because he was ashamed of you but because he had become accustomed to living with his secrets and was loath to part with them. And because—and this is no more than speculation—because he was uncertain how you might react to his revelation. By your own account, you were not that well acquainted with Brom before you left Carvahall with him. It is

quite possible he was afraid that you might hate him if he told you he was your father."

"Hate him?" exclaimed Eragon. "I wouldn't have hated him. Although … I might not have believed him."

"And would you have trusted him after such a revelation?"

Eragon bit the inside of his cheek. *No, I wouldn't have*.

Continuing, Oromis said, "Brom did the best he could in what were incredibly trying circumstances. Before all else, it was his responsibility to keep the two of you alive and to teach and advise you, Eragon, so that you would not use your power for selfish means, as Galbatorix has done. In that, Brom acquitted himself with distinction. He may not have been the father you wished him to be, but he gave you as great an inheritance as any son has ever had."

"It was no more than he would have done for whoever became the new Rider."

"That does not diminish its value," Oromis pointed out. "But you are mistaken; Brom did more for you than he would have for anyone else. You need only think of how he sacrificed himself to save your life to know the truth of that."

With the nail of his right index finger, Eragon picked at the edge of the table, following a faint ridge formed by one of the rings in the wood. "And it really was an accident that Arya sent Saphira to me?"

"It was," Oromis confirmed. "But it was not entirely a coincidence. Instead of transporting the egg to the father, Arya made it appear before the son."

"How could that be if she had no knowledge of me?"

Oromis's thin shoulders rose and fell. "Despite thousands of years of study, we still cannot predict or explain all of the effects of magic."

Eragon continued to finger the small ridge in the edge of the table. *I have a father*, he thought. *I watched him die, and I had no idea who he was to me*.… "My parents," he said, "were they ever married?"

"I know why you ask, Eragon, and I do not know if my answer will satisfy you. Marriage is not an elvish custom, and the subtleties of it often escape me. No one joined Brom's and Selena's hands in marriage, but I know that they considered themselves to be husband and wife. If you are wise, you will not worry that others of your race may call you a bastard but rather be content to know that you are your parents' child and that they both gave their lives that you might live."

It surprised Eragon how calm he felt. His entire life he had speculated about the identity of his father. When Murtagh had claimed it was Morzan, the revelation had shocked Eragon as deeply as had the death of Garrow. Glaedr's counterclaim that Eragon's father was Brom had also shocked him, but the shock did not seem to have

lasted, perhaps because, this time, the news was not as upsetting. Calm as he was, Eragon thought that it might be many years before he was certain of his feelings toward either of his parents. *My father was a Rider and my mother was Morzan's consort and Black Hand*.

"Could I tell Nasuada?" he asked.

Oromis spread his hands. "Tell whomever you wish; the secret is now yours to do with as you please. I doubt you would be in any more danger if the whole world knew you were Brom's heir."

"Murtagh," Eragon said. "He believes we are full brothers. He told me so in the ancient language."

"And I am sure Galbatorix does as well. It was the Twins who figured out that Murtagh's mother and your mother were one and the same person, and this they conveyed to the king. But they could not have informed him of Brom's involvement, for there was no one among the Varden who was privy to that information."

Eragon glanced up as a pair of swallows swooped by overhead, and he allowed himself a wry half smile.

"Why do you smile?" Oromis asked.

"I'm not sure you would understand."

The elf folded his hands in his lap. "I might not; that is true. But then, you cannot know for certain unless you try to explain."

It took Eragon a while to find the words he needed. "When I was younger, before … all of *this*"—he gestured at Saphira and Oromis and Glaedr and the world in general—"I used to amuse myself by imagining that, because of her great wit and beauty, my mother had been taken in among the courts of Galbatorix's nobles. I imagined that she had traveled from city to city and supped with the earls and ladies in their halls and that … well, she had fallen desperately in love with a rich and powerful man, but for some reason, she was forced to hide me from him, so she gave me to Garrow and Marian for safekeeping, and one day she would return and tell me who I was and that she had never wanted to leave me behind."

"That is not so different from what happened," said Oromis.

"No, it isn't, but … I imagined that my mother and my father were people of importance and I was someone of importance as well. Fate gave me what I wanted, but the truth of it is not as grand or as happy as I thought it would be.… I was smiling at my own ignorance, I suppose, and also at the unlikeliness of everything that has befallen me."

A light breeze swept across the clearing, feathering the grass at their feet and stirring the branches of the forest around them. Eragon watched the fluttering of the grass for a few moments, then slowly asked, "Was my mother a good person?"

"I could not say, Eragon. The events of her life were complicated. It

would be foolish and arrogant of me to presume to pass judgment on one I know so little of."

"But I need to know!" Eragon clasped his hands, pressing his fingers between the calluses on his knuckles. "When I asked Brom if he had known her, he said that she was proud and dignified and that she always helped the poor and those less fortunate than her. How could she, though? How could she be that person and also the Black Hand? Jeod told me stories about some of the things—horrible, terrible things—she did while she was in Morzan's service.… Was she evil, then? Did she not care if Galbatorix ruled or not? Why did she go with Morzan in the first place?"

Oromis paused. "Love can be a terrible curse, Eragon. It can make you overlook even the largest flaws in a person's behavior. I doubt that your mother was fully aware of Morzan's true nature when she left Carvahall with him, and once she had, he would not have allowed her to disobey his wishes. She became his slave in all but name, and it was only by changing her very identity that she was able to escape his control."

"But Jeod said that she enjoyed what she did as the Black Hand."

An expression of faint disdain altered Oromis's features. "Accounts of past atrocities are often exaggerated and distorted. That much you should keep in mind. No one but your mother knows exactly what she did, nor why, nor how she felt about it, and she is not still among the living to explain herself."

"Whom should I believe, though?" pleaded Eragon. "Brom or Jeod?"

"When you asked Brom about your mother, he told you what he thought were her most important qualities. My advice would be to trust in his knowledge of her. If that does not quell your doubts, remember that whatever crimes she may have committed while acting as the Hand of Morzan, ultimately your mother sided with the Varden and went to extraordinary lengths to protect you. Knowing that, you should not torment yourself further about the nature of her character."

Propelled by the breeze, a spider hanging from a gossamer strand of silk drifted past Eragon, rising and falling on the invisible eddies of air. When the spider had floated out of view, Eragon said, "The first time we visited Tronjheim, the fortuneteller Angela told me that it was Brom's wyrd to fail at everything he attempted, except for killing Morzan."

Oromis inclined his head. "One might think that. Another might conclude that Brom achieved many great and difficult things. It depends upon how you choose to view the world. The words of fortunetellers are rarely easy to decipher. It has been my experience that their predictions are never conducive to peace of mind. If you

wish to be happy, Eragon, think not of what is to come nor of that which you have no control over but rather of the now and of that which you are able to change."

A thought occurred to Eragon then. "Blagden," he said, referring to the white raven who was Queen Islanzadí's companion. "He knows about Brom as well, doesn't he?"

One of Oromis's sharp eyebrows lifted. "Does he? I never spoke of it to him. He is a fickle creature and not to be relied upon."

"The day Saphira and I left for the Burning Plains, he recited a riddle to me.… I can't remember every line, but it was something about one of two being one, while one might be two. I think he might have been hinting that Murtagh and I only share a single parent."

"It is not impossible," said Oromis. "Blagden was here in Ellesméra when Brom told me about you. I would not be surprised if that sharp-beaked thief happened to be perched in a nearby tree during our conversation. Eavesdropping is an unfortunate habit of his. It might also be that his riddle was the result of one of his sporadic fits of foresight."

A moment later, Glaedr stirred, and Oromis turned and glanced back at the golden dragon. The elf rose from his chair with a graceful motion, saying, "Fruit, nuts, and bread are fine fare, but after your trip, you should have something more substantial to fill your belly. I have a soup that needs tending simmering in my hut, but please, do not bestir yourself. I will bring it to you when it is ready." His footsteps soft upon the grass, Oromis walked to his bark-covered house and disappeared inside. As the carved door closed, Glaedr huffed out his breath and closed his eyes, seeming to fall asleep.

And all was silent, save the rustle of the wind-tossed branches.

Eragon remained sitting at the round table for several minutes, then he stood and walked to the edge of the Crags of Tel'naeír, where he gazed out over the rolling forest a thousand feet below. With the tip of his left boot, he pushed a pebble over the cliff and watched it bounce off the slanted face of the stone until it vanished into the depths of the canopy.

A branch cracked as Saphira approached from behind. She crouched by his side, her scales painting him with hundreds of shifting flecks of blue light, and stared in the same direction as he. *Are you angry with me?* she asked.

No, of course not. I understand that you could not break your oath in the ancient language.… I just wish that Brom could have told me this himself and that he hadn't felt it necessary to hide the truth from me.

She swung her head toward him. *And how do you feel, Eragon?*

You know as well as I.

A few minutes ago, I did, but not now. You have grown still, and looking into your mind is like peering into a lake so deep, I cannot see the bottom. What is in you, little one? Is it rage? Is it happiness? Or have you no emotions to give?

What is in me is acceptance, he said, and turned to face her. *I cannot change who my parents are; I reconciled myself with that after the Burning Plains. What is is, and no amount of gnashing teeth on my part will change that. I am … glad, I think, to consider Brom my father. But I'm not sure.… It's too much to grasp all at once*.

Perhaps what I have to give you will help. Would you like to see the memory Brom left for you, or would you prefer to wait?

No, no waiting, he said. *If we delay, you may never have the opportunity*.

Then close your eyes and let me show you what once was.

Eragon did as she directed, and from Saphira, there flowed a stream of sensations: sights, sounds, smells, and more, everything that she had been experiencing at the time of the memory.

Before him, Eragon beheld a glade in the forest somewhere among the foothills piled against the western side of the Spine. The grass was thick and lush, and veils of chartreuse lichen hung from the tall, drooping, moss-covered trees. Due to the rains that swept inland from the ocean, the woods were far greener and wetter than those of Palancar Valley. As seen through Saphira's eyes, the greens and reds were more subdued than they would have been to Eragon, while every

hue of blue shone with additional intensity. The smell of moist soil and punky wood suffused the air.

And in the center of the glade lay a fallen tree, and upon the fallen tree sat Brom.

The hood of the old man's robe was pulled back to expose his bare head. Across his lap lay his sword. His twisted, rune-carved staff stood propped against the log. The ring Aren glittered on his right hand.

For a long while, Brom did not move, and then he squinted up at the sky, his hooked nose casting a long shadow across his face. His voice rasped, and Eragon swayed, feeling disjointed in time.

Brom said, "Ever the sun traces its path from horizon to horizon, and ever the moon follows, and ever the days roll past without care for the lives they grind away, one by one." Lowering his eyes, Brom gazed straight at Saphira and, through her, Eragon. "Try though they might, no being escapes death forever, not even the elves or the spirits. To all, there is an end. If you are watching me, Eragon, then my end has come and I am dead and you know that I am your father."

From the leather pouch by his side, Brom drew forth his pipe, filled it with cardus weed, then lit it with a soft muttering of "Brisingr." He puffed on the pipe several times to set the fire before he resumed talking. "If you do see this, Eragon, I hope that you are safe and happy and that Galbatorix is dead. However, I realize that's unlikely, if for no other reason than you are a Dragon Rider, and a Dragon Rider may never rest while there is injustice in the land."

A chuckle escaped Brom and he shook his head, his beard rippling like water. "Ah, I have not the time to say even half of what I would like; I would be twice my current age before I finished. In the pursuit of brevity, I shall assume that Saphira has already told you how your mother and I met, how Selena died, and how I came to be in Carvahall. I wish that you and I could have this talk face to face, Eragon, and perhaps we still shall and Saphira will have no need to share this memory with you, but I doubt it. The sorrows of my years press on me, Eragon, and I feel a cold creeping into my limbs the likes of which has never troubled me before. I think it is because I know it is now your turn to take up the standard. There is much I still hope to accomplish, but none of it is for myself, only for you, and you shall eclipse everything I have done. Of that, I am sure. Before my grave closes over me, though, I wanted to be able, at least this once, to call you my son.… My son.… Your whole life, Eragon, I have longed to reveal to you who I was. It has been a pleasure like no other for me to watch you growing up, but also a torture like no other because of the secret I held in my heart."

Brom laughed then, a harsh, barking sound. "Well, I didn't exactly manage to keep you safe from the Empire, now did I? If you are still

wondering who was responsible for Garrow's death, you need look no further, for here he sits. It was my own foolishness. I should never have returned to Carvahall. And now look: Garrow dead, and you a Dragon Rider. I warn you, Eragon, beware of whom you fall in love with, for fate seems to have a morbid interest in our family."

Wrapping his lips around the stem of his pipe, Brom drew on the smoldering cardus weed several times, blowing the chalk-white smoke off to one side. The pungent smell was heavy in Saphira's nostrils. Brom said, "I have my share of regrets, but you are not one of them, Eragon. You may occasionally behave like a moon-addled fool, such as letting these blasted Urgals escape, but you are no more of an idiot than I was at your age." He nodded. "Less of an idiot, in fact. I am proud to have you as my son, Eragon, prouder than you will ever know. I never thought that you would become a Rider as I was, nor wished that future upon you, but seeing you with Saphira, ah, it makes me feel like crowing at the sun like a rooster."

Brom drew on the pipe again. "I realize you may be angry at me for keeping this from you. I can't say I would have been happy to discover the name of my own father this way. Whether you like it or not, though, we are family, you and I. Since I could not give you the care I owed you as your father, I will give you the one thing I can instead, and that is advice. Hate me if you wish, Eragon, but heed what I have to say, for I know whereof I speak."

With his free hand, Brom grasped the sheath of his sword, the veins prominent on the back of his hand. He fixed the pipe in one corner of his mouth. "Right. Now, my advice is twofold. Whatever you do, protect those you care for. Without them, life is more miserable than you can imagine. An obvious statement, I know, but no less true because of it. There, that is the first part of my advice. As for the rest … If you are so fortunate as to have already killed Galbatorix—or if *anyone* has succeeded in slitting that traitor's throat—then congratulations. If *not*, then you must realize that Galbatorix is your greatest and most dangerous enemy. Until he is dead, neither you nor Saphira will ever find peace. You may run to the farthest corners of the earth, but unless you join the Empire, one day you will have to confront Galbatorix. I am sorry, Eragon, but that is the truth of it. I have fought many magicians, and several of the Forsworn, and so far, I have always defeated my opponents." The lines on Brom's forehead deepened. "Well, all but once, but that was because I was not yet fully grown. Anyway, the reason I have always emerged triumphant is that I use my brain, unlike most. I am not a strong spellcaster, nor are you, compared with Galbatorix, but when it comes to a wizards' duel, *intelligence* is even more important than strength. The way to defeat another magician is not by battering blindly against his mind. No! In

order to ensure victory, you have to figure out how your enemy interprets information and reacts to the world. Then you will know his weaknesses, and there you strike. The trick isn't inventing a spell no one else has ever thought of before; the trick is finding a spell your enemy has overlooked and using it against him. The trick isn't plowing your way through the barriers in someone's mind; the trick is slipping underneath or around the barriers. No one is omniscient, Eragon. Remember that. Galbatorix may have immense power, but he cannot anticipate every possibility. Whatever you do, you must remain nimble in your thinking. Do not become so attached to any one belief that you cannot see past it to another possibility. Galbatorix is mad and therefore unpredictable, but he also has gaps in his reasoning that an ordinary person would not. If you can find those, Eragon, then perhaps you and Saphira can defeat him."

Brom lowered his pipe, his face grave. "I hope you do. My greatest desire, Eragon, is that you and Saphira will live long and fruitful lives, free from fear of Galbatorix and the Empire. I wish that I could protect you from all of the dangers that threaten you, but alas, that is not within my ability. All I can do is give you my advice and teach you what I can *now* while I am still here.… My son. Whatever happens to you, know that I love you, and so did your mother. May the stars watch over you, Eragon Bromsson."

As Brom's final words echoed in Eragon's mind, the memory faded away, leaving behind empty darkness. Eragon opened his eyes and was embarrassed to find tears running down his cheeks. He uttered a choked laugh and wiped his eyes on the edge of his tunic. *Brom really was afraid that I would hate him*, he said, and sniffed.

Are you going to be all right? Saphira asked.

Yes, said Eragon, and lifted his head. *I think I will, actually. I don't like some of the things Brom did, but I am proud to call him my father and to carry his name. He was a great man.… It bothers me, though, that I never had the opportunity to talk to either of my parents as my parents*.

At least you were able to spend time with Brom. I am not so fortunate; both my sire and my mother died long before I hatched. The closest I can come to meeting them are a few hazy memories from Glaedr.

Eragon put a hand on her neck, and they comforted each other as best they could while they stood upon the edge of the Crags of Tel'naeír and gazed out over the forest of the elves.

Not long afterward, Oromis emerged from his hut, carrying two bowls of soup, and Eragon and Saphira turned away from the crags and slowly walked back to the small table in front of Glaedr's immense bulk.

As Eragon pushed away his empty bowl, Oromis said, “Would you like to see a fairth of your mother, Eragon?”

Eragon froze for a moment, astonished. “Yes, please.”

From within the folds of his white tunic, Oromis withdrew a shingle of thin gray slate, which he passed to Eragon.

The stone was cool and smooth between Eragon’s fingers. On the other side of it, he knew he would find a perfect likeness of his mother, painted by means of a spell with pigments an elf had set within the slate many years ago. A flutter of uneasiness ran through Eragon. He had always wanted to see his mother, but now that the opportunity was before him, he was afraid that the reality might disappoint him.

With an effort, he turned the slate over and beheld an image—clear as a vision seen through a window—of a garden of red and white roses lit by the pale rays of dawn. A gravel path ran through the beds of roses. And in the middle of the path was a woman, kneeling, cupping a white rose between her hands and smelling the flower, her eyes closed and a faint smile upon her lips. She was very beautiful, Eragon thought. Her expression was soft and tender, yet she wore clothes of padded leather, with blackened bracers upon her forearms and greaves upon her shins and a sword and dagger hanging from her waist. In the shape of her face, Eragon could detect a hint of his own features, as well as a certain resemblance to Garrow, her brother.

The image fascinated Eragon. He pressed his hand against the surface of the fairth, wishing that he could reach into it and touch her on the arm.

Mother.

Oromis said, “Brom gave me the fairth for safekeeping before he left for Carvahall, and now I give it to you.”

Without looking up, Eragon asked, “Would you keep it safe for me as well? It might get broken during our traveling and fighting.”

The pause that followed caught Eragon’s attention. He wrenched his gaze away from his mother to see that Oromis appeared melancholy and preoccupied. “No, Eragon, I cannot. You will have to make other arrangements for the preservation of the fairth.”

Why? Eragon wanted to ask, but the sorrow in Oromis’s eyes dissuaded him.

Then Oromis said, “Your time here is limited, and we still have many matters to discuss. Shall I guess which subject you would like to

address next, or will you tell me?"

With great reluctance, Eragon placed the fairth on the table and rotated it so that the image was upside down. "The two times we have fought Murtagh and Thorn, Murtagh has been more powerful than any human ought to be. On the Burning Plains, he defeated Saphira and me because we did not realize how strong he was. If not for his change of heart, we would be prisoners in Urû'baen right now. You once mentioned that you know how Galbatorix has become so powerful. Will you tell us now, Master? For our own safety, we need to know."

"It is not my place to tell you this," said Oromis.

"Then whose is it?" demanded Eragon. "You can't—"

Behind Oromis, Glaedr opened one of his molten eyes, which was as large as a round shield, and said, *It is mine.… The source of Galbatorix's power lies in the hearts of dragons. From us, he steals his strength. Without our aid, Galbatorix would have fallen to the elves and the Varden long ago*.

Eragon frowned. "I don't understand. Why would you help Galbatorix? And how could you? There are only four dragons and an egg left in Alagaësia … aren't there?"

Many of the dragons whose bodies Galbatorix and the Forsworn slew are still alive today.

"Still alive …?" Bewildered, Eragon glanced at Oromis, but the elf remained quiet, his face inscrutable. Even more disconcerting was that Saphira did not seem to share Eragon's confusion.

The gold dragon turned his head on his paws to better look at Eragon, his scales scraping against one another. *Unlike with most creatures*, he said, *a dragon's consciousness does not reside solely within our skulls. There is in our chests a hard, gemlike object, similar in composition to our scales, called the Eldunarí, which means "the heart of hearts." When a dragon hatches, their Eldunarí is clear and lusterless. Usually it remains so all through a dragon's life and dissolves along with the dragon's corpse when they die. However, if we wish, we can transfer our consciousness into the Eldunarí. Then it will acquire the same color as our scales and begin to glow like a coal. If a dragon has done this, the Eldunarí will outlast the decay of their flesh, and a dragon's essence may live on indefinitely. Also, a dragon can disgorge their Eldunarí while they are still alive. By this means, a dragon's body and a dragon's consciousness can exist separately and yet still be linked, which can be most useful in certain circumstances. But to do this exposes us to great danger, for whosoever holds our Eldunarí holds our very soul in their hands. With it, they could force us to do their bidding, no matter how vile*.

The implications of what Glaedr had said astounded Eragon. Shifting his gaze to Saphira, he asked, *Did you already know about this?*

The scales on her neck rippled as she made an odd, serpentine

motion with her head. *I have always been aware of my heart of hearts. Always I have been able to feel it inside of me, but I never thought to mention it to you.*

How could you not when it's of such significance?

Would you think it worthy of mention that you have a stomach, Eragon? Or a heart or a liver or any other organ? My Eldunarí is an integral part of who I am. I never considered its existence worthy of note.… At least not until we last came to Ellesméra.

So you did know!

Only a little. Glaedr hinted that my heart of hearts was more important than I had originally believed, and he warned me to protect it, lest I inadvertently deliver myself into the hands of our enemies. More than that he did not explain, but since then, I inferred much of what he just said.

Yet you still did not think this was worth mentioning? demanded Eragon.

I wanted to, she growled, *but as with Brom, I gave my word to Glaedr that I would speak of this to no one, not even to you.*

And you agreed?

I trust Glaedr, and I trust Oromis. Do you not?

Eragon scowled and turned back to the elf and the golden dragon. "Why didn't you tell us of this sooner?"

Unstoppering the decanter, Oromis refilled his goblet with wine and said, "In order to protect Saphira."

"Protect her? From what?"

From you, Glaedr said. Eragon was so surprised and outraged, he failed to regain his composure well enough to protest before Glaedr resumed speaking. *In the wild, a dragon would learn about his Eldunarí from one of his elders when he was old enough to understand the use of it. That way, a dragon would not transfer themself into their heart of hearts without knowing the full import of their actions. Among the Riders, a different custom arose. The first few years of partnership between a dragon and a Rider are crucial to establishing a healthy relationship between the two, and the Riders discovered that it was better to wait until newly joined Riders and dragons were well familiar with each other before informing them of the Eldunarí. Otherwise, in the reckless folly of youth, a dragon might decide to disgorge his heart of hearts merely to appease or impress his Rider. When we give up our Eldunarí, we are giving up a physical embodiment of our entire being. And we cannot return it to its original place within our bodies once it is gone. A dragon should not undertake the separation of their consciousness lightly, for it will change how they live the rest of their lives, even if they should endure for another thousand years.*

"Do you still have your heart of hearts within you?" Eragon asked.

The grass around the table bent under the blast of hot air that erupted from Glaedr's nostrils. *That is not a meet question to ask any*

dragon but Saphira. Do not presume to put it to me again, hatchling.

Although Glaedr's rebuke made Eragon's cheeks sting, he still had the wherewithal to respond as he should, with a seated bow and the words "No, Master." Then he asked, "What … what happens if your Eldunarí breaks?"

If a dragon has already transferred their consciousness to their heart of hearts, then they will die a true death. With an audible click, Glaedr blinked, his inner and outer eyelids flashing across the rayed orb of his iris. *Before we formed our pact with the elves, we kept our hearts in Du Fells Nángoröth, the mountains in the center of the Hadarac Desert. Later, after the Riders established themselves on the island of Vroengard and therein built a repository for the Eldunarí, wild dragons and paired dragons both entrusted their hearts to the Riders for safekeeping*.

"So then," said Eragon, "Galbatorix captured the Eldunarí?"

Contrary to Eragon's expectations, it was Oromis who replied. "He did, but not all at once. It had been so long since anyone had truly threatened the Riders, many of our order had become careless about protecting the Eldunarí. At the time Galbatorix turned against us, it was not uncommon for a Rider's dragon to disgorge their Eldunarí merely for the sake of convenience."

"Convenience?"

Anyone who holds one of our hearts, said Glaedr, *may communicate with the dragon from which it came without regard for distance. The whole of Alagaësia might separate a Rider and dragon, and yet if the Rider had with him his dragon's Eldunarí, they could share thoughts as easily as you and Saphira do now*.

"In addition," said Oromis, "a magician who possesses an Eldunarí can draw upon the dragon's strength to bolster his spells, again without regard for where the dragon might be. When—"

A brilliantly colored hummingbird interrupted their conversation by darting across the table. Its wings a throbbing blur, the bird hovered over the bowls of fruit and lapped at the liquid oozing from a crushed blackberry, then flitted up and away, vanishing among the trunks of the forest.

Oromis resumed speaking: "When Galbatorix killed his first Rider, he also stole the heart of the Rider's dragon. During the years Galbatorix spent hiding in the wilderness thereafter, he broke the dragon's mind and bent it to his will, likely with the help of Durza. And when Galbatorix began his insurrection in earnest, with Morzan by his side, he was already stronger than most every other Rider. His strength was not merely magical but mental, for the force of the Eldunarí's consciousness augmented his own.

"Galbatorix did not just try to kill the Riders and dragons. He made it his goal to acquire as many of the Eldunarí as he could, either by

seizing them from Riders or by torturing a Rider until his dragon disgorged its heart of hearts. By the time we realized what Galbatorix was doing, he was already too powerful to stop. It helped Galbatorix that many Riders traveled not only with the Eldunarí of their own dragon but also with Eldunarí of dragons whose bodies were no more, for such dragons often became bored with sitting in an alcove and yearned for adventure. And of course, once Galbatorix and the Forsworn sacked the city of Doru Araeba on the island of Vroengard, he gained possession of the entire hoard of Eldunarí stored therein.

"Galbatorix engineered his success by using the might and wisdom of the dragons against all of Alagaësia. At first he was unable to control more than a handful of the Eldunarí he had captured. It is no easy thing to force a dragon to submit to you, no matter how powerful you might be. As soon as Galbatorix crushed the Riders and had installed himself as king in Urû'baen, he dedicated himself to subduing the rest of the hearts, one by one.

"We believe the task preoccupied him for the main part of the next forty years, during which time he paid little attention to the affairs of Alagaësia—which is why the people of Surda were able to secede from the Empire. When he finished, Galbatorix emerged from seclusion and began to reassert his control over the Empire and the lands beyond. For some reason, after two and a half years of additional slaughter and sorrow, he withdrew to Urû'baen again, and there he has dwelt ever since, not so solitary as before, but obviously focused upon some project known only to him. His vices are many, but he has not abandoned himself to debauchery; that much the Varden's spies have determined. More than that, though, we have not been able to discover."

Lost deep in thought, Eragon stared off into the distance. For the first time, all of the stories he had heard about Galbatorix's unnatural power made sense. A faint feeling of optimism welled up within Eragon as he said to himself, *I'm not sure how, but if we could release the Eldunarí from Galbatorix's control, he would be no more powerful than any normal Dragon Rider*. Unlikely as the prospect seemed, it heartened Eragon to know that the king did have a vulnerability, no matter how slight.

As Eragon continued to muse upon the subject, another question occurred to him. "Why is it that I've never heard mention of the hearts of dragons in the stories of old? Surely if they are so important, the bards and scholars would speak of them."

Oromis laid a hand flat on the table then and said, "Of all the secrets in Alagaësia, that of the Eldunarí is one of the most closely guarded, even among my own people. Throughout history, dragons have striven to hide their hearts from the rest of the world. They

revealed their existence to us only after the magical pact between our races was established, and then only to a select few."

"But why?"

Ah, said Glaedr, *often we despised the need for secrecy, but if ever the Eldunarí had become common knowledge, every low-minded scoundrel in the land would have attempted to steal one, and eventually some would have achieved their goal. It was an outcome we went to great lengths to prevent.*

"Is there no way for a dragon to defend themselves through their Eldunarí?" Eragon asked.

Glaedr's eye seemed to twinkle brighter than ever. *An apt question. A dragon who has disgorged their Eldunarí but who still enjoys the use of their flesh can, of course, defend their heart with their claws and their fangs and their tail and with the battering of their wings. A dragon whose body is dead, however, possesses none of those advantages. Their only weapon is the weapon of their mind and, perhaps, if the moment is right, the weapon of magic, which we cannot command at will. That is one reason why many dragons did not choose to prolong their existence beyond the demise of their flesh. To be unable to move of your own volition, to be unable to sense the world around you except through the minds of others, and to only be able to influence the course of events with your thoughts and with rare and unpredictable flashes of magic; it would be a difficult existence to embrace for most any creature, but especially dragons, who are the freest of all beings*.

"Why would they, then?" asked Eragon.

Sometimes it happened by accident. As their body was failing, a dragon might panic and flee into their Eldunarí. Or if a dragon had disgorged their heart before their body died, they would have no choice but to continue to endure. But mostly, the dragons who chose to live on in their Eldunarí were those who were old beyond measure, older than Oromis and I are now, old enough that the concerns of the flesh had ceased to matter to them and they had turned in on themselves and wished to spend the rest of eternity pondering questions younger beings could not comprehend. We revered and treasured the hearts of such dragons on account of their vast wisdom and intelligence. It was common for wild dragons and paired dragons alike, as well as Riders, to seek advice from them on matters of importance. That Galbatorix enslaved them is a crime of almost unimaginable cruelty and evil.

Now I *have a question*, said Saphira, the rich thrum of her thoughts running through Eragon's mind. *Once one of our kind becomes confined to their Eldunarí, must they continue to exist, or is it possible for them, if they could no longer endure their condition, to release their hold on the world and pass into the darkness beyond?*

"Not on their own," said Oromis. "Not unless the inspiration to use

magic should sweep over the dragon and allow them to break their Eldunarí from within, which to my knowledge has happened but rarely. The only other option would be for the dragon to convince someone else to smash the Eldunarí for them. That lack of control is another reason why dragons were extremely wary of transferring themselves into their heart of hearts, lest they trap themselves in a prison from which there was no escape."

Eragon could feel Saphira's loathing at the thought of that prospect. She did not speak of it, however, but asked, *How many Eldunarí does Galbatorix hold in his thrall?*

"We do not know the exact number," said Oromis, "but we estimate that his hoard contains many hundreds."

A wriggle shimmered down Saphira's glittering length. *So then, our race is not on the verge of extinction after all?*

Oromis hesitated, and it was Glaedr who answered. *Little one*, he said, startling Eragon with the use of the epithet, *even if the ground were covered with Eldunarí, our race would still be doomed. A dragon preserved within an Eldunarí is still a dragon, but they possess neither the urges of the flesh nor the organs with which to fulfill them. They cannot reproduce*.

The base of Eragon's skull began to throb, and he became increasingly aware of his weariness from the past four days of traveling. His exhaustion made it difficult to keep hold of thoughts for more than a few moments; at the slightest distraction, they slipped out of his grasp.

The tip of Saphira's tail twitched. *I am not so ignorant as to believe that Eldunarí could beget offspring. However, it comforts me to know I am not as alone as I once thought.… Our race may be doomed, but at least there are more than four dragons alive in the world, whether they be cloaked in their flesh or not.*

"That is true," said Oromis, "but they are as much Galbatorix's captives as Murtagh and Thorn."

Freeing them gives me something to strive for, though, along with rescuing the last egg, said Saphira.

"It is something for us both to strive for," said Eragon. "We are their only hope." He rubbed his brow with his right thumb, then said, "There is still something I don't understand."

"Oh?" asked Oromis. "Wherein lies your confusion?"

"If Galbatorix draws his power from these hearts, how do they produce the energy he uses?" Eragon paused, searching for a better way to phrase his question. He gestured at the swallows flitting about in the sky. "Every living thing eats and drinks to sustain itself, even plants. Food provides the energy our bodies need to function properly. It also provides the energy we need to work magic, whether we rely

upon our own strength to cast a spell or make use of the strength of others. How can that be, though, with these Eldunarí? They don't have bones and muscles and skin, do they? They don't eat, do they? So then, how do they survive? Where does their energy come from?"

Oromis smiled, his longish teeth glossy as enameled porcelain. "From magic."

"Magic?"

"If one defines magic as the manipulation of energy, which properly it is, then yes, magic. Where exactly the Eldunarí acquire their energy is a mystery to both us and the dragons; no one has ever identified the source. It may be they absorb sunlight, as do plants, or that they feed off the life forces of the creatures closest to them. Whatever the answer, it has been proven that when a dragon undergoes body death and their consciousness takes up sole residence in their heart of hearts, they bring with them however much spare strength was available within their body when it ceased to function. Thereafter, their store of energy increases at a steady pace for the next five to seven years, until they attain the full height of their power, which is immense indeed. The total amount of energy an Eldunarí can hold depends upon the size of the heart; the older a dragon, the larger their Eldunarí and the more energy it can absorb before becoming saturated."

Thinking back to when he and Saphira had battled Murtagh and Thorn, Eragon said, "Galbatorix must have given Murtagh several Eldunarí. That's the only explanation for his increase in strength."

Oromis nodded. "You are fortunate Galbatorix did not lend him any more hearts, else it would have been easy for Murtagh to overwhelm you, Arya, and all the other spellcasters with the Varden."

Eragon remembered how, both times he and Saphira had encountered Murtagh and Thorn, Murtagh's mind had felt as if it contained multiple beings. Eragon shared his recollection with Saphira and said, *Those must have been the Eldunarí I sensed.… I wonder where Murtagh put them? Thorn carried no saddlebags, and I didn't see any odd bulges in Murtagh's clothing*.

I don't know, said Saphira. *You do realize that Murtagh must have been referring to his Eldunarí when he said that instead of tearing out your own heart, it would be better to tear out his hearts*. Hearts, *not* heart.

You're right! Maybe he was trying to warn me. Inhaling, Eragon loosened the knot between his shoulder blades and leaned back in his chair. "Aside from Saphira's heart of hearts, and Glaedr's, are there any Eldunarí that Galbatorix hasn't captured?"

Faint lines appeared around the corners of Oromis's down-turned mouth. "None that we know of. After the fall of the Riders, Brom went searching for Eldunarí that Galbatorix might have overlooked, but

without success. Nor, in all my years of scouring Alagaësia with my mind, have I detected so much as a whisper of a thought from an Eldunarí. Every Eldunarí was well accounted for when Galbatorix and Morzan initiated their attack on us, and none of them vanished without explanation. It is inconceivable that any great store of Eldunarí might be lying hidden somewhere, ready to help us if we could but locate them."

Although Eragon had expected no other answer, he still found it disappointing. "One last question. When either a Rider or a Rider's dragon dies, the surviving member of the pair would often waste away or commit suicide soon afterward. And those that didn't usually went mad from the loss. Am I right?"

You are, said Glaedr.

"What would happen, though, if the dragon transferred their consciousness to their heart and then their body died?"

Through the soles of his boots, Eragon felt a faint tremor shake the ground as Glaedr shifted his position. The gold dragon said, *If a dragon experienced body death and yet their Rider still lived, together they became known as Indlvarn. The transition would hardly be a pleasant one for the dragon, but many Riders and dragons successfully adapted to the change and continued to serve the Riders with distinction. If, however, it was a dragon's Rider who died, then the dragon would often smash their Eldunarí, or arrange for another to smash it for them if their body was no more, thus killing themselves and following their Rider into the void. But not all. Some dragons were able to overcome their loss—as were some Riders, such as Brom—and continue to serve our order for many years afterward, either through their flesh or through their heart of hearts*.

You have given us much to think about, Oromis-elda, said Saphira. Eragon nodded but stayed silent, for he was busy pondering all that had been said.

Eragon nibbled on a warm, sweet strawberry while he stared into the fathomless depths of the sky. When he finished eating the berry, he set the stem on the tray before him, pushing it into just the right spot with the tip of his forefinger, and then opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could, Oromis said, "What now, Eragon?"

"What now?"

"We have spoken at length on those subjects about which you were curious. What now do you and Saphira wish to accomplish? You cannot linger in Ellesméra, so I wonder what else you hope to achieve by your visit, or is it your intention to depart again tomorrow morning?"

"We had hoped," Eragon said, "that, when we returned, we would be able to continue our training as before. Obviously, we haven't time for that now, but there is something else I would like to do."

"And that would be?"

"… Master, I have not told you everything that happened to me when Brom and I were in Teirm." And then Eragon recounted how curiosity had lured him into Angela's shop and how she had told him his fortune, and the advice Solembum had given him afterward.

Oromis drew a finger across his upper lip, his demeanor contemplative. "I have heard this fortuneteller mentioned with increasing frequency throughout this past year, both by you and in Arya's reports from the Varden. This Angela seems to be most adept at turning up whenever and wherever events of significance are about to take place."

That she is, confirmed Saphira.

Continuing, Oromis said, "Her behavior reminds me very much of a human spellcaster who once visited the halls of Ellesméra, although she did not go by the name of Angela. Is Angela a woman of short stature, with thick, curly brown hair, flashing eyes, and a wit that is as sharp as it is odd?"

"You have described her perfectly," said Eragon. "Is she the same person?"

Oromis made a small flicking motion with his left hand. "If she is, she is an extraordinary person.… As for her prophecies, I would not devote much thought to them. Either they will come true or they will not, and without knowing more, none of us can influence the outcome.

"What the werecat said, though, is worthy of far more

consideration. Unfortunately, I cannot elucidate either of his statements. I have never heard of any such place as the Vault of Souls, and while the Rock of Kuthian strikes a familiar chord in my memory, I cannot recall where I have encountered the name. I will search my scrolls for it, but instinct tells me I will find no mention of it in elvish writings."

"What of the weapon underneath the Menoa tree?"

"I know of no such weapon, Eragon, and I am well acquainted with the lore of this forest. In all of Du Weldenvarden, there are perhaps only two elves whose learning exceeds my own where the forest is concerned. I will inquire of them, but I suspect it will be a futile endeavor." When Eragon expressed his disappointment, Oromis said, "I understand that you require a suitable replacement for Zar'roc, Eragon, and this I can help you with. Besides my own blade, Naegling, we elves have preserved two other swords of the Dragon Riders. They are Arvindr and Támerlein. Arvindr is currently held in the city of Nädindel, which you have not the time to visit. But Támerlein is here, in Ellesméra. It is a treasure of House Valtharos, and while the lord of their house, Lord Fiolr, would not part with it eagerly, I think he would give it to you if you asked him respectfully. I will arrange for you to meet with him tomorrow morning."

"And what if the sword does not fit me?" asked Eragon.

"Let us hope it does. However, I shall also send word to the smith Rhunön that she may expect you later in the day."

"But she swore she would never forge another sword."

Oromis sighed. "She did, but her advice would still be worth seeking out. If anyone can recommend the proper weapon for you, it would be she. Besides, even if you like the feel of Támerlein, I am sure Rhunön would want to examine the sword before you left with it. Over a hundred years have elapsed since Támerlein was last used in battle, and it might need some slight refurbishing."

"Could another elf forge me a blade?" asked Eragon.

"Nay," said Oromis. "Not if it were to match the craftsmanship of Zar'roc or whichever stolen sword Galbatorix has chosen to wield. Rhunön is one of the very oldest of our race, and it is she alone who has made the swords for our order."

"She is as old as the Riders?" said Eragon, amazed.

"Older even."

Eragon paused. "What shall we do between now and tomorrow, Master?"

Oromis looked over Eragon and Saphira, then said, "Go and visit the Menoa tree; I know you will not rest easy until you have. See there if you can find the weapon the werecat enticed you with. When you have satisfied your curiosity, retire to the quarters of your tree house,

which Islanzadí's servants keep in readiness for you and Saphira. Tomorrow we shall do what we can."

"But, Master, we have so little time—"

"And the pair of you are far too tired for any more excitement today. Trust me, Eragon; you will do better for the rest. I think the hours between will help you to digest all we have spoken of. Even by the measure of kings, queens, and dragons, this conversation of ours has been no light exchange."

Despite Oromis's assurances, Eragon felt uneasy about spending the remainder of the day in leisure. His sense of urgency was so great, he wanted to continue working even when he knew he ought to be recuperating.

Eragon shifted in his chair, and by the motion he must have revealed something of his ambivalence, for Oromis smiled and said, "If it will help you relax, Eragon, I promise you this: before you and Saphira leave for the Varden, you may pick any use of magic, and in the brief while we have, I will teach you everything I can concerning it."

With his thumb, Eragon pushed his ring around his right index finger and considered Oromis's offer, trying to decide what, of all areas of magic, he would most like to learn. At last he said, "I would like to know how to summon spirits."

A shadow passed over Oromis's face. "I shall keep my word, Eragon, but sorcery is a dark and unseemly art. You should not seek to control other beings for your own gain. Even if you ignore the immorality of sorcery, it is an exceptionally dangerous and fiendishly complicated discipline. A magician requires at least three years of intensive study before he can hope to summon spirits and not have them possess him.

"Sorcery is not like other magics, Eragon; by it, you attempt to force incredibly powerful and hostile beings to obey your commands, beings who devote every moment of their captivity to finding a flaw in their bonds so that they can turn on you and subjugate you in revenge. Throughout history, never has there been a Shade who was also a Rider, and of all the horrors that have stalked this fair land, such an abomination could easily be the worst, worse even than Galbatorix. Please choose another subject, Eragon: one less perilous for you and for our cause."

"Then," said Eragon, "could you teach me my true name?"

"Your requests," said Oromis, "grow ever more difficult, Eragon-finiarel. I might be able to guess your true name if I so wished." The silver-haired elf studied Eragon with increased intensity, his eyes heavy upon him. "Yes, I believe I could. But I will not. A true name can be of great importance magically, but it is not a spell in and of itself, and so it is exempt from my promise. If your desire is to better

understand yourself, Eragon, then seek to discover your true name on your own. If I gave you it, you might profit thereof, but you would do so without the wisdom you would otherwise acquire during the journey to find your true name. A person must earn enlightenment, Eragon. It is not handed down to you by others, regardless of how revered they be."

Eragon fiddled with his ring for another moment, then made a noise in his throat and shook his head. "I don't know.… My questions have run dry."

"That I very much doubt," said Oromis.

Eragon found it difficult to concentrate upon the matter at hand; his thoughts kept returning to the Eldunarí and to Brom. Again Eragon marveled at the strange series of events that had led Brom to settle in Carvahall and, eventually, to Eragon himself becoming a Dragon Rider. *If Arya hadn't* … Eragon stopped and smiled as a thought occurred to him. "Will you teach me how to move an object from place to place without delay, just as Arya did with Saphira's egg?"

Oromis nodded. "An excellent choice. The spell is costly, but it has many uses. I am sure it will prove most helpful to you in your dealings with Galbatorix and the Empire. Arya, for one, can attest to its effectiveness."

Lifting his goblet from the table, Oromis held it up to the sun, and the radiance from above rendered the wine transparent. He studied the liquid for a long while, then lowered the goblet and said, "Before you venture into the city, you should know that he whom you sent to live among us arrived here some time ago."

A moment passed before Eragon realized to whom Oromis was referring. "Sloan is in Ellesméra?" said Eragon, astonished.

"He lives alone in a small dwelling by a stream on the western edge of Ellesméra. Death was close upon him when he staggered out of the forest, but we tended the wounds of his flesh, and he is healthy now. The elves in the city bring him food and clothes and otherwise see to it he is well cared for. They escort him wherever he wishes to go, and sometimes they read to him, but for the most part, he prefers to sit alone, saying nothing to those who approach. Twice he has attempted to leave, but your spells prevented it."

I'm surprised he arrived here so quickly, Eragon said to Saphira.

The compulsion you placed upon him must have been stronger than you realized.

Aye. In a quiet voice, Eragon asked, "Have you seen fit to restore his vision?"

"We have not."

The weeping man is broken inside, Glaedr said. *He cannot see clearly enough for his eyes to be of any use*.

“Should I go and visit him?” asked Eragon, unsure of what Oromis and Glaedr expected.

“That is for you to decide,” said Oromis. “Meeting you again might only upset him. However, you are responsible for his punishment, Eragon. It would be wrong for you to forget him.”

“No, Master, I won’t.”

With a brisk motion of his head, Oromis set his goblet on the table and moved his chair closer to Eragon. “The day grows old, and I would keep you here no longer, lest I interfere with your rest, but there is one more thing I wish to attend to before you depart: your hands, may I examine them? I would like to see what they say about you now.” And Oromis held out his own hands toward Eragon.

Extending his arms, Eragon placed his hands palm-downward on top of Oromis’s, shivering at the touch of the elf’s thin fingers against the inside of his wrists. The calluses on Eragon’s knuckles cast long shadows across the backs of his hands as Oromis tilted them from side to side. Then, exerting a slight but firm pressure, Oromis turned Eragon’s hands over and inspected his palms and the undersides of his fingers.

“What do you see?” asked Eragon.

Oromis twisted Eragon’s hands around again and gestured at his calluses. “You now have the hands of a warrior, Eragon. Take care they do not become the hands of a man who revels in the carnage of war.”

THE TREE OF LIFE

From the Crags of Tel'naeír, Saphira flew low over the swaying forest until she arrived at the clearing wherein stood the Menoa tree. Thicker than a hundred of the giant pines that encircled it, the Menoa tree rose toward the sky like a mighty pillar, its arching canopy thousands of feet across. The gnarled net of its roots radiated outward from the massive, moss-bound trunk, covering more than ten acres of forest floor before the roots delved deeper into the soft soil and vanished beneath those of lesser trees. Close to the Menoa tree, the air was moist and cool, and a faint but constant mist drifted down from the mesh of needles above, watering the broad ferns clustered about the base of its trunk. Red squirrels raced along the branches of the ancient tree, and the bright calls and chirrups of hundreds of birds burst forth from the bramble-like depths of its foliage. And throughout the clearing, the sense of a watchful presence pervaded, for the tree contained within it the remnants of the elf once known as Linnëa, whose consciousness now guided the growth of the tree and that of the forest beyond.

Eragon searched the uneven field of roots for any sign of a weapon, but as before, he found no object he would consider carrying into battle. He pried a loose slab of bark from the moss at his feet and held it up to Saphira. *What do you think?* he asked. *If I imbued it with enough spells, could I kill a soldier with this?*

You could kill a soldier with a blade of grass if you wanted to, she answered. *However, against Murtagh and Thorn, or the king and his black dragon, you might as well attack them with a strand of wet wool as that bark.*

You're right, he said, and tossed it away.

It seems to me, she said, *that you should not need to make a fool of yourself in order for Solembum's advice to prove true.*

No, but perhaps I should approach the problem differently if I am going to find this weapon. As you pointed out before, it could just as easily be a stone or a book as a blade of some sort. A staff carved from the branch of the Menoa tree would be a worthy weapon, I would think.

But hardly equal to a sword.

No.… And I would not dare lop off a branch without permission from the tree herself, and I have no idea how I could go about convincing her to grant my request.

Saphira arched her sinuous neck and gazed upward at the tree, then shook her head and shoulders to rid herself of the droplets that had

accumulated on the sharp edges of her faceted scales. As the spray of cold water struck him, Eragon yelped and jumped backward, shielding his face with his arm. *If any creature tried to harm the Menoa tree*, she said, *I doubt they would live long enough to regret their mistake*.

For several more hours, the two of them prowled the clearing. Eragon continued to hope they would stumble across some nook or cranny among the knotted roots where they would find the exposed corner of a buried chest, which would contain a sword. *Since Murtagh has Zar'roc, which is his father's sword*, Eragon thought, *by all rights, I ought to have the sword Rhunön made for Brom*.

It would be the right color too, Saphira added. *His dragon, my namesake, was blue as well*.

At last, in desperation, Eragon reached out with his mind toward the Menoa tree and attempted to attract the attention of her slow-moving consciousness, to explain his search and ask for her help. But he might as well have been trying to communicate with the wind or the rain, for the tree took no more notice of him than he would of an ant flailing its feelers by his boots.

Disappointed, he and Saphira left the Menoa tree even as the rim of the sun kissed the horizon. From the clearing, Saphira flew to the center of Ellesméra, where she glided to a landing within the bedroom of the tree house the elves had given them to stay in. The house was a cluster of several globular rooms that rested in the crown of a sturdy tree, several hundred feet above the ground.

A meal of fruit, vegetables, cooked beans, and bread was waiting for Eragon in the dining room. After eating a little, Eragon curled up next to Saphira on the blanket-lined basin set into the floor, ignoring the bed in preference for Saphira's company. He lay there, alert and aware of his surroundings, while Saphira sank into a deep sleep. From his place by her side, Eragon watched the stars rise and set above the moonlit forest and thought of Brom and the mystery of his mother. Late in the night, he slipped into the trancelike state of his waking dreams, and there he spoke with his parents. Eragon could not hear what they said, for his voice and theirs were muted and indistinct, but somehow he was aware of the love and pride his parents felt for him, and although he knew they were no more than phantoms of his restless mind, ever after he treasured the memory of their affection.

At dawn, a slim elf maid led Eragon and Saphira through the paths of Ellesméra to the compound of the family Valtharos. As they passed between the dark boles of the gloomy pines, it struck Eragon how very empty and quiet the city was compared with their last visit; he descried only three elves among the trees: tall, graceful figures who glided away on silent footsteps.

When the elves march to war, Saphira observed, *few remain behind.*

Aye.

Lord Fiolr was waiting for them inside an arched hall illuminated by several floating werelights. His face was long and stern and angled more sharply than those of most elves, so that his features reminded Eragon of a thin-bladed spear. He wore a robe of green and gold, the collar of which flared high behind his head, like the neck feathers of an exotic bird. In his left hand, he carried a wand of white wood carved with glyphs from the Liduen Kvaedhí. Mounted upon the end was a lustrous pearl.

Bending at the waist, Lord Fiolr bowed, as did Eragon. Then they exchanged the elves' traditional greetings, and Eragon thanked the lord for being so generous as to allow him to inspect the sword Támerlein.

And Lord Fiolr said, "Long has Támerlein been a prized possession of my family, and it is especially dear to my own heart. Know you the history of Támerlein, Shadeslayer?"

"No," said Eragon.

"My mate was the most wise and fair Naudra, and her brother, Arva, was a Dragon Rider at the time of the Fall. Naudra was visiting with him in Ilirea when Galbatorix and the Forsworn did sweep down upon the city like a storm from the north. Arva fought alongside the other Riders to defend Ilirea, but Kialandí of the Forsworn dealt him a mortal blow. As he lay dying on the battlements of Ilirea, Arva gave his sword, Támerlein, to Naudra that she might protect herself. With Támerlein, Naudra fought free of the Forsworn and returned here with another dragon and Rider, although she died soon afterward of her wounds."

With a single finger, Lord Fiolr stroked the wand, eliciting a soft glow from the pearl in response. "Támerlein is as precious to me as the air in my lungs; I would sooner part with life than part with it. Unfortunately, neither I nor my kin are worthy of wielding it. Támerlein was forged for a Rider, and Riders we are not. I am willing to lend you it, Shadeslayer, in order to aid you in your fight against Galbatorix. However, Támerlein will remain the property of House Valtharos, and you must promise to return the sword if ever I or my heirs ask for it."

Eragon gave his word, and then Lord Fiolr led him and Saphira to a long, polished table grown out of the living wood of the floor. At one end of the table was an ornate stand, and resting upon the stand was the sword Támerlein and its sheath.

The blade of Támerlein was colored a dark, rich green, as was its sheath. A large emerald adorned the pommel. The furniture of the sword had been wrought of blued steel. A line of glyphs adorned the

crossguard. In Elvish, they said, *I am Támerlein, bringer of the final sleep*. In length, the sword was equal to Zar'roc, but the blade was wider and the tip rounder and the build of the hilt was heavier. It was a beautiful, deadly weapon, but just by looking at it, Eragon could see that Rhunön had forged Támerlein for a person with a fighting style different from his own, a style that relied more on cutting and slashing than the faster, more elegant techniques Brom had taught him.

As soon as Eragon's fingers closed around Támerlein's hilt, he realized that the hilt was too large for his hand, and at that moment he knew that Támerlein was not the sword for him. It did not feel like an extension of his arm, as had Zar'roc. And yet, despite his realization, Eragon hesitated, for where else could he hope to find so fine a sword? Arvindr, the other blade Oromis had mentioned, lay in a city hundreds of miles distant.

Then Saphira said, *Do not take it. If you are to carry a sword into battle, if your life and mine are to depend upon it, then the sword must be perfect. Nothing else will suffice. Besides, I do not like the conditions Lord Fiolr has attached to his gift*.

And so Eragon replaced Támerlein on its stand and apologized to Lord Fiolr, explaining why he could not accept the sword. The narrow-faced elf did not appear overly disappointed; to the contrary, Eragon thought he saw a flash of satisfaction appear in Fiolr's fierce eyes.

From the halls of the family Valtharos, Eragon and Saphira made their own way through the dim caverns of the forest to the tunnel of dogwood trees that led to the open atrium in the center of Rhunön's house. As they emerged from the tunnel, Eragon heard the clink of a hammer on a chisel, and he saw Rhunön sitting at a bench by the open-walled forge in the middle of the atrium. The elf woman was busy carving a block of polished steel that lay before her. Whatever she was sculpting, Eragon could not guess, for the piece was still rough and indistinct.

"So, Shadeslayer, you are still alive," said Rhunön, without taking her eyes off her work. Her voice grated like pitted millstones. "Oromis told me that you lost Zar'roc to the son of Morzan."

Eragon winced and nodded, even though she was not looking at him. "Yes, Rhunön-elda. He took it from me on the Burning Plains."

"Hmph." Rhunön concentrated on her hammering, tapping the back of her chisel with inhuman speed, then she paused and said, "The sword has found its rightful owner, then. I do not like the use to which—what is his name? ah yes—*Murtagh* is putting Zar'roc, but every Rider deserves a proper sword, and I can think of no better sword for the son of Morzan than Morzan's own blade." The elf woman glanced up at Eragon from underneath her lined brow.

“Understand me, Shadeslayer, I would prefer it if you had kept hold of Zar’roc, but it would please me even more if you had a sword that was made for you. Zar’roc may have served you well, but it was the wrong shape for your body. And do not even speak to me of Támerlein. You would have to be a fool to think you could wield it.”

“As you can see,” said Eragon, “I did not bring it with me from Lord Fiolr.”

Rhunön nodded and resumed chiseling. “Well then, good.”

“If Zar’roc is the right sword for Murtagh,” said Eragon, “wouldn’t Brom’s sword be the right weapon for me?”

A frown pinched Rhunön’s eyebrows together. “Undbitr? Why would you think of Brom’s blade?”

“Because Brom was my father,” said Eragon, and felt a thrill at being able to say that.

“Is that so now?” Laying down her hammer and chisel, Rhunön walked out from under the roof of her forge until she stood opposite Eragon. Her posture was slightly stooped from the centuries she had spent hunched over her work, and because of it, she appeared an inch or two shorter than he. “Mmh, yes, I can see the similarity. He was a rude one, he was, Brom; he said what he meant and wasted no words. I rather liked it. I cannot abide how my race has become. They are too polite, too refined, too precious. Ha! I remember when elves used to laugh and fight like normal creatures. Now they have become so withdrawn, some seem to have no more emotion than a marble statue!”

Saphira said, *Are you referring to how elves were before our races joined themselves to one another?*

Rhunön turned her scowl onto Saphira. “Brightscales. Welcome. Yes, I was speaking of a time before the bond between elves and dragons was sealed. The changes I have seen in our races since, you would hardly credit as possible, but so they are, and here I am, one of the few still alive who can remember what we were like before.”

Then Rhunön whipped her gaze back to Eragon. “Undbitr is not the answer to your need. Brom lost his sword during the fall of the Riders. If it does not reside in Galbatorix’s collection, then it may have been destroyed or it may be buried in the earth somewhere, underneath the crumbling bones of a long-forgotten battlefield. Even if it could be found, you could not retrieve it before you would have to face your enemies again.”

“What, then, should I do, Rhunön-elda?” asked Eragon. And he told her of the falchion he had chosen when he was among the Varden and of the spells he had reinforced the falchion with and of how it had failed him in the tunnels underneath Farthen Dûr.

Rhunön snorted. “No, that would never work. Once a blade has

been forged and quenched, you can protect it with an endless array of spells, but the metal itself remains as weak as ever. A Rider needs something more: a blade that can survive the most violent of impacts and one that is unaffected by most any magic. No, what you must do is sing spells over the hot metal while you are extracting it from the ore and also while you are forging it, so as to alter and improve the structure of the metal."

"How can I get such a sword, though?" Eragon asked. "Would you make me one, Rhunön-elda?"

The wire-thin lines on Rhunön's face deepened. She reached over and rubbed her left elbow, the thick muscles in her bare forearm writhing. "You know that I swore that I would never create another weapon so long as I live."

"I do."

"My oath binds me; I cannot break it, no matter how much I might wish to." Continuing to hold her elbow, Rhunön walked back to her bench and sat before her sculpture. "And why should I, Dragon Rider? Tell me that. Why should I loose another soul-reaver upon the world?"

Choosing his words with care, Eragon said, "Because if you did, you could help put an end to Galbatorix's reign. Would not it be fitting if I killed him with a blade you forged when it was with your swords he and the Forsworn slew so many dragons and Riders? You hate how they have used your weapons. How better to balance the scales, then, than by forging the instrument of Galbatorix's doom?"

Rhunön crossed her arms and looked up at the sky. "A sword … a new sword. After so long, to again ply my craft…." Lowering her gaze, she jutted her chin out at Eragon and said, "It is possible, just possible, that there might be a way I could help you, but it is futile to speculate, for I cannot try."

Why not? asked Saphira.

"Because I have not the metal I need!" Rhunön growled. "You do not think that I forged the Riders' swords out of ordinary steel, do you? No! Long ago, while I was wandering through Du Weldenvarden, I happened upon fragments of a shooting star that had fallen to the earth. The pieces contained an ore unlike any I had handled before, and so I returned with it to my forge, and I refined it, and I discovered that the mix of steel that resulted was stronger, harder, and more flexible than any of earthly origin. I named the metal *brightsteel*, on account of its uncommon brilliance, and when Queen Tarmunora asked me to forge the first of the Riders' swords, it was brightsteel I used. Thereafter, whenever I had the opportunity, I would search the forest for more fragments of the star metal. I did not often find any, but when I did, I would save them for the Riders.

"Over the centuries, the fragments became ever more rare, until at

last I began to think none were left. It took me four-and-twenty years to find the last deposit. From it, I forged seven swords, among them Undbitr and Zar'roc. Since the Riders fell, I have searched for brightsteel only once more, and that was last night, after Oromis spoke to me about you." Rhunön tilted her head, and her watery eyes bored into Eragon. "I wandered far and wide, and I cast many spells of finding and binding, but I came across not a single speck of brightsteel. If some could be procured, then we might begin to consider a sword for you, Shadeslayer. Otherwise, this discussion is no more than pointless blathering."

Eragon bowed to the elf woman and thanked her for her time, then he and Saphira left the atrium through the green leafy tunnel of dogwood.

As they walked side by side toward a glade from which Saphira could take off, Eragon said, *Brightsteel; that has to be what Solembum meant. There must be brightsteel underneath the Menoa tree.*

How would he know?

Perhaps the tree told him herself. Does it matter?

Brightsteel or not, she said, *how are we supposed to get at anything that the roots of the Menoa tree cover? We cannot chop through them. We do not even know where to chop.*

I have to think about it.

From the glade by Rhunön's house, Saphira and Eragon flew over Ellesméra back to the Crags of Tel'naeír, where Oromis and Glaedr were waiting. Once Saphira had landed and Eragon climbed down, she and Glaedr leaped off the cliff and spiraled high overhead, not really going anywhere, but rather enjoying the pleasure of each other's presence.

While the two dragons danced among the clouds, Oromis taught Eragon how a magician could transport an object from one place to another without having the object traverse the intervening distance. "Most forms of magic," said Oromis, "require ever more energy to sustain as the distance between you and your target increases. However, that is not the case in this particular instance. It would require the same amount of energy to send the rock in my hand to the other side of that stream as it would to send it all the way to the Southern Isles. For that reason, the spell is most useful when you need to transport an item with magic across a distance so vast, it would kill you to move it normally through space. Even so, it is a demanding spell, and you should only resort to it if all else has failed. To shift something as large as Saphira's egg, for example, would leave you too exhausted to move."

Then Oromis taught Eragon the wording of the spell and several

variations on it. Once he had memorized the incantations to Oromis's satisfaction, the elf had him attempt to shift the small rock he was holding.

As soon as Eragon uttered the spell in its entirety, the rock vanished from the palm of Oromis's hand and, an instant later, reappeared in the middle of the clearing with a flash of blue light, a loud detonation, and a surge of burning hot air. Eragon flinched from the noise and then gripped the branch of a nearby tree to steady himself as his knees buckled and cold crept over his limbs. His scalp tingled as he gazed at the rock, which lay in a circle of charred and flattened grass, and he remembered the moment when he had first beheld Saphira's egg.

"Well done," said Oromis. "Now, can you tell me why the stone made that sound when it materialized in the grass?"

Eragon paid close attention to everything Oromis said, but throughout the lesson, he continued to ponder the question of the Menoa tree, even as he knew Saphira did as she soared high above. The longer he considered it, the more he despaired of ever finding a solution.

When Oromis had finished teaching him how to shift objects, the elf asked, "Since you have declined Lord Fiolr's offer of Támerlein, will you and Saphira stay in Ellesméra much longer?"

"I don't know, Master," replied Eragon. "There is something more I wish to try with the Menoa tree, but if it does not succeed, then I suppose we will have no choice but to depart for the Varden empty-handed."

Oromis nodded. "Before you leave, return here with Saphira one last time."

"Yes, Master."

As Saphira winged her way toward the Menoa tree with Eragon on her back, she said, *It didn't work before. Why should it now?*

It will work because it must. Besides, do you have a better idea?

No, but I like it not. We do not know how she might react. Remember, before Linnëa sang herself into the tree, she killed the young man who betrayed her affections. She might resort to violence again.

She won't dare, not while you are there to protect me.

Mmh.

With a faint whisper of wind, Saphira alighted upon a knuckle-like root several hundred feet from the base of the Menoa tree. The squirrels in the enormous pine screamed warnings to their brethren as they noticed her arrival.

Sliding down onto the root, Eragon rubbed his palms on his thighs, then muttered, "Right, let's not waste time." With light footsteps, he ran up the root to the trunk of the tree, holding his arms out on either

side to maintain his balance. Saphira followed at a slower pace, her claws splitting and cracking the bark she trod over.

Eragon squatted on a slippery patch of wood and hooked his fingers through a crevice in the trunk of the tree in order to keep himself from toppling over. He waited until Saphira was standing above him, and then he closed his eyes, breathed deeply of the cool, moist air, and pushed his thoughts out toward the tree.

The Menoa tree made no attempt to stop him from touching her mind, for her consciousness was so large and alien, and so intertwined with that of the other plant life of the forest, it did not need to defend itself. Anyone who attempted to seize control of the tree would also have to establish their mental dominance over a large swath of Du Weldenvarden, a feat which no single person could hope to achieve.

From the tree, Eragon felt a sense of warmth and light and of the earth pressing against her roots for hundreds of yards in every direction. He felt the stir of a breeze through the tree's tangled branches and the flow of sticky sap seeping over a small cut in its bark, and he received a host of similar impressions from the other plants the Menoa tree watched over. Compared with the awareness it had displayed during the Blood-oath Celebration, the tree almost seemed to be asleep; the only sentient thought Eragon could detect was so long and slow-moving, it was impossible to decipher.

Summoning all of his resources, Eragon flung a mental shout at the Menoa tree. *Please, listen to me, O great tree! I need your help! The entire land is at war, the elves have left the safety of Du Weldenvarden, and I do not have a sword to fight with! The werecat Solembum told me to look under the Menoa tree when I needed a weapon. Well, that time has come! Please, listen to me, O mother of the forest! Help me in my quest!* While he spoke, Eragon pressed against the tree's consciousness images of Thorn and Murtagh and the armies of the Empire. Adding several more memories to the mix, Saphira bolstered his efforts with the force of her own mind.

Eragon did not rely on words and images alone. From within himself and Saphira, he funneled a steady stream of energy into the tree: a gift of good faith that he hoped might also rouse the Menoa tree's curiosity.

Several minutes elapsed, and still the tree did not acknowledge them, but Eragon refused to abandon their attempt. The tree, he reasoned, moved at a slower pace than humans or elves; it was only to be expected that it would not immediately respond to their request.

We cannot spare much more of our strength, said Saphira, *not if we are to return to the Varden in a timely fashion*.

Eragon agreed and reluctantly stemmed the flow of energy.

While they continued to plead with the Menoa tree, the sun reached

its zenith and then began to descend. Clouds billowed and shrank and scuttled across the dome of the sky. Birds darted over the trees, angry squirrels chattered, butterflies meandered from spot to spot, and a line of red ants marched past Eragon's boot, carrying small white larvae in their pincers.

Then Saphira snarled, and every bird within hearing fled in fright. *Enough of this groveling!* she declared. *I am a dragon, and I will not be ignored, not even by a tree!*

"No, wait!" Eragon cried, sensing her intentions, but she ignored him.

Stepping back from the trunk of the Menoa tree, Saphira crouched, sank her claws deep into the root underneath her, and, with a mighty wrench, tore three huge strips of wood out of the root. *Come out and speak with us, elf-tree!* she roared. She drew back her head like a snake about to strike, and a pillar of flame erupted from between her jaws, bathing the trunk in a storm of blue and white fire.

Covering his face, Eragon leaped away to escape the heat.

"Saphira, stop!" he shouted, horrified.

I will stop when she answers us.

A thick cloud of water droplets fell to the ground. Looking up, Eragon saw the branches of the pine trembling and swaying with increasing agitation. The groan of wood rubbing against wood filled the air. At the same time, an ice-cold breeze struck Eragon's cheek, and he thought he felt a low rumble beneath his feet. Glancing around, he saw that the trees that ringed the clearing seemed taller and more angular than before, and they seemed to be leaning inward, their crooked branches reaching toward him like talons.

And Eragon was afraid.

Saphira …, he said, and sank into a half crouch, ready to either run or fight.

Closing her jaws and thus ending the stream of fire, Saphira looked away from the Menoa tree. As she beheld the ring of menacing trees, her scales rippled and the tips rose from her hide like the ruff on a riled cat. She growled at the forest, swinging her head from side to side, then unfolded her wings and began to retreat from the Menoa tree. *Quick, get on my back*.

Before Eragon could take a single step, a root as thick as his arm sprouted out of the ground and coiled itself around his left ankle, immobilizing him. Even thicker roots appeared on either side of Saphira and grasped her by the legs and tail, holding her in place. Saphira roared in fury and arched her neck to loose another deluge of fire.

The flames in her mouth flickered and went out as a voice sounded in her mind and Eragon's, a slow, whispering voice that reminded

Eragon of rustling leaves, and the voice said: *Who dares to disturb my peace? Who dares to bite me and burn me? Name yourselves, so I will know who it is I have killed.*

Eragon grimaced in pain as the root tightened around his ankle. A little more pressure and it would break the bone. *I am Eragon Shadeslayer, and this is the dragon with whom I am bonded, Saphira Brightscales.*

Die well, Eragon Shadeslayer and Saphira Brightscales.

Wait! Eragon said. *I have not finished naming us.*

A long silence followed, then the voice said, *Continue.*

I am the last free Dragon Rider in Alagaësia, and Saphira is the last female dragon in all of existence. We are perhaps the only ones who can defeat Galbatorix, the traitor who has destroyed the Riders and conquered half of Alagaësia.

Why did you hurt me, dragon? the voice sighed.

Saphira bared her teeth as she answered: *Because you would not talk with us, elf-tree, and because Eragon has lost his sword and a werecat told him to look under the Menoa tree when he needed a weapon. We have looked and looked, but we cannot find it on our own.*

Then you die in vain, dragon, for there is no weapon under my roots.

Desperate to keep the tree talking, Eragon said, *We believe the werecat might have meant brightsteel, the star metal Rhunön uses to forge the blades of the Riders. Without it, she cannot replace my sword.*

The surface of the earth rippled as the network of roots that covered the clearing shifted slightly. The disturbance flushed hundreds of panicked rabbits, mice, voles, shrews, and other small creatures from their burrows and dens, and sent them scampering across the open ground toward the main body of the forest.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eragon saw dozens of elves running toward the clearing, their hair streaming behind them like silk pennants. Silent as apparitions, the elves stopped underneath the boughs of the encircling trees and stared at him and Saphira but made no move to approach or to assist them.

Eragon was about to call with his mind for Oromis and Glaedr when the voice returned. *The werecat knew whereof he spoke; there is a nodule of brightsteel ore buried at the very edge of my roots, but you shall not have it. You bit me and you burned me, and I do not forgive you.*

Alarm tempered Eragon's excitement at hearing of the ore's existence. *But Saphira is the last female dragon!* he exclaimed. *Surely you would not kill her!*

Dragons breathe fire, whispered the voice, and a shudder ran through the trees at the edge of the clearing. *Fires must be extinguished.*

Saphira growled again and said, *If we cannot stop the man who destroyed the Dragon Riders, he will come here and he will burn the forest*

around you, and then he will destroy you as well, elf-tree. If you help us, though, we may be able to stop him.

A screech echoed among the trees as two branches scraped against each other. *If he tries to kill my seedlings, then he will die*, said the voice. *No one is as strong as the whole of the forest. No one can hope to defeat the forest, and I speak for the forest.*

Is not the energy we gave you enough to repair your wounds? asked Eragon. *Is not it compensation enough?*

The Menoa tree did not answer but rather probed at Eragon's mind, sweeping through his thoughts like a gust of wind. *What are you, Rider?* said the tree. *I know every creature that lives among this forest, but never have I encountered one like you.*

I am neither elf nor human, said Eragon. *I am something in between. The dragons changed me during the Blood-oath Celebration.*

Why did they change you, Rider?

So that I could better fight Galbatorix and his empire.

I remember I felt a warping in the world during the celebration, but I did not think it was important.… So little seems important now, save the sun and the rain.

Eragon said, *We will heal your root and trunk if that will satisfy you, but please, may we have the brightsteel?*

The other trees creaked and moaned like abandoned souls, and then, soft and fluttering, the voice came again. *Will you give me what I want in return, Dragon Rider?*

I will, Eragon said without hesitation. Whatever the price, he would gladly pay it for a Rider's sword.

The canopy of the Menoa tree grew still, and for several minutes, all was quiet in the clearing. Then the ground began to shake and the roots in front of Eragon began to twist and grind, shedding flakes of bark as they pulled aside to reveal a bare patch of dirt, out of which emerged what appeared to be a lump of corroded iron roughly two feet long and a foot and a half wide. As the ore came to rest on the surface of the rich black soil, Eragon felt a slight twinge in his lower belly. He winced and rubbed at the spot, but the momentary flare of discomfort had already vanished. Then the root around his ankle loosened and retreated into the ground, as did those that had been holding Saphira in place.

Here is your metal, whispered the Menoa tree. *Take it and go.…*

But—Eragon started to ask.

Go …, said the Menoa tree, its voice fading away. *Go.…* And the tree's consciousness withdrew from him and Saphira, receding deeper and deeper into itself until Eragon could barely sense its presence. Around them, looming pines relaxed and resumed their usual positions.

“But …,” Eragon said out loud, puzzled that the Menoa tree had not told him what she wanted.

Still perplexed, he went over to the ore, slid his fingers under the edge of the metal-laced stone, and hoisted the irregular mass into his arms, grunting at its weight. Hugging it against his chest, he turned away from the Menoa tree and started the long walk toward Rhunön’s house.

Saphira sniffed the brightsteel as she joined him. *You were right*, she said. *I should not have attacked her*.

At least we got the brightsteel, said Eragon, *and the Menoa tree … well, I don’t know what she got, but we have what we came for, and that’s what matters*.

The elves gathered alongside the path Eragon had chosen to follow and gazed at Eragon and Saphira with an intensity that made Eragon quicken his pace and the skin on the nape of his neck prickle. Not once did the elves speak, only stared with their slanting eyes, stared as if they were watching a dangerous animal stalk through their homes.

A puff of smoke billowed from Saphira’s nostrils. *If Galbatorix does not kill us first*, she said, *I think we shall live to regret this*.

"Where did you find that?" demanded Rhunön as Eragon staggered into the atrium of her house and dropped the lump of brightsteel ore onto the ground by her feet.

In as few words as possible, Eragon explained about Solembum and the Menoa tree.

Squatting next to the ore, Rhunön caressed the pitted surface, her fingers lingering over the metallic patches interspersed among the stone. "You were either very foolish or very brave to test the Menoa tree as you did. She is not one to trifle with."

Is there enough ore for a sword? Saphira asked.

"Several swords, if past experience is anything to judge by," said Rhunön, rising to her full height. The elf woman glanced at her forge in the center of the atrium, then clapped her hands together, her eyes lighting up with a combination of eagerness and determination. "Let us to it, then! You need a sword, Shadeslayer? Very well, I shall give you a sword the likes of which has never been seen before in Alagaësia."

"But what of your oath?" Eragon asked.

"Think not of it for the time being. When must the two of you return to the Varden?"

"We should have left the day we arrived," said Eragon.

Rhunön paused, her expression introspective. "Then I shall have to hurry that which I do not normally hurry and use magic to craft that which would otherwise require weeks of work by hand. You and Brightscales will help me." It was not a question, but Eragon nodded in agreement. "We shall not rest tonight, but I promise you, Shadeslayer, you shall have your sword by tomorrow morning." Bending at the knees, Rhunön lifted the ore from the ground without discernible effort and carried it to the bench with her carving in progress.

Eragon removed his tunic and shirt, so he would not ruin them during the work to come, and in their place Rhunön gave him a tight-fitting jerkin and a fabric apron treated so that it was impervious to fire. Rhunön wore the same. When Eragon asked her about gloves, she laughed and shook her head. "Only a clumsy smith uses gloves."

Then Rhunön led him to a low, grotto-like chamber set within the trunk of one of the trees out of which her house was grown. Inside the chamber were bags of charcoal and loose piles of whitish clay bricks. By means of a spell, Eragon and Rhunön lifted several hundred bricks

and carried them outside, next to the open-walled forge, then did the same with the bags of charcoal, each of which was as large as a man.

Once the supplies were arranged to Rhunön's satisfaction, she and Eragon built a smelter for the ore. The smelter was a complex structure, and Rhunön refused to use much magic to construct it, so the project took them most of the afternoon. First they dug a rectangular pit five feet deep, which they filled with layers of sand, gravel, clay, charcoal, and ash, and in which they embedded a number of chambers and channels to wick away moisture that would otherwise dampen the heat of the smelting fire. When the contents of the pit were level with the ground, they assembled a trough of bricks on top of the layers below, using water and unfired clay as their mortar. Ducking inside her house, Rhunön returned with a pair of bellows, which they attached to holes at the base of the trough.

They broke then to drink and to eat a few bites of bread and cheese.

After the brief repast, Rhunön placed a handful of small branches in the trough, lit them on fire with a murmured word, and, when the flames were well set, laid medium-sized pieces of seasoned oak along the bottom. For nearly an hour, she tended the fire, cultivating it with the care of a gardener growing roses, until the wood had burned down to an even bed of coals. Then Rhunön nodded to Eragon and said, "Now."

Eragon lifted the lump of ore and gently lowered it into the trough. When the heat on his fingers became unbearable, he released the ore and jumped back as a fountain of sparks swirled upward like a swarm of fireflies. On top of the ore and the coals, he shoveled a thick blanket of charcoal as fuel for the fire.

Eragon brushed the charcoal dust from his palms, then grasped the handles of one set of bellows and began to pump it, as did Rhunön the bellows on the other side of the smelter. Between them, they supplied the fire with a steady stream of fresh air so that it burned ever hotter.

The scales on Saphira's chest, as well as on the underside of her head and neck, sparkled with dazzling flashes of light as the flames in the smelter danced. She crouched several yards away, her eyes fixed upon the molten heart of the fire. *I could help with this, you know*, she said. *It would take me but a minute to melt the ore*.

"Yes," said Rhunön, "but if we melt it too quickly, the metal will not combine with the charcoal and become hard and flexible enough for a sword. Save your fire, dragon. We shall need it later."

The heat from the smelter and the effort of pumping the bellows soon had Eragon covered in a sheen of sweat; his bare arms shone in the light from the fire.

Every now and then, he or Rhunön would abandon their bellows to shovel a new layer of charcoal over the fire.

The work was monotonous, and as a result, Eragon soon lost track of the time. The constant roar of the fire, the feel of the bellows' handle in his hands, the whoosh of rushing air, and Saphira's vigilant presence were the only things he was aware of.

It came as a surprise to him, then, when Rhunön said, "That should be sufficient. Leave the bellows."

Wiping his brow, Eragon helped as she shoveled the incandescent coals out of the smelter and into a barrel filled with water. The coals sizzled and emitted an acrid smell as they struck the liquid.

When they finally exposed the glowing pool of white-hot metal at the bottom of the trough—the slag and other impurities having run off during the process—Rhunön covered the metal with an inch of fine white ash, then leaned her shovel against the side of the smelter and went to sit on the bench by her forge. "What now?" Eragon asked as he joined her.

"Now we wait."

"For what?"

Rhunön gestured toward the sky, where the light from the setting sun painted a tattered array of clouds red and purple and gold. "It must be dark when we work the metal if we are to correctly judge its color. Also, the brightsteel needs time to cool so that it will be soft and easy to shape."

Reaching around behind her head, Rhunön undid the cord that held back her hair, then gathered up her hair again and retied the cord. "In the meantime, let us talk about your sword. How do you fight, with one hand or two?"

Eragon thought for a minute, then said, "It varies. If I have a choice, I prefer to wield a sword with one hand and carry a shield with my other. However, circumstances have not always been favorable to me, and I have often had to fight without a shield. Then I like being able to grip the hilt with both hands, so I can deliver a more powerful stroke. The pommel on Zar'roc was large enough to grasp with my left hand if I had to, but the ridges around the ruby were uncomfortable and they did not afford me a secure hold. It would be nice to have a slightly longer hilt."

"I take it you do not want a true two-handed sword?" said Rhunön.

Eragon shook his head. "No, it would be too big for fighting indoors."

"That depends upon the size of the hilt and the blade combined, but in general, you are correct. Would you be amenable to a hand-and-a-half sword instead?"

An image flashed in Eragon's mind of Murtagh's original sword, and he smiled. *Why not*? thought Eragon. "Yes, a hand-and-a-half sword would be perfect, I think."

"And how long would you like the blade?"

"No longer than Zar'roc's."

"Mmh. Do you want a straight blade or a curved blade?"

"Straight."

"Have you any preferences as to the guard?"

"Not especially."

Crossing her arms, Rhunön sat with her chin touching her breastbone, her eyes heavy-lidded. Her lips twitched. "What of the width of the blade? Remember, no matter how narrow it is, the sword shall not break."

"Perhaps it could be a little wider at the guard than Zar'roc was."

"Why?"

"I think it might look better."

A harsh, cracked laugh broke from Rhunön's throat. "But how would that improve the use of the sword?"

Embarrassed, Eragon shifted on the bench, at a loss for words.

"Never ask me to alter a weapon merely in order to improve its appearance," admonished Rhunön. "A weapon is a tool, and if it is beautiful, then it is beautiful because it is useful. A sword that could not fulfill its function would be ugly to my eyes no matter how fair its shape, not even if it were adorned with the finest jewels and the most intricate engraving." The elf woman pursed her lips, pushing them out as she thought. "So, a sword equally suited for the unrestrained bloodshed of a battlefield as it is for defending yourself in the narrow tunnels under Farthen Dûr. A sword for all occasions, of middling length, but for the hilt, which shall be longer than average."

"A sword for killing Galbatorix," said Eragon.

Rhunön nodded. "And as such, it must be well protected against magic…." Her chin sank to her chest again. "Armor has improved a great deal in the past century, so the tip will need to be narrower than I used to make them, the better to pierce plate and mail and to slip into the gaps between the various pieces. Mmh." From a pouch by her side, Rhunön withdrew a knotted piece of twine, with which she took numerous measurements of Eragon's hands and arms. Afterward, she retrieved a wrought-iron poker from the forge and tossed it toward Eragon. He caught it with one hand and raised an eyebrow at the elf woman. She motioned toward him with a finger and said, "Go on now. Up on your feet and let me see how you move with a sword."

Walking out from under the roof of the open-walled forge, Eragon obliged her by demonstrating several of the forms Brom had taught him. After a minute, he heard the clink of metal on stone, then Rhunön coughed and said, "Oh, this is hopeless." She stepped in front of Eragon, holding another poker. Her brow furrowed with a fierce scowl as she raised the poker before her in a salute and shouted,

“Have at you, Shadeslayer!”

Rhunön’s heavy poker whistled through the air as she swung at him with a strong slashing blow. Dancing to the side, Eragon parried the attack. The poker jumped in his hand as the two rods of metal collided. For a brief while, he and Rhunön sparred. Although it was obvious she had not practiced her swordsmanship for some time, Eragon still found her a formidable opponent. At last they were forced to stop because the soft iron of the pokers had bent until the rods were as crooked as the branches of a yew tree.

Rhunön collected Eragon’s poker, then carried the two mangled pieces of metal over to a pile of broken tools. When she returned, the elf woman lifted her chin and said, “Now I know exactly what shape your sword should have.”

“But how will you make it?”

A twinkle of amusement appeared in Rhunön’s eyes. “I won’t. You shall make the sword instead of me, Shadeslayer.”

Eragon gaped at her for a moment, then sputtered and said, “Me? But I was never apprenticed to a blacksmith or a bladesmith. I have not the skill to forge even a common brush knife.”

The twinkle in Rhunön’s eyes brightened. “Nevertheless, you shall be the one to make this sword.”

“But how? Will you stand beside me and give me orders as I hammer the metal?”

“Hardly,” said Rhunön. “No, I shall guide your actions from within your mind so that your hands may do what mine cannot. It is not a perfect solution, but I can think of no other means of evading my oath that will also allow me to ply my craft.”

Eragon frowned. “If you move my hands for me, how is that any different from making the sword yourself?”

Rhunön’s expression darkened and, in a brusque voice, she said, “Do you want this sword or not, Shadeslayer?”

“I do.”

“Then refrain from pestering me with such questions. Making the sword through you is different because I think it is different. If I believed otherwise, then my oath would prevent me from participating in the process. So, unless you wish to return to the Varden empty-handed, you would be wise to remain silent on the subject.”

“Yes, Rhunön-elda.”

They went to the smelter then, and Rhunön had Saphira pry the still-warm mass of congealed brightsteel from the bottom of the brick trough. “Break it into fist-sized pieces,” Rhunön directed, and withdrew to a safe distance.

Lifting her front leg, Saphira stamped upon the rippled beam of brightsteel with all her strength. The earth shook, and the brightsteel cracked in several places. Three more times Saphira stamped upon the metal before Rhunön was satisfied with the results.

The elf woman gathered up the sharp lumps of metal in her apron and carried them to a low table next to her forge. There she sorted the metal according to its hardness, which, or so she told Eragon, she was able to determine by the color and texture of the fractured metal. "Some is too hard and some is too soft," she said, "and while I could remedy that if I wanted to, it would require another heating. So we will only use the pieces that are already suitable for a sword. On the edges of the sword will go a slightly harder steel"—she touched a cluster of pieces that had a brilliant, sparkling grain—"the better to take a keen edge. The middle of the sword shall be made of a slightly softer steel"—she touched a cluster of pieces that were grayer and not so bright—"the better to bend and to absorb the shock of a blow. Before the metal can be forged into shape, though, it must be worked to rid it of the remaining impurities."

How is that done? asked Saphira.

"That you shall see momentarily." Rhunön went to one of the poles that supported the roof of the forge, sat with her back against it, crossed her legs, and closed her eyes, her face still and composed. "Are you ready, Shadeslayer?" she asked.

"I am," said Eragon, despite the tension gathered in his belly.

The first thing Eragon noticed about Rhunön as their minds met was the low chords that echoed through the dark and tangled landscape of her thoughts. The music was slow and deliberate and cast in a strange and unsettling key that scraped on his nerves. What it implied about Rhunön's character, Eragon was not sure, but the eerie melody caused him to reconsider the wisdom of allowing her to control his flesh. But then he thought of Saphira sitting next to the forge, watching over him, and his trepidation receded, and he lowered the last of the defenses around his consciousness.

It felt to Eragon like a piece of raw wool sliding over his skin as Rhunön enveloped his mind with hers, insinuating herself into the most private areas of his being. He shivered at the contact and almost withdrew from it, but then Rhunön's rough voice sounded within his skull: *Relax, Shadeslayer, and all shall be well.*

Yes, Rhunön-elda.

Then Rhunön began to lift his arms, shift his legs, roll his head, and otherwise experiment with the abilities of his body. Strange as it was for Eragon to feel his head and limbs move without his direction, it was stranger still when his eyes began to flick from place to place, seemingly of their own accord. The sensation of helplessness kindled a

burst of sudden panic within Eragon. When Rhunön walked him forward and his foot struck the corner of the forge and it seemed as if he were going to fall, Eragon immediately reasserted command over his faculties and grabbed the horn of Rhunön's anvil to steady himself.

Do not interfere, snapped Rhunön. *If your nerve fails you at the wrong moment during the forging, you could cause yourself irreparable harm*.

So could you if you're not careful, Eragon retorted.

Be patient, Shadeslayer. I shall have mastered this by the time it is dark.

While they waited for the last of the light to fade from the velvet sky, Rhunön prepared the forge and practiced wielding various tools. Her initial clumsiness with Eragon's body soon disappeared, although once she reached for a hammer and rammed the tips of his fingers into the top of a table. The pain made Eragon's eyes water. Rhunön apologized and said, *Your arms are longer than mine*. A few minutes later, when they were about to begin, she commented, *It is fortunate you have the speed and strength of an elf, Shadeslayer, else we would have no hope of finishing this tonight*.

Taking the pieces of hard and soft brightsteel she had decided to use, Rhunön placed them into the forge. At the elf's request, Saphira heated the steel, opening her jaws only a fraction of an inch so that the blue and white flames that poured from her mouth remained focused in a narrow stream and did not spill over into the rest of the workshop. The roaring pillar of fire illuminated the entire atrium with a fierce blue light and made Saphira's scales sparkle and flash with blinding brilliance.

Rhunön had Eragon remove the brightsteel from the torrent of flames with a pair of tongs once the metal began to glow cherry red. She laid it on her anvil and, with a series of quick blows from a sledgehammer, flattened the lumps of metal into plates that were no more than a quarter of an inch thick. The surface of the red-hot steel glittered with incandescent motes. As she finished with each plate, Rhunön dropped it into a nearby trough of brine.

Having flattened all of the brightsteel, Rhunön pulled the plates out of the trough, the brine warm against Eragon's arm, and scoured each plate with a piece of sandstone to remove the black scales that had formed on the surface of the metal. The scouring exposed the crystalline structure of the metal, which Rhunön examined with great attentiveness. She further sorted the metal by relative hardness and purity according to the qualities the crystals displayed.

Eragon was privy to Rhunön's every thought and feeling, by reason of their closeness. The depth of her knowledge amazed him; she saw things within the metal he had not suspected existed, and the calculations she made concerning its treatment were beyond his

understanding. He also sensed she was dissatisfied with how she had handled the sledgehammer while flattening the steel.

Rhunön's dissatisfaction continued to grow until she said, *Bah! Look at these dents in the metal! I cannot forge a blade like this. My control over your arms and hands is not fine enough to craft a sword worthy of note*.

Before Eragon could attempt to reason with her, Saphira said, *The tools do not the artist make, Rhunön-elda. Surely you can find a way to compensate for this inconvenience*.

Inconvenience? snorted Rhunön. *I have no more coordination than a fledgling. I am a stranger in a stranger's house*. Still grumbling, she subsided into mental deliberations that were incomprehensible to Eragon, then said, *Well, I may have a solution, but I warn you, I shall not continue if I am unable to maintain my usual level of craftsmanship*.

She did not explain the solution to either Eragon or Saphira but, one by one, placed the plates of steel on the anvil and cracked them into flakes no wider than rose petals. Gathering up half the flakes of the harder brightsteel, Rhunön stacked them into a brick, which she then coated with clay and birch bark to hold them together. The brick went on a thick steel paddle with a seven-foot-long handle, similar to those used by bakers to insert and remove loaves of bread from a hot oven.

Rhunön laid the end of the paddle in the center of the forge and then backed Eragon as far away as she could and still have him hold on to the handle. Then she asked Saphira to resume breathing fire, and again the atrium glowed with a flickering blue radiance. The heat was so intense, Eragon felt as if his exposed skin were crisping, and he saw that the granite stones of which the forge was made had acquired a bright yellow glow.

The brightsteel could easily have taken over half an hour to reach the appropriate temperature in a charcoal fire, but it required only a few minutes in the withering inferno of Saphira's flames before it turned white. The moment it did, Rhunön ordered Saphira to cease breathing fire. Darkness engulfed the forge as Saphira closed her jaws.

Rushing Eragon forward, Rhunön had him transport the glowing brick of clay-covered steel to the anvil, where she seized a hammer and welded the disparate flakes of brightsteel into a cohesive whole. She continued to pound on the metal, elongating it out into a bar, then made a cut in the middle, folded the metal back on itself, and welded the two pieces together. The bell-like peals of ringing metal echoed off the ancient trees that surrounded the atrium.

Rhunön had Eragon return the brightsteel to the forge once its color had faded from white to yellow, and again Saphira bathed the metal with the fire from her belly. Six times Rhunön heated and folded the brightsteel, and each time the metal became smoother and more flexible, until it could bend without tearing.

As Eragon hammered the steel, his every action dictated by Rhunön, the elf woman began to sing, both with his tongue and her own. Together, their voices formed a not-unpleasant harmony that rose and fell with the beats of the hammer. A tingle crawled down Eragon's spine as he felt Rhunön channel a steady flow of energy into the words they were mouthing, and he realized that the song contained spells of making, shaping, and binding. With their voices two, Rhunön sang of the metal that lay on the anvil, describing its properties—altering them in ways that exceeded Eragon's understanding—and imbuing the brightsteel with a complex web of enchantments designed to give it strength and resilience beyond that of any ordinary metal. Of Eragon's hammer arm Rhunön also sang, and under the gentle influence of her crooning, every blow she struck with his arm landed upon its intended target.

Rhunön quenched the bar of brightsteel after the sixth and final fold was complete. She repeated the entire process with the other half of the hard brightsteel, forging an identical bar to the first. Then she gathered up the fragments of the softer steel, which she folded and welded ten times before forming it into a short, heavy wedge.

Next, Rhunön had Saphira reheat the two bars of harder steel. Rhunön lay the shining rods side by side on her anvil, grasped both of them at either end with a pair of tongs, and then twisted the rods around each other seven times. Sparks shot into the air as she hammered upon the twists to weld them into a single piece of metal. The resulting mass of brightsteel Rhunön folded, welded, and pounded back out to length another six times. When she was pleased with the quality of the metal, Rhunön flattened the brightsteel into a thick rectangular sheet, cut the sheet in half lengthwise with a sharp chisel, and bent each of the two halves down their middle, so they were in the shape of long, shallow V's.

And all that, Eragon estimated, Rhunön was able to accomplish within the course of an hour and a half. He marveled at her speed, even though it was his own body that carried out the tasks. Never before had he seen a smith shape metal with such ease; what would have taken Horst hours took her only minutes. And yet no matter how demanding the forging was, Rhunön continued to sing, weaving a fabric of spells within the brightsteel and guiding Eragon's arm with infallible accuracy.

Amid the frenzy of noise, fire, sparks, and exertion, Eragon thought he glimpsed, as Rhunön raked his eyes across the forge, a trio of slender figures standing by the edge of the atrium. Saphira confirmed his suspicion a moment later when she said, *Eragon, we are not alone*.

Who are they? he asked. Saphira sent him an image of the short, wizened werecat Maud, in human form, standing between two pale

elves who were no taller than she. One of the elves was male, the other female, and they were both extraordinarily beautiful, even by the standards of the elves. Their solemn teardrop faces seemed wise and innocent in equal measure, which made it impossible for Eragon to judge their age. Their skin displayed a faint, silvery sheen, as if the two elves were so filled with energy, it was seeping out of their very flesh.

Eragon queried Rhunön as to the identity of the elves when she paused to allow his body a brief rest. Rhunön glanced at them, affording him a slightly better view, then, without interrupting her song, she said with her thoughts, *They are Alanna and Dusan, the only elf children in Ellesméra. There was much rejoicing when they were conceived twelve years ago*.

They are like no other elves I have met, he said.

Our children are special, Shadeslayer. They are blessed with certain gifts—gifts of grace and gifts of power—which no grown elf can hope to match. As we age, our blossom withers somewhat, although the magic of our early years never completely abandons us.

Rhunön wasted no more time talking. She had Eragon place the wedge of brightsteel between the two V-shaped strips and hammer on them until the strips nearly enveloped the wedge and friction held the three pieces together. Then Rhunön welded the pieces into a whole, and while the metal was still hot, she began to draw it out and form a rough blank of the sword. The soft wedge became the spine of the blade, while the two harder strips became the sides, edges, and point. Once the blank was nearly as long as the finished sword, the work slowed as Rhunön returned to the tang and carefully hammered her way up the blade, establishing the final angles and proportions.

Rhunön had Saphira heat the blade in segments of no more than six or seven inches at a time, which Rhunön arranged by holding the blade over one of Saphira's nostrils, through which Saphira would release a single jet of fire. A host of writhing shadows fled toward the perimeter of the atrium every time the fire sprang into existence.

Eragon watched with amazement as his hands transformed the crude lump of metal into an elegant instrument of war. With every blow, the outline of the blade became clearer, as if the brightsteel *wanted* to be a sword and was eager to assume the shape Rhunön desired.

At last the forging came to a close, and there on the anvil lay a long black blade, which, although it was still rough and incomplete, already radiated a sense of deadly purpose.

Rhunön allowed Eragon's tired arms to rest while the blade cooled by air, then she had Eragon take the blade to another corner of her workshop, where she had arranged six different grinding wheels and,

on a small bench, a wide assortment of files, scrapers, and abrasive stones. She fixed the blade between two blocks of wood and spent the next hour planing the sides of the sword with a drawknife, as well as refining the contours of the blade with files. As with the hammering, every stroke of the drawknife and every scrape of a file seemed to have twice the effect it normally would; it was as if the tools knew exactly how much steel to remove and would remove no more.

When she was done filing, Rhunön built a charcoal fire in her forge, and while she waited for the fire to mature, she mixed a slurry of dark, fine-grained clay, ash, powdered pumice, and crystallized juniper sap. She painted the blade with the concoction, slathering twice as much on the spine as she did along the edges and by the point. The thicker the solution of clay, the slower the underlying metal would cool when it was quenched and, as a result, the softer that area of the sword would become.

The clay lightened as Rhunön dried it with a quick incantation. At the direction of the elf woman, Eragon went to the forge. He lay the sword flat upon the bed of scintillating coals and, pumping the bellows with his free hand, slowly pulled it toward his hip. Once the tip of the blade came free of the fire, Rhunön turned it over and repeated the sequence. She continued to draw the blade through the coals until both edges had acquired an even orange tone and the spine of the sword was bright red in color. Then, with a single smooth motion, Rhunön lifted the sword from the coals, swept the glowing bar of steel through the air, and plunged it into the trough of water next to the forge.

An explosive cloud of steam erupted from the surface of the water, which hissed and sizzled and bubbled around the blade. After a minute, the roiling water subsided, and Rhunön withdrew the now pearl-gray sword. Returning it to the fire, she brought the whole sword to the same low heat, so as to reduce the brittleness of the edges, and then quenched it once more.

Eragon had expected Rhunön to relinquish her hold on his body after they had forged, hardened, and tempered the blade, but to his surprise, she remained in his mind and continued to control his limbs.

Rhunön had him douse the forge, then she walked Eragon back to the bench with the files and scrapers and abrasive stones. There she sat him, and making use of ever finer stones, she polished the blade. From her memories, Eragon learned that she would normally spend a week or more polishing a blade, but because of the song they sang, she, through him, was able to complete the task in a mere four hours, in addition to carving a narrow groove down the middle of each side of the blade. As the brightsteel grew smoother, the true beauty of the metal was revealed; within it, Eragon could see a shimmering, cable-

like pattern, every line of which marked the transition between two layers of the velvety steel. And along each edge of the sword was a rippling, silvery white band as wide as his thumb, which made it appear as if the edges burned with tongues of frozen fire.

The muscles in Eragon's right arm gave way as Rhunön was covering the tang with decorative cross-hatching, and the file he was holding slipped off the tang and fell from his fingers. The extent of his exhaustion surprised him, for he had been concentrating upon the sword to the exclusion of all else.

Enough, said Rhunön, and she removed herself from Eragon's mind without further ado.

Shocked by her sudden absence, Eragon swayed on his seat and nearly lost his balance before he regained control over his rebellious limbs. "But we're not finished!" he protested, turning toward Rhunön. The night sounded unnaturally quiet to him without the strains of their extended duet.

Rhunön rose from where she had been sitting cross-legged against the pole and shook her head. "I have no more need of you, Shadeslayer. Go and dream until dawn."

"But—"

"You are tired, and even with my magic, you are liable to ruin the sword if you continue to work on it. Now that the blade is done, I can attend to the rest without interference from my oath, so go. You will find a bed on the second floor of my house. If you are hungry, there is food in the pantry."

Eragon hesitated, reluctant to leave, then nodded and shambled away from the bench, his feet dragging in the dirt. As he passed her, he ran a hand over Saphira's wing and bade her good night, too weary to say more. In return, she tousled his hair with a warm puff of air and said, *I shall watch and remember for you, little one*.

Eragon paused on the threshold of Rhunön's house and looked across the shadowy atrium to where Maud and the two elf children were still standing. He raised a hand in greeting, and Maud smiled at him, baring her sharp, pointed teeth. A tingle crawled down Eragon's neck as the elf children gazed at him; their large, slanted eyes were slightly luminous in the gloom. When they made no other motion, he ducked his head and hurried inside, eager to lie down upon a soft mattress.

A Rider in Full

W*ake, little one*, said Saphira. *The sun has risen and Rhunön is impatient.*

Eragon bolted upright, throwing off his blankets as easily as he cast off his waking dreams. His arms and shoulders were sore from his exertions of the previous day. He pulled on his boots, fumbling with the laces in his excitement, grabbed his grimy apron from the floor, and bounded down the elaborately carved stairs to the entryway of Rhunön's curved house.

Outside, the sky was bright with the first light of dawn, although shadow still enveloped the atrium. Eragon spotted Rhunön and Saphira by the open-walled forge and trotted over to them, combing his hair into place with his fingers.

Rhunön stood leaning against the edge of the bench. There were dark bags under her eyes, and the lines on her face were heavier than before.

The sword lay before her, concealed beneath a length of white cloth.

"I have done the impossible," she said, the words hoarse and broken. "I made a sword when I swore I would not. What is more, I made it in less than a day and with hands that were not my own. Yet the sword is not crude or shoddy. No! It is the finest sword I have ever forged. I would have preferred to use less magic during the process, but that is my only qualm, and it is a small one compared with the perfection of the results. Behold!"

Grasping the corner of the cloth, Rhunön pulled it aside, revealing the sword.

Eragon gasped.

He had thought that in the handful of hours since he had left her, Rhunön would only have had enough time to fabricate a plain hilt and crossguard for the sword, and maybe a simple wooden scabbard. Instead, the sword Eragon saw on the bench was as magnificent as Zar'roc, Naegling, and Támerlein and, in his opinion, more beautiful than any of them.

Covering the blade was a glossy scabbard of the same dark blue as the scales on Saphira's back. The color displayed a slight variegation, like the mottled light at the bottom of a clear forest pond. A piece of blued brightsteel carved in the shape of a leaf capped the end of the scabbard while a collar decorated with stylized vines encircled the mouth. The curved crossguard was also made of blued brightsteel, as were the four ribs that held in place the large sapphire that formed

the pommel. The hand-and-a-half hilt was made of hard black wood.

Overcome by a sense of reverence, Eragon reached out toward the sword, then paused and glanced at Rhunön. “May I?” he asked.

She inclined her head. “You may. I give it to thee, Shadeslayer.”

Eragon lifted the sword from the bench. The scabbard and the wood of the hilt were cool to the touch. For several minutes, he marveled at the details on the scabbard and the guard and the pommel. Then he tightened his grip around the hilt and unsheathed the blade.

Like the rest of the sword, the blade was blue, but of a slightly lighter shade; it was the blue of the scales in the hollow of Saphira’s throat rather than the blue of those on her back. And as it was on Zar’roc, the color was iridescent; as Eragon moved the sword about, the color would shimmer and shift, displaying any of the many tones of blue present on Saphira herself. Through the wash of color, the cable-like patterns within the brightsteel and the pale bands along the edges were still visible.

With a single hand, Eragon swung the sword through the air, and he laughed at how light and fast it felt. The sword almost seemed alive. He grasped the sword with both his hands then and was delighted to find that they fit perfectly on the longer hilt. Lunging forward, he stabbed at an imaginary enemy and was confident they would have died from the attack.

“Here,” said Rhunön, and pointed at a bundle of three iron rods planted upright in the ground outside the forge. “Try it on those.”

Eragon allowed himself a moment to focus his thoughts, then took a single step toward the rods. With a yell, he slashed downward and cut through all three rods. The blade emitted a single pure note that slowly faded into silence. When Eragon examined the edge where it had struck the iron, he saw that the impact had not damaged it in the slightest.

“Are you well pleased, Dragon Rider?” Rhunön asked.

“More than pleased, Rhunön-elda,” said Eragon, and bowed to her. “I do not know how I can thank you for such a gift.”

“You may thank me by killing Galbatorix. If there is any sword destined to slay that mad king, it is this one.”

“I shall try my hardest, Rhunön-elda.”

The elf woman nodded, appearing satisfied. “Well, you finally have a sword of your own, which is as it ought to be. *Now* you are truly a Dragon Rider!”

“Yes,” said Eragon, and held the sword up toward the sky, admiring it. “Now I am truly a Rider.”

“Before you leave, one last thing remains for you to do,” said Rhunön.

“Oh?”

She flicked a finger toward the sword. “You must name it so I can mark the blade and scabbard with the appropriate glyph.”

Eragon walked over to Saphira and said, *What do you think?*

I am not the one who must carry the blade. Name it as you see fit.

Yes, but you must have some ideas!

She lowered her head toward him and sniffed at the sword, then said, *Blue-gem-tooth is what I would name it. Or Blue-claw-red.*

That would sound ridiculous to humans.

Then what of Reaver or Gutripper? Or maybe Battleclaw or Glitterthorn or Limbhacker? You could name it Terror or Pain or Armbiter or Eversharp or Ripplescale: that on account of the lines in the steel. There is also Tongue of Death and Elfsteel and Starmetal and many others besides.

Her sudden outpouring surprised Eragon. *You have a talent for this,* he said.

Inventing random names is easy. Inventing the right name, however, can try the patience of even an elf.

What of Kingkiller? he asked.

And what if we actually kill Galbatorix? What, then? Will you do nothing else of worth with your sword?

Mmh. Placing the sword alongside Saphira’s left foreleg, Eragon said, *It’s exactly the same color as you.… I could name it after you.*

A low growl sounded in Saphira’s chest. *No.*

He fought back a smile. *Are you sure? Just imagine if we were in battle and—*

Her claws sank into the earth. *No. I am not a thing for you to wave about and make fun of.*

No, you’re right. I’m sorry.… Well, what if I named it Hope in the ancient language? Zar’roc *means “misery,” so wouldn’t it be fitting if I were to wield a sword that by its very name would counteract misery?*

A noble sentiment, said Saphira. *But do you really want to give your enemies hope? Do you want to stab Galbatorix with hope?*

It’s an amusing pun, he said, chuckling.

Once, maybe, but no more.

Stymied, Eragon grimaced and rubbed his chin, studying the play of light across the glittering blade. As he gazed into the depths of the steel, his eye chanced upon the flamelike pattern that marked the transition between the softer steel of the spine and that of the edges, and he recalled the word Brom had used to light his pipe during the memory Saphira had shared with him. Then Eragon thought of Yazuac, where he had first used magic, and also of his duel with Durza in Farthen Dûr, and in that instant he knew without doubt that he had found the right name for his sword.

Eragon consulted with Saphira, and when she agreed with his choice, he lifted the weapon to shoulder level and said, “I am decided.

Sword, I name thee Brisingr!"

And with a sound like rushing wind, the blade burst into fire, an envelope of sapphire-blue flames writhing about the razor-sharp steel.

Uttering a startled cry, Eragon dropped the sword and jumped back, afraid of being burned. The blade continued to blaze on the ground, the translucent flames charring a nearby clump of grass. It was then that Eragon realized it was he who was providing the energy to sustain the unnatural fire. He quickly ended the magic, and the fire vanished from the sword. Puzzled by how he could have cast a spell without intending to, he picked up the sword again and tapped the blade with the tip of a finger. It was no hotter than before.

A heavy scowl on her brow, Rhunön stalked forward, seized the sword from Eragon, and examined it from tip to pommel. "You are fortunate I have already protected it with wards against heat and damage, else you would have just scratched the guard and destroyed the temper of the blade. Do not drop the sword again, Shadeslayer—even if it should turn into a snake—or else I shall take it back and give you a worn-out hammer instead." Eragon apologized, and appearing somewhat mollified, Rhunön handed the sword back to him. "Did you set fire to it on purpose?" she asked.

"No," said Eragon, unable to explain what had happened.

"Say it again," ordered Rhunön.

"What?"

"The name, the name, say it again."

Holding the sword as far away from his body as he could, Eragon exclaimed, "Brisingr!"

A column of flickering flames engulfed the blade of the sword, the heat warming Eragon's face. This time Eragon noticed the slight drain on his strength from the spell. After a few moments, he extinguished the smokeless fire.

Once more Eragon exclaimed, "Brisingr!" And once more the blade shimmered with blue, wraithlike tongues of flame.

Now there is a fitting sword for a Rider and dragon! said Saphira in a delighted tone. *It breathes fire as easily as I do*.

"But I wasn't trying to cast a spell!" protested Eragon. "All I did was say *Brisingr* and—" He yelped and swore as the sword again caught fire, which he put out for the fourth time.

"May I?" asked Rhunön, extending a hand toward Eragon. He gave her the sword, and she too said, "Brisingr!" A shiver seemed to run down the blade, but other than that, it remained inanimate. Her expression contemplative, Rhunön returned the sword to Eragon and said, "I can think of two explanations for this marvel. One is that because you were involved with the forging, you imbued the blade with a portion of your personality and therefore it has become attuned

to your wishes. My other explanation is that you have discovered the true name of your sword. Perhaps both those things are what has happened. In any event, you have chosen well, Shadeslayer. Brisingr! Yes, I like it. It is a good name for a sword."

A very good name, Saphira agreed.

Then Rhunön placed her hand over the middle of Brisingr's blade and murmured an inaudible spell. The Elvish glyph for *fire* appeared upon both sides of the blade. She did the same to the front of the scabbard.

Again Eragon bowed to the elf woman, and both he and Saphira expressed their gratitude to her. A smile appeared on Rhunön's aged face, and she touched each of them upon their brows with her callused thumb. "I am glad I was able to help the Riders this once more. Go, Shadeslayer. Go, Brightscales. Return to the Varden, and may your enemies flee with fear when they see the sword you now wield."

So Eragon and Saphira bade her farewell, and together they departed Rhunön's house, Eragon cradling Brisingr in his arms as he would a newborn child.

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GREAVES AND BRACERS

A single candle lit the inside of the gray wool tent, a poor substitute for the radiance of the sun.

Roran stood with his arms outstretched while Katrina laced up the sides of the padded jerkin she had fitted for him. When she finished, she tugged on the hem of the jerkin, smoothing out the wrinkles, and said, "There now. Is it too tight?"

He shook his head. "No."

She retrieved his greaves from the cot they shared and knelt before him in the flickering candlelight. Roran watched as she buckled the greaves onto his lower legs. She cupped the curve of his calf with her hand as she secured the second piece of armor, her flesh warm against his through the fabric of his trousers.

Standing, she turned to the cot again and picked up his bracers. Roran held out his arms toward her and stared into her eyes, even as she stared into his. With slow, deliberate motions, she fastened the bracers onto his forearms, then drew her hands from the inside of his elbow down to his wrists, where he clasped her hands with his own.

She smiled and pulled free of his gentle grip.

Next from the cot, she took his shirt of mail. She rose up onto the tips of her toes and lifted the hauberk over his head and held it there while he fit his arms into the sleeves. The mail tinkled like ice as she released it and it fell onto his shoulders, unfurling so that the lower edge hung level with his knees.

On his head, she set his leather arming cap, tying it firmly in place with a knot under his chin. She held his face between her hands for a moment, then kissed him once upon the lips and fetched his peaked helm, which she carefully slid over the arming cap.

Roran slipped his arm around her thickening waist as she started back toward the cot, stopping her. "Listen to me," he said. "I'll be fine." He tried to convey all his love for her through the tone of his voice and the strength of his gaze. "Don't just sit here all alone. Promise me that. Go to Elain; she could use your help. She's sick, and her child is overdue."

Katrina lifted her chin, her eyes gleaming with tears he knew she would not shed until after he had left. "Must you march in the front line?" she whispered.

"Someone must, and it might as well be me. Whom would you send in my stead?"

"Anyone … anyone at all." Katrina looked down and was silent for a

span, then she removed a red kerchief from the bodice of her dress and said, “Here, carry this favor of mine, so that the whole world may know how proud I am of you.” And she tied the kerchief to his sword belt.

Roran kissed her twice and released her, and she fetched his shield and spear from the cot. He kissed her a third time as he took them from her, then fit his arm through the strap on his shield.

“If something does happen to me—” he began to say.

Katrina placed a finger upon his lips. “Shh. Speak not of it, lest it should come true.”

“Very well.” He hugged her one last time. “Be safe.”

“And you.”

Although he hated to leave her, Roran raised his shield and strode out of the tent into the pale light of dawn. Men, dwarves, and Urgals streamed westward through the camp, heading toward the trampled field where the Varden were assembling.

Roran filled his lungs with the cool morning air and then followed, knowing that his band of warriors would be waiting for him. Once he arrived at the field, he sought out Jörmundur’s division and, after reporting to Jörmundur, made his way to the front of the group, where he chose to stand next to Yarbog.

The Urgal glanced at him, then grunted, “A good day for a battle.”

“A good day.”

A horn sounded at the forefront of the Varden as soon as the sun broke over the horizon. Roran hefted his spear and began to run forward, like everyone else around him, howling at the top of his lungs as arrows rained down upon them and boulders whistled past overhead, flying in either direction. Ahead of him, a stone wall eighty feet tall loomed.

The siege of Feinster had begun.

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LEAVE-TAKING

From Rhunön's house, Saphira and Eragon flew back to their tree house. Eragon gathered up his belongings from the bedroom, saddled Saphira, and then returned to his usual place upon the crest of her shoulders.

Before we go to the Crags of Tel'naeír, he said, *there is one more thing I must do in Ellesméra.*

Must you? she asked.

I won't be content unless I do.

Saphira leaped out from the tree house. She glided westward until the number of buildings began to diminish, and then she angled downward for a soft landing upon a narrow, moss-covered path. After asking for, and getting, directions from an elf who was sitting in the branches of a nearby tree, Eragon and Saphira continued through the woods until they arrived at a small one-room house grown out of the bole of a fir tree that stood at an acute angle, as if a constant wind pressed against it.

To the left of the house was a soft bank of earth taller by several feet than Eragon. A rivulet of water tumbled over the edge of the bank and poured itself into a limpid pool before meandering off into the dim recesses of the forest. White orchids lined the pool. A bulbous root protruded out of the ground from among the slender flowers that grew along the near shore, and sitting cross-legged upon the root was Sloan.

Eragon held his breath, not wanting to alert the other man to his presence.

The butcher wore robes of brown and orange, after the fashion of the elves. A thin black strip of cloth was tied around his head, concealing the gaping holes where his eyes had been. In his lap, he held a length of seasoned wood, which he was whittling with a small, curved knife. His face was covered with far more lines than Eragon remembered, and upon his hands and arms were several new scars, livid against the surrounding skin.

Wait here, Eragon said to Saphira, and slipped off her back.

As Eragon approached him, Sloan paused in his carving and cocked his head. "Go away," he rasped.

Not knowing how to respond, Eragon stopped where he was and remained silent.

The muscles in his jaw rippling, Sloan removed another few curls from the wood he held, then tapped the tip of his knife against the

root and said, “Blast you. Can you not leave me alone with my misery for a few hours? I don’t want to listen to any bard or minstrel of yours, and no matter how many times you ask me, I won’t change my mind. Now go on. Away with you.”

Pity and anger welled up inside Eragon, and also a sense of displacement at seeing a man he had grown up around, and had so often feared and disliked, brought to such a state. “Are you comfortable?” Eragon asked in the ancient language, adopting a light, lilting tone.

Sloan uttered a growl of disgust. “You know I cannot understand your tongue and I do not wish to learn it. The words ring in my ears longer than they ought to. If you will not speak in the language of my race, then do not speak to me at all.”

Despite Sloan’s entreaty, Eragon did not repeat the question in their common language, nor did he depart.

With a curse, Sloan resumed his whittling. After every other stroke, he ran his right thumb over the surface of the wood, checking the progress of whatever he was carving. Several minutes passed, and then in a softer voice, Sloan said, “You were right; having something to do with my hands calms my thoughts. Sometimes … sometimes I can almost forget what I have lost, but the memories always return, and I feel as if I am choking on them.… I am glad you sharpened the knife. A man’s knives should always be sharp.”

Eragon watched him for a minute more, then he turned away and walked back to where Saphira was waiting. As he pulled himself into the saddle, he said, *Sloan does not seem to have changed very much*.

And Saphira replied, *You cannot expect him to become someone else entirely in such a short time*.

No, but I had hoped he would learn something of wisdom here in Ellesméra and that maybe he would repent of his crimes.

If he does not wish to acknowledge his mistakes, Eragon, nothing can force him to. In any event, you have done all you can for him. Now he must find a way to reconcile himself with his lot. If he cannot, then let him seek the solace of the everlasting grave.

From a clearing close to Sloan’s house, Saphira launched herself up and over the surrounding trees and headed north toward the Crags of Tel’naeír, flapping as hard and fast as she could. The morning sun sat full upon the horizon, and the rays of light that streamed out over the treetops created long, dark shadows that, as one, pointed to the west like purple pennants.

Saphira descended toward the clearing by Oromis’s pinewood house, where Glaedr and Oromis stood waiting for them. Eragon was startled to see that Glaedr was wearing a saddle nestled between two of the towering spikes on his back and that Oromis was garbed in

heavy traveling robes of blue and green, over which he wore a corselet of golden scale armor, as well as bracers upon his arms. A tall, diamond-shaped shield was slung across his back, an archaic helm rested in the crook of his left arm, and around his waist was belted his bronze-colored sword, Naegling.

With a gust of wind from her wings, Saphira alighted upon the sward of grass and clover. She flicked out her tongue, tasting the air as Eragon slid to the ground. *Are you going to fly with us to the Varden?* she asked. The tip of her tail twitched with excitement.

"We shall fly with you as far as the edge of Du Weldenvarden, but there our paths must part," said Oromis.

Disappointed, Eragon asked, "Will you return to Ellesméra then?"

Oromis shook his head. "No, Eragon. Then we shall continue onward to the city of Gil'ead."

Saphira hissed with surprise, a sentiment Eragon shared. "Why to Gil'ead?" he asked, bewildered.

Because Islanzadí and her army have marched there from Ceunon, and they are about to lay siege to the city, said Glaedr. The strange, gleaming structures of his mind brushed against Eragon's consciousness.

But do not you and Oromis wish to keep your existence hidden from the Empire? Saphira asked.

Oromis closed his eyes for a moment, his expression withdrawn and enigmatic. "The time for hiding has passed, Saphira. Glaedr and I have taught the two of you everything we could in the brief while you were able to study under us. It was a paltry education compared with that you would have received of old, but given how events press on us, we are fortunate to have been able to teach you as much as we did. Glaedr and I are satisfied that you now know everything that might help you to defeat Galbatorix.

"Therefore, since it seems unlikely that either of you will have a chance to return here for further instruction before the conclusion of this war, and since it seems even more unlikely that there shall ever be another dragon and Rider for us to instruct while Galbatorix still bestrides the warm earth, we have decided that we no longer have any reason to remain sequestered in Du Weldenvarden. It is more important that we help Islanzadí and the Varden overthrow Galbatorix than we tarry here in idle comfort while we wait for another Rider and dragon to seek us out.

"When Galbatorix learns that we are still alive, it shall undermine his confidence, for he shall not know if other dragons and Riders have survived his attempt to exterminate them. Also, knowledge of our existence shall bolster the spirits of the dwarves and the Varden and counteract any adverse effects Murtagh and Thorn's appearance on the Burning Plains may have had upon the resolution of their warriors.

And it may well increase the number of recruits Nasuada receives from the Empire."

Eragon glanced at Naegling and said, "Surely, though, Master, you do not intend to venture into battle yourselves."

"And why should we not?" inquired Oromis, tilting his head to one side.

Since he did not want to offend Oromis or Glaedr, Eragon was uncertain how to respond. At last he said, "Forgive me, Master, but how can you fight when you cannot cast spells that require more than a small amount of energy? And what of the spasms you sometimes suffer? If one were to strike in the middle of a battle, it could prove fatal."

Oromis replied, "As you ought to know well by now, mere strength rarely decides the victor when two magicians duel. Even so, I have all the strength I need here, in the jewel of my sword." And he reached across his body and placed the palm of his right hand on the yellow diamond that formed the pommel of Naegling. "For over a hundred years, Glaedr and I have stored every iota of our excess strength in this diamond, and others have added their strength to the pool as well; twice a week, several elves from Ellesméra visit me here and transfer as much of their life force into the gem as they can without killing themselves. The amount of energy contained within this stone is formidable, Eragon; with it, I could shift an entire mountain. It is a small matter, then, to defend Glaedr and myself from swords and spears and arrows, or even from a boulder cast by a siege engine. As for my seizures, I have attached certain wards to the stone in Naegling that will protect me from harm if I become incapacitated upon the battlefield. So you see, Eragon, Glaedr and I are far from helpless."

Chastened, Eragon dipped his head and murmured, "Yes, Master."

Oromis's expression softened somewhat. "I appreciate your concern, Eragon, and you are right to be concerned, for war is a perilous endeavor and even the most accomplished warrior may find death waiting for him amid the heated frenzy of battle. However, our cause is a worthy one. If Glaedr and I go to our deaths, then we go willingly, for by our sacrifice, we may help to free Alagaësia from the shadow of Galbatorix's tyranny."

"But if you die," said Eragon, feeling very small, "and yet we still succeed in killing Galbatorix and freeing the last dragon egg, who will train that dragon and his Rider?"

Oromis surprised Eragon by reaching out and clasping him by the shoulder. "If that should come to pass," said the elf, his face grave, "then it shall be your responsibility, Eragon, and yours, Saphira, to instruct the new dragon and Rider in the ways of our order. Ah, do not look so apprehensive, Eragon. You would not be alone in the task.

No doubt Islanzadí and Nasuada would ensure that the wisest scholars of both our races would be there to help you."

A strange sense of unease troubled Eragon. He had often longed to be treated as more of an adult, but nevertheless, he did not feel ready to take Oromis's place. It seemed wrong to even contemplate the notion. For the first time, Eragon understood that he would eventually become part of the older generation, and that when he did, he would have no mentor to rely upon for guidance. His throat tightened.

Releasing Eragon's shoulder, Oromis gestured at Brisingr, which lay in Eragon's arms, and said, "The entire forest shuddered when you woke the Menoa tree, Saphira, and half the elves in Ellesméra contacted Glaedr and me with frantic pleas for us to rush to her aid. Moreover, we had to intervene on your behalf with Gilderien the Wise, so as to prevent him from punishing you for employing such violent methods."

I shall not apologize, said Saphira. *We had not the time to wait for gentle persuasion to work*.

Oromis nodded. "I understand, and I am not criticizing you, Saphira. I only wanted you to be aware of the consequences of your actions." At his request, Eragon handed his newly forged sword to Oromis and held his helm for him while the elf examined the sword. "Rhunön has outdone herself," Oromis declared. "Few weapons, swords or otherwise, are the equal of this. You are fortunate to wield such an impressive blade, Eragon." One of Oromis's sharp eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch as he read the glyph on the blade. "Brisingr … a most apt name for the sword of a Dragon Rider."

"Aye," said Eragon. "But for some reason, every time I utter its name, the blade bursts into …," he hesitated, and instead of saying *fire* —which, of course, was *brisingr* in the ancient language—he said, "flames."

Oromis's eyebrow climbed even higher. "Indeed? Did Rhunön have an explanation for this unique phenomenon?" As he spoke, Oromis returned Brisingr to Eragon in exchange for his helm.

"Yes, Master," said Eragon. And he recounted Rhunön's two theories.

When he had finished, Oromis murmured, "I wonder …," and his gaze drifted past Eragon toward the horizon. Then Oromis gave a brief shake of his head and again focused his gray eyes upon Eragon and Saphira. His face became even more solemn than before. "I am afraid I have let my pride speak for me. Glaedr and I may not be helpless, but neither, as you pointed out, Eragon, are we entirely whole. Glaedr has his wound, and I have my own … impairments. It is not for nothing I am called the Cripple Who Is Whole.

"Our disabilities would not be a problem if our only enemies were

mortal men. Even in our current state, we could easily slay a hundred ordinary humans—a hundred or a thousand, it would matter little which. However, our enemy is the most dangerous foe we or this land has ever faced. As much as I dislike acknowledging it, Glaedr and I are at a disadvantage, and it is quite possible that we shall not survive the battles yet to come. We have lived long and full lives, and the sorrows of centuries press upon us, but the two of you are young and fresh and full of hope, and I believe your prospects of defeating Galbatorix are greater than those of anyone else."

Oromis glanced at Glaedr, and the elf's face became troubled. "Therefore, in order to help ensure your survival, and as a precaution against our possible demise, Glaedr has, with my blessing, decided to …"

I have decided, said Glaedr, *to give you my heart of hearts, Saphira Brightscales, Eragon Shadeslayer*.

Saphira's astonishment was no less than Eragon's. Together, they stared at the majestic gold dragon who towered high above them. Saphira said, *Master, you honor us beyond words, but … are you sure that you wish to entrust your heart to us?*

I am sure, said Glaedr, and lowered his massive head until it was only slightly above Eragon. *For many reasons, I am sure. If you hold my heart, you shall be able to communicate with Oromis and me—no matter how far apart we may be—and I shall be able to aid you with my strength whenever you are in difficulty. And if Oromis and I should fall in battle, our knowledge and experience, and also my strength, shall still be at your disposal. Long have I pondered this choice, and I am confident it is the right one*.

"But if Oromis were to die," said Eragon in a soft voice, "would you really want to live on without him, and as an Eldunarí?"

Glaedr turned his head and focused one of his immense eyes upon Eragon. *I do not wish to be parted from Oromis, but whatever happens, I shall continue to do what I can to topple Galbatorix from his throne. That is our only goal, and not even death shall deter us from pursuing it. The idea of losing Saphira horrifies you, Eragon, and rightly so. However, Oromis and I have had centuries to reconcile ourselves with the fact that such a parting is inevitable. No matter how careful we are, if we live long enough, eventually one of us will die. It is not a happy thought, but it is the truth. Such is the way of the world*.

Shifting his stance, Oromis said, "I cannot pretend that I regard this with favor, but the purpose of life is not to do what we want but what needs to be done. This is what fate demands of us."

So now I ask you, said Glaedr, *Saphira Brightscales and Eragon Shadeslayer, will you accept my gift and all that it entails?*

I will, said Saphira.

I will, replied Eragon after a brief hesitation.

Then Glaedr drew back his head. The muscles of his abdomen rippled and clenched several times, and his throat began to convulse, as if something were stuck in it. Widening his stance, the gold dragon extended his neck straight out in front of him, every cord and sinew of his body standing in high relief underneath the armor of his sparkling scales. Glaedr's throat continued to flex and relax with increasing speed until at last he lowered his head so that it was level with Eragon and opened his jaws, hot, pungent air pouring from his massive maw. Eragon squinted and tried not to gag. As he gazed into the depths of Glaedr's mouth, Eragon saw the dragon's throat contract one last time, and then a hint of gold light appeared between the folds of dripping, blood-red tissue. A second later, a round object about a foot in diameter slid down Glaedr's crimson tongue and out of his mouth so fast, Eragon nearly missed catching it.

As his hands closed around the slippery, saliva-covered Eldunarí, Eragon gasped and staggered backward, for he suddenly felt Glaedr's every thought and emotion, and all of the sensations of his body. The amount of information was overwhelming, as was the closeness of their contact. Eragon had expected as much, but it still shocked him to realize he was holding Glaedr's entire being between his hands.

Glaedr flinched, shaking his head as if he had been stung, and quickly shielded his mind from Eragon, although Eragon could still sense the flicker of his shifting thoughts, as well as the general color of his emotions.

The Eldunarí itself was like a giant gold jewel. Its surface was warm and covered with hundreds of sharp facets, which varied somewhat in size and sometimes projected at odd, slanting angles. The center of the Eldunarí glowed with a dull radiance, similar to that of a shuttered lantern, and the diffuse light throbbed with a slow, steady beat. Upon first inspection, the light appeared uniform, but the longer Eragon gazed at it, the more details he saw within it: small eddies and currents that coiled and twisted in seemingly random directions, darker motes that barely moved at all, and flurries of bright flashes no larger than the head of a pin that would flare for a moment, then fade back into the underlying field of light. It was alive.

"Here," said Oromis, and handed Eragon a sturdy cloth sack.

To Eragon's relief, his connection with Glaedr vanished as soon as he placed the Eldunarí in the bag and his hands were no longer touching the gemlike stone. Still somewhat shaken, Eragon clasped the cloth-covered Eldunarí against his chest, awed by the knowledge that his arms were wrapped around Glaedr's essence and afraid of what might happen to it if he allowed the heart of hearts out of his grasp.

"Thank you, Master," Eragon managed to say, bowing his head

toward Glaedr.

We shall guard your heart with our lives, Saphira added.

"No!" exclaimed Oromis, his voice fierce. "Not with your lives! That is the very thing we wish to avoid. Do not allow any misfortune to befall Glaedr's heart because of carelessness on your part, but neither should you sacrifice yourself to protect him or me or anyone else. You have to stay alive at all costs, else our hopes shall be dashed and all will be darkness."

"Yes, Master," Eragon and Saphira said at the same time, he with his tongue and she with her thoughts.

Said Glaedr, *Because you swore fealty to Nasuada, and you owe her your loyalty and obedience, you may tell her of my heart if you must, but only if you must. For the sake of dragons everywhere, what few of us remain, the truth about the Eldunarí cannot become common knowledge*.

May we tell Arya? asked Saphira.

"And what about Blödhgarm and the other elves Islanzadí sent to protect me?" asked Eragon. "I allowed them into my mind when Saphira and I last fought Murtagh. They will notice your presence, Glaedr, if you help us in the midst of a battle."

You may inform Blödhgarm and his spellcasters of the Eldunarí, said Glaedr, *but only after they have sworn oaths of secrecy to you*.

Oromis placed his helm on his head. "Arya is Islanzadí's daughter, and so I suppose it is proper she should know. However, as with Nasuada, do not tell her unless it becomes absolutely necessary. A secret shared is no secret at all. If you can be so disciplined, do not even think of it, nor of the very fact of the Eldunarí, so that no one may steal the information from your minds."

"Yes, Master."

"Now let us be gone from here," said Oromis, and drew a pair of thick gauntlets over his hands. "I have heard from Islanzadí that Nasuada has laid siege to the city of Feinster, and the Varden have great need of you."

We have spent too long in Ellesméra, said Saphira.

Perhaps, said Glaedr, *but it was time well spent.*

Taking a short running start, Oromis bounded up Glaedr's single foreleg and onto his high, jagged back, where Oromis settled into his saddle and began to tighten the straps around his legs. "As we fly," said the elf, calling down to Eragon, "we can review the lists of true names you learned during your last visit."

Eragon went to Saphira and carefully climbed onto her back, wrapped one of his blankets around Glaedr's heart, and packed the bundle in his saddlebags. Then he secured his legs in the same manner as had Oromis. Behind him, he could feel a constant thrum of energy radiating from the Eldunarí.

Glaedr walked to the edge of the Crags of Tel'naeír and unfurled his voluminous wings. The earth shook as the gold dragon leaped toward the cloud-streaked sky, and the air boomed and shuddered as Glaedr drove his wings downward, pulling away from the ocean of trees below. Eragon gripped the spike in front of him as Saphira followed, flinging herself out into open space and falling several hundred feet in a steep dive before she ascended to Glaedr's side.

Glaedr assumed the lead as the two dragons oriented themselves toward the southwest. Each of them flapping at a different tempo, Saphira and Glaedr sped over the rolling forest.

Saphira arched her neck and uttered a ringing roar. Ahead, Glaedr responded likewise. Their fierce cries echoed across the vast dome of the sky, frightening the birds and beasts below.

FLIGHT

From Ellesméra, Saphira and Glaedr flew without stopping over the ancient forest of the elves, soaring high above the tall, dark pine trees. Sometimes the forest would break, and Eragon would see a lake or a contorted river winding across the land. Often there was a herd of small roe deer gathered along the edge of the water, and the animals would stop and lift their heads to watch the dragons soar past. For the most part, however, Eragon paid little attention to the scenery because he was busy reciting within his mind every word of the ancient language Oromis had taught him, and if he forgot any or made a mistake in pronunciation, Oromis would have him repeat the word until he had memorized it.

They arrived at the edge of Du Weldenvarden by late afternoon of the first day. There, above the shadowed boundary between the trees and the fields of grass beyond, Glaedr and Saphira circled one another, and Glaedr said, *Keep safe your heart, Saphira, and mine as well.*

I will, Master, Saphira replied.

And Oromis shouted from Glaedr's back, "Fair winds to you both, Eragon, Saphira! When next we meet, let it be before the gates of Urû'baen."

"Fair winds to you as well!" Eragon called in return.

Then Glaedr turned and followed the line of the forest westward—which would lead him to the northernmost tip of Isenstar Lake, and the lake thence to Gil'ead—while Saphira continued in the same southwesterly direction as before.

Saphira flew all through that night, landing only to drink and so Eragon could stretch his legs and relieve himself. Unlike during their flight to Ellesméra, they encountered no headwinds; the air remained clear and smooth, as if even nature were eager for them to return to the Varden. When the sun rose on their second day, it found them already deep within the Hadarac Desert and heading straight south, so as to skirt the eastern border of the Empire. And by the time darkness had again engulfed the land and sky and held them in its cold embrace, Saphira and Eragon were beyond the confines of the sandy wastes and were again soaring over the verdant fields of the Empire, their course such that they would pass between Urû'baen and Lake Tüdosten on their way to the city of Feinster.

After flying for two days and two nights without sleep, Saphira was unable to continue. Swooping down to a small thicket of white birch

trees by a pond, she curled up in their shade and napped for a few hours while Eragon kept watch and practiced his swordsmanship with Brisingr.

Ever since they had parted with Oromis and Glaedr, a sense of constant anxiety had troubled Eragon as he pondered what awaited him and Saphira at Feinster. He knew that they were better protected than most from death and injury, but when he thought back to the Burning Plains, and to the Battle of Farthen Dûr, and when he remembered the sight of blood spurting from severed limbs and the screams of wounded men and the white-hot lash of a sword slicing through his own flesh, then Eragon's gut would roil and his muscles would shake with suppressed energy, and he did not know whether he wished to fight every soldier in the land or flee in the opposite direction and hide in a deep, dark hole.

His dread only worsened when he and Saphira resumed their journey and spotted lines of armed men marching over the fields below. Here and there, pillars of pale smoke rose from sacked villages. The sight of so much wanton destruction sickened him. Averting his gaze, he squeezed the neck spike in front of him and squinted until the only thing visible through the bars of his blurry eyelashes was the white calluses on his knuckles.

Little one, said Saphira, her thoughts slow and tired. *We have done this before. Do not allow it to disturb you so*.

Regretting that he had distracted her from flying, he said, *I'm sorry. … I'll be fine when we get there. I just want it to be over*.

I know.

Eragon sniffed and wiped his cold nose on the cuff of his tunic. *Sometimes I wish I enjoyed fighting as much as you do. Then this would be so much easier*.

If you did, she said, *the entire world would cower before our feet, including Galbatorix. No, it is good you do not share my love of blood. We balance each other out, Eragon.… Apart we are incomplete, but together we are whole. Now clear your mind of these poisonous thoughts and tell me a riddle that will keep me awake*.

Very well, he said after a moment. *I am colored red and blue and yellow and every other hue of the rainbow. I am long and short, thick and thin, and I often rest coiled up. I can eat a hundred sheep in a row and still be hungry. What am I?*

A dragon, of course, she said without hesitation.

No, a woolen rug.

Bah!

Their third day of traveling crept past with agonizing slowness. The only sounds were those of Saphira's wings flapping, the steady rasp of

her panting, and the dull roar of air rushing past Eragon's ears. His legs and lower back ached from sitting in the saddle for so long, but his discomfort was slight compared with Saphira's; her flight muscles burned with an almost unbearable amount of pain. Still, she persevered and did not complain, and she refused his offer to alleviate her suffering with a spell, saying, *You will need the strength when we arrive*.

Hours after dusk, Saphira wobbled and dropped several feet in a single, sickening lurch. Eragon straightened, alarmed, and looked around for any clues as to what had caused the disturbance but saw only blackness below and the glittering stars above.

I think we just reached the Jiet River, said Saphira. *The air here is cool and moist, as it would be over water*.

Then Feinster shouldn't be much farther ahead. Are you sure you can find the city in the dark? We could be a hundred miles north or south of it!

No, we could not. My sense of direction may not be infallible, but it is certainly better than yours or that of any other earthbound creature. If the elf maps we have seen were accurate, then we cannot be off by more than fifty miles north or south of Feinster, and at this height, we can easily see the city over that distance. We may even be able to smell the smoke from their chimneys.

And so it was. Later that night, when dawn was only a few hours away, a dull red glow appeared upon the western horizon. Seeing it, Eragon twisted around and removed his armor from the saddlebags, then donned his mail hauberk, his arming cap, his helm, his bracers, and his greaves. He wished he had his shield, but he had left it with the Varden before running to Mount Thardûr with Nar Garzhvog.

Then Eragon rummaged with one hand through the contents of his bags until he found the silver flask of faelnirv Oromis had given him. The metal container was cool to the touch. Eragon drank a small sip of the enchanted liqueur, which seared the inside of his mouth and which tasted of elderberries and mead and mulled cider. Heat suffused his face. Within seconds, his weariness began to recede as the restorative properties of the faelnirv took effect.

Eragon shook the flask. To his concern, it felt as if a third of the precious liqueur was already gone, even though he had only consumed a single mouthful once before. *I have to be more careful with it in the future*, he thought.

As he and Saphira drew closer, the glow on the horizon resolved into thousands of individual points of light, from small handheld lanterns to cookfires to bonfires to huge patches of burning pitch that poured a foul black smoke into the night sky. By the ruddy light of the fires, Eragon saw a sea of flashing spearpoints and gleaming helmets surging against the base of the large, well-fortified city, the walls of

which teemed with tiny figures busy firing arrows at the army below, pouring cauldrons of boiling oil between the merlons of the parapet, cutting ropes thrown over the walls, and pushing away the rickety wooden ladders the besiegers kept leaning against the ramparts. Faint calls and cries floated upward from the ground, as well as the boom of a battering ram crashing against the city's iron gates.

The last of Eragon's weariness vanished as he studied the battlefield and noted the placement of the men and the buildings and the various pieces of war machinery. Extending outward from the walls of Feinster were hundreds of ramshackle hovels crammed one against another, with hardly enough room for a horse to pass between: the dwellings of those too poor to afford a house within the main part of the city. Most of the hovels appeared deserted, and a wide swath had been demolished so that the Varden could approach the city walls in force. A score or more of the mean huts were burning, and even as he watched, the fires spread, leaping from one thatched roof to another. East of the hovels, curved black lines scored the earth where trenches had been excavated to protect the Varden's camp. On the other side of the city were docks and wharves similar to those Eragon remembered from Teirm, and then the dark and restless ocean that seemed to extend to infinity.

A thrill of feral excitement ran through Eragon, and he felt Saphira shiver underneath him at the same time. He gripped the hilt of Brisingr. *They don't seem to have noticed us yet. Shall we announce our arrival?*

Saphira answered him by loosing a roar that made his teeth rattle and by painting the sky in front of them with a thick sheet of blue fire.

Below, the Varden at the foot of the city and the defenders upon the ramparts paused, and for a moment, silence enveloped the battlefield. Then the Varden began to cheer and bang their spears and swords against their shields while great groans of despair wafted from the people of the city.

Ah! exclaimed Eragon, blinking. *I wish you hadn't done that. Now I can't see anything.*

Sorry.

Still blinking, he said, *The first thing we should do is find a horse that just died, or some other animal, so that I can replenish your strength with theirs*.

You don't have—

Saphira stopped talking as another mind touched theirs. After a half second of panic, Eragon recognized the consciousness as that of Trianna. *Eragon, Saphira!* cried the sorceress. *You're just in time! Arya and another elf scaled the walls, but they were trapped by a large group of soldiers. They won't survive another minute unless someone helps them!*

Hurry!

Saphira tucked her wings close to her body and tipped into a steep dive, hurtling toward the dark buildings of the city. Eragon ducked his head against the blast of wind that tore at his face. The world spun around them as Saphira rolled to her right so that the archers on the ground would have difficulty shooting her.

Eragon's limbs grew heavy as Saphira pulled out of the dive. Then she leveled out and the weight pressing down on him vanished. Like strange, shrieking hawks, arrows whistled past them, some missing their mark, while Eragon's wards deflected the rest.

Swooping low over the outer city walls, Saphira roared again and lashed out with her claws and tail, knocking groups of screaming men off the parapet and toward the hard ground eighty feet below.

A tall, square tower armed with four ballistae stood at the far end of the southern wall. The huge crossbows fired twelve-foot-long javelins toward the Varden massed before the city gates. Inside the curtain wall, Eragon and Saphira spotted a hundred or so soldiers gathered around a pair of warriors, who stood with their backs pressed against the base of the tower, desperately trying to fend off a thicket of thrusting blades.

Even in the gloom and from high above, Eragon recognized one of the warriors as Arya.

Saphira leaped down from the parapet and landed in the midst of the soldiers, crushing several men beneath her feet. The rest scattered, screaming with fear and surprise. Saphira roared, frustrated that her prey was escaping, and whipped her tail across the dirt, flattening a dozen more soldiers. A man tried to run past her. Fast as a striking snake, she caught him between her jaws and shook her head, snapping his spine. She disposed of another four in a similar manner.

By then the remaining men had vanished among the buildings.

Eragon quickly pulled loose his leg straps, then jumped to the ground. The additional weight of his armor drove him to one knee as he landed. He grunted and pushed himself up onto his feet.

"Eragon!" cried Arya, running up to him. She was panting and drenched with sweat. Her only armor was a padded jerkin and a light helm painted black so it would not cast unwanted reflections.

"Welcome, Bjartskular. Welcome, Shadeslayer," purred Blödhgarm from by her side, his short fangs orange and glistening in the torchlight, his yellow eyes glowing. The ruff of fur on the elf's back and neck stood on end, which made him appear even fiercer than

usual. Both he and Arya were stained with blood, although Eragon could not tell if the blood was theirs.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

Arya shook her head, and Blödhgarm said, "A few scratches, but nothing serious."

What are you doing here without reinforcements? asked Saphira.

"The gates," said Arya, gasping. "For three days, we've tried to break them, but they're impervious to magic, and the battering ram has barely dented the wood. So I convinced Nasuada to …"

When Arya paused to regain her breath, Blödhgarm picked up the thread of her narrative. "Arya convinced Nasuada to stage tonight's attack so that we could sneak into Feinster without being noticed and open the gates from within. Unfortunately, we encountered a trio of spellcasters. They engaged us with their minds and prevented us from using magic while they summoned soldiers to overwhelm us with sheer numbers."

While Blödhgarm spoke, Eragon placed a hand on the chest of one of the dead soldiers and transferred what energy remained in the man's flesh into his own body, and thence to Saphira. "Where are the spellcasters now?" he asked, proceeding to another corpse.

Blödhgarm's fur-covered shoulders rose and fell. "They seem to have taken fright at your appearance, Shur'tugal."

As well they should, growled Saphira.

Eragon drained the energy from three more soldiers, and from the last, he also took the man's round wooden shield. "Well then," he said, standing, "let us go open the gates for the Varden, shall we?"

"Yes, and without delay," said Arya. She started forward, then cast a sideways glance at Eragon. "You have a new sword." It was not a question.

He nodded. "Rhunön helped me to forge it."

"And what is the name of your weapon, Shadeslayer?" asked Blödhgarm.

Eragon was about to answer when four soldiers ran out from the mouth of a dark alleyway, spears lowered. In a single, smooth motion, he drew Brisingr from its sheath and slashed through the haft of the lead man's spear and, continuing with the blow, decapitated the soldier. Brisingr seemed to shimmer with savage delight. Arya lunged forward and stabbed two of the other men before they could react while Blödhgarm leaped sideways and tackled the last soldier, killing him with his own dagger.

"Hurry!" cried Arya, and started to run toward the city gates.

Eragon and Blödhgarm raced after her while Saphira followed close behind, her claws loud against the paving stones of the street. Archers fired arrows at them from the parapet above, and three different

times, soldiers rushed out from the main bulk of the city and flung themselves against them. Without slowing, Eragon, Arya, and Blödhgarm cut down the attackers, or else Saphira blasted them with a withering torrent of fire.

The steady boom of the battering ram became ever louder as they approached the forty-foot-tall gates of the city. Eragon saw two men and a woman, who were garbed in dark robes, standing before the ironbound doors, chanting in the ancient language and swaying from side to side with upheld arms. The three spellcasters fell silent when they noticed Eragon and his companions and, with their robes flapping, ran up the main street of Feinster, which led to the keep at the far side of the city.

Eragon longed to pursue them. However, it was more important to let the Varden into the city, where they would no longer be at the mercy of the men on the walls. *I wonder what mischief they have planned*, he thought, worried as he watched the spellcasters depart.

Before Eragon, Arya, Blödhgarm, and Saphira arrived at the gates, fifty soldiers in gleaming armor streamed out of the guard towers and positioned themselves in front of the huge wooden doors.

One of the soldiers pounded the hilt of his sword against his shield and shouted, “Never shall you pass, foul demons! This is our home, and we shall not allow Urgals and elves and other inhuman monsters to enter! Begone, for you shall find nothing but blood and sorrow in Feinster!”

Arya pointed at the guard towers and murmured to Eragon, “The gears for opening the gates are hidden within there.”

“Go,” he said. “You and Blödhgarm sneak around the men and slip into the towers. Saphira and I will keep them occupied in the meantime.”

Arya nodded, then she and Blödhgarm disappeared into the pools of inky shadows that surrounded the houses behind Eragon and Saphira.

Through his bond with her, Eragon sensed that Saphira was gathering herself to pounce upon the group of soldiers. He put a hand on one of her forelegs. *Wait*, he said. *Let me try something first.*

If it doesn’t work, then *may I tear them to shreds?* she asked, licking her fangs.

Yes, then you may do what you wish with them.

Eragon slowly walked toward the soldiers, holding his sword and shield out to either side. An arrow shot toward him from above, only to stop dead in the air three feet from his chest and drop straight to the ground. Eragon looked over the soldiers’ frightened faces, then raised his voice and said, “My name is Eragon Shadeslayer! Perhaps you have heard of me, and perhaps not. In either case, know this: I am a Dragon Rider, and I have sworn to help the Varden remove

Galbatorix from his throne. Tell me, have any of you sworn fealty in the ancient language to Galbatorix or the Empire? … Well, have you?"

The same man who had spoken before, who appeared to be the captain of the soldiers, said, "We would not swear fealty to the king even if he held a sword to our necks! Our loyalty belongs to Lady Lorana. She and her family have ruled us for four generations, and they've done a fine job of it too!" The other soldiers muttered in agreement.

"Then join us!" cried Eragon. "Lay down your weapons, and I promise no harm shall come to you or your families. You cannot hope to hold Feinster against the combined might of the Varden, Surda, the dwarves, and the elves."

"So you say," shouted one of the soldiers. "But what if Murtagh and that red dragon of his should come here again?"

Eragon hesitated, then said in a confident tone, "He is no match for me and the elves who fight with the Varden. We have already driven him off once before." To the left of the soldiers, Eragon saw Arya and Blödhgarm sidle out from behind one of the stone staircases that led to the top of the walls and, with silent footsteps, creep toward the leftmost guard tower.

The captain of the soldiers said, "We may not have pledged ourselves to the king, but Lady Lorana has. What will you do to her, then? Kill her? Imprison her? No, we will not betray our trust and allow you to pass, nor the monsters clawing at our walls. You and the Varden hold nothing but the promise of death for those who have been forced to serve the Empire!

"Why couldn't you have left well enough alone, eh, Dragon Rider? Why couldn't you have kept your head down so the rest of us could live in peace? But no, the lure of fame and glory and riches was too great. You had to bring wrack and ruin to our homes so that you could satisfy your ambitions. Well, I curse you, Dragon Rider! I curse you with all my heart! May you leave Alagaësia and never return!"

A chill crept over Eragon, for the man's curse echoed that which the last Ra'zac had cast upon him in Helgrind, and he remembered how Angela had foretold that very future for him. With an effort, he put aside such thoughts and said, "I do not wish to kill you, but I will if I must. Lay down your weapons!"

Arya silently opened the door at the bottom of the leftmost guard tower and slipped inside. Stealthy as a hunting wildcat, Blödhgarm crept behind the soldiers toward the other tower. If any of the men had turned around, they would have seen him.

The captain of the soldiers spat on the ground by Eragon's feet. "You don't even look human yourself! You're a traitor to your race, you are!" And with that, the man raised his shield and hefted his

sword and slowly walked toward Eragon. “Shadeslayer,” growled the soldier. “Ha! I’d as soon believe my brother’s twelve-year-old son had killed a Shade as a youth like you.”

Eragon waited until the captain was only a few feet away. Then he took a single step forward and stabbed Brisingr through the center of the man’s embossed shield, through his arm underneath, and then through the man’s chest and out his back. The man convulsed once and was still. As Eragon pulled his blade free of the corpse, there was a discordant clamor from within the guard towers as gears and chains began to turn and the massive beams that held closed the city gates began to withdraw.

“Lay down your weapons or die!” Eragon shouted.

Bellowing in unison, twenty soldiers ran at him, brandishing their swords. The others either dispersed and fled toward the heart of the city or else took Eragon’s advice and placed their swords and spears and their shields on the gray paving stones and knelt by the side of the street with their hands on their knees.

A fine mist of blood formed around Eragon as he cut his way through the soldiers, dancing from one to the next faster than they could react. Saphira knocked two of the soldiers over, then set another two on fire with a short burst of flame from her nostrils, cooking them in their armor. Eragon slid to a stop several feet beyond the rearmost soldier and held his position, his sword arm outstretched from the blow he had just dealt, and waited until he heard the man topple to the ground, first one half, and then the other.

Arya and Blödhgarm emerged from the guard towers just as the gates groaned and swung outward, revealing the blunt and splintered end of the Varden’s massive battering ram. Above, the archers on the parapet cried out in dismay and retreated toward more defensible positions. Dozens of hands appeared around the edges of the gates and pulled them farther apart, and Eragon saw a mass of grim-faced Varden, men and dwarves alike, crowded in the archway beyond.

“Shadeslayer!” they shouted, and also “Argetlam!” and “Welcome back! The hunting is good today!”

“These are my prisoners!” Eragon said, and pointed with Brisingr at the soldiers kneeling by the side of the street. “Bind them and see that they are treated well. I gave my word that no harm would come to them.”

Six warriors hurried to follow his order.

The Varden rushed forward, streaming into the city, their jangling armor and pounding boots creating a continuous, rolling thunder. Eragon was pleased to see Roran and Horst and several other men from Carvahall in the fourth rank of the warriors. He hailed them, and Roran raised his hammer in greeting and ran toward him.

Eragon grasped Roran's right forearm and pulled him into a rough hug. Drawing back, he noticed that Roran seemed older and hollow-eyed compared with before.

"About time you got here," Roran grunted. "We've been dying by the hundreds trying to take the walls."

"Saphira and I came as fast as we could. How's Katrina?"

"She's fine."

"Once this is over, you'll have to tell me everything that's happened to you since I left."

Roran pressed his lips together and nodded. Then he pointed at Brisingr and said, "Where did you get the sword?"

"From the elves."

"What's it called?"

"Bris—" Eragon started to say, but then the eleven other elves whom Islanzadí had assigned to protect him and Saphira sprinted out of the column of men and surrounded the two of them. Arya and Blödhgarm rejoined them as well, Arya wiping clean the slim blade of her sword.

Before Eragon could resume speaking, Jörmundur rode through the gates and hailed him, shouting, "Shadeslayer! Well met indeed!"

Eragon greeted him in return and asked, "What should we do now?"

"Whatever you see fit," Jörmundur replied, reining in his brown charger. "We have to fight our way up to the keep. It doesn't look as if Saphira would fit between most of the houses, so fly around and harry their forces where you can. If you could break open the keep or capture Lady Lorana, it would be a great help."

"Where's Nasuada?"

Jörmundur gestured over his shoulder. "At the rear of the army, coordinating our forces with King Orrin." Jörmundur glanced out over the influx of warriors, then looked back at Eragon and Roran. "Stronghammer, your place is with your men, not gossiping with your cousin." Then the lean, wiry commander spurred his horse forward and rode up the gloomy street, shouting orders to the Varden.

As Roran and Arya started to follow, Eragon grabbed Roran by the shoulder and tapped Arya's blade with his own. "Wait," he said.

"What!" both Arya and Roran demanded in exasperated tones.

Yes, what? Saphira asked. *We should not be sitting and talking when there is sport to be had.*

"My father," Eragon exclaimed. "It's not Morzan, it's Brom!"

Roran blinked. "Brom?"

"Yes, Brom!"

Even Arya appeared surprised. "Are you sure, Eragon? How do you know?"

"Of course I'm sure! I'll explain later, but I couldn't wait to tell you

the truth."

Roran shook his head. "Brom.... I never would have guessed, but I suppose it makes sense. You must be glad to be rid of Morzan's name."

"More than glad," Eragon said, grinning.

Roran clapped him on the back, then said, "Watch yourself, eh?" and trotted after Horst and the other villagers.

Arya moved away in the same direction, but before she went more than a few steps, Eragon called her name and said, "The Cripple Who Is Whole has left Du Weldenvarden and joined Islanzadí at Gil'ead." Arya's green eyes widened and her lips parted, as if she were about to ask a question. Before she could, the column of inrushing warriors swept her deeper into the city.

Blödhgarm sidled closer to Eragon. "Shadeslayer, why did the Mourning Sage leave the forest?"

"He and his companion felt that the time had come to strike against the Empire and to reveal their presence to Galbatorix."

The elf's fur rippled. "That is indeed momentous news."

Eragon climbed back onto Saphira. To Blödhgarm and his other guards, he said, "Work your way up to the keep. We'll meet you there."

Without waiting for the elf to answer, Saphira jumped onto the stairs leading to the top of the city walls. The stone steps cracked under her weight as she climbed up to the wide parapet, from which she took flight over the burning hovels outside Feinster, flapping quickly to gain altitude.

Arya will have to give us permission before we can tell anyone else about Oromis and Glaedr, said Eragon, remembering the oath of secrecy he, Orik, and Saphira had sworn to Queen Islanzadí during their first visit to Ellesméra.

I am sure she will once she hears our account, said Saphira.

Aye.

Eragon and Saphira flew from place to place within Feinster, landing wherever they spotted a large clump of men or wherever members of the Varden appeared beleaguered. Unless someone immediately attacked, Eragon attempted to convince each group of enemies to surrender. He failed as often as he succeeded, but he felt better for having tried, for many of the men who thronged the streets were ordinary citizens of Feinster, and not trained soldiers. To each, Eragon said, "The Empire is our foe, not you. Do not take up arms against us and you shall have no cause to fear us." The few times Eragon saw a woman or child running through the dark city, he ordered them to hide in the nearest house, and without exception, they obeyed.

Eragon examined the minds of every person around him and

Saphira, searching for magicians who might mean them harm, but he found no other spellcaster besides the three they had already seen, and the three were careful to keep their thoughts hidden from him. It concerned him that they did not seem to have rejoined the fight in any noticeable way.

Maybe they intend to abandon the city, he said to Saphira.

Would Galbatorix let them leave in the middle of a battle?

I doubt he wants to lose any of his spellcasters.

Maybe, but we should still tread with care. Who knows what they are planning?

Eragon shrugged. *For now, the best thing we can do is help the Varden secure Feinster as quickly as possible*.

She agreed and angled toward a skirmish in a nearby square.

Fighting in a city was different from fighting in the open, as Eragon and Saphira were accustomed to. The narrow streets and close-set buildings hampered Saphira's movements and made it difficult to react when soldiers attacked, even though Eragon could sense the men approaching long before they arrived. Their encounters with the soldiers devolved into dark and desperate struggles, broken only by the occasional burst of fire or magic. More than once, Saphira wrecked the front of a house with a careless sweep of her tail. She and Eragon always managed to escape permanent injury—through a combination of luck, skill, and Eragon's wards—but the attacks made them even more cautious and tense than they normally were in battle.

The fifth such confrontation left Eragon so enraged that when the soldiers began to withdraw, as they always did in the end, he gave chase, determined to kill every last one. They surprised him by swerving off the street and crashing through the barred door of a millinery shop.

Eragon followed, leaping over the cracked wreckage of the door. The inside of the shop was pitch-black and smelled like chicken feathers and stale perfume. He could have lit the shop with magic, but since he knew the soldiers were at a greater disadvantage than he was, he refrained. Eragon felt their minds nearby, and he could hear their ragged breathing, but he was uncertain of what lay between him and them. He inched deeper into the inky shop, feeling his way with his feet. He held his shield in front of him and Brisingr over his head, ready to strike.

Faint as a line of thread falling to the floor, Eragon heard an object flying through the air.

He jerked backward and staggered as a mace or a hammer struck his shield, breaking it into pieces. Shouts erupted. A man knocked over a chair or a table and something shattered against a wall. Eragon lashed out and felt Brisingr sink into flesh and bury itself in bone. A

weight dragged on the end of his sword. Eragon yanked it free, and the man he had struck collapsed across his feet.

Eragon dared a glance back at Saphira, who was waiting for him in the narrow street outside. Only then did Eragon see that there was a lantern mounted on an iron post beside the street and that the light it cast rendered him visible to the soldiers. He quickly moved from the open doorway and threw away the remnants of his shield.

Another crash echoed through the shop, and there was a confusion of footsteps as the soldiers rushed out the back and up a flight of stairs. Eragon scrambled after them. The second story was the living quarters of the family who owned the store below. Several people screamed and a baby began to wail as Eragon bounded through a maze of small rooms, but he ignored them, intent as he was on his prey. At last he cornered the soldiers in a cramped sitting room illuminated by a single flickering candle.

Eragon slew the four soldiers with four strokes of his sword, wincing as their blood splattered him. He scavenged a new shield from one, then paused and studied the corpses. It seemed rude to leave them lying in the middle of the sitting room, so he threw them out a nearby window.

On his way back to the stairs, a figure stepped around a corner and stabbed a dagger toward Eragon's ribs. The tip of the dagger stopped a fraction of an inch from Eragon's side, halted by his wards. Startled, Eragon swept Brisingr upward and was about to strike his attacker's head from his shoulders when he realized that the holder of the dagger was a thin boy of no more than thirteen.

Eragon froze. *That could be me*, he thought. *I would have done the same if I were in his shoes*. Looking past the boy, he saw a man and a woman standing in their nightgowns and knit caps, clutching each other and staring at him with horror.

A tremor ran through Eragon. He lowered Brisingr and, with his free hand, removed the dagger from the boy's now-soft grip. "If I were you," Eragon said, and the loudness of his voice shocked him, "I would not go outside until the battle is over." He hesitated, then added, "I'm sorry."

Feeling ashamed, he hurried from the shop and rejoined Saphira.

They continued along the street.

Not far from the millinery shop, Eragon and Saphira came across several of King Orrin's men carrying gold candlesticks, silver plates and utensils, jewelry, and an assortment of furnishings out of a well-appointed mansion the men had broken into.

Eragon dashed a pile of rugs from the arms of one man. "Put these things back!" he shouted to the entire group. "We're here to *help* these people, not steal from them! They are our brothers and sisters, our

mothers and fathers. I'll let you off this once, but spread the word that if you or anyone else goes looting, I'll have you strung up and whipped as the thieves you are!" Saphira growled, emphasizing his point. Under their watchful gaze, the chastened warriors returned the spoils to the marble-clad mansion.

Now, Eragon said to Saphira, *maybe we can—*

"Shadeslayer! Shadeslayer!" shouted a man, running toward them from deeper within the city. His arms and armor identified him as one of the Varden.

Eragon tightened his grip on Brisingr. "What?"

"We need your help, Shadeslayer. And yours too, Saphira!"

They followed the warrior through Feinster until they arrived at a large stone building. Several dozen Varden sat hunched behind a low wall in front of the building. They appeared relieved to see Eragon and Saphira.

"Stay back!" said one of the Varden, gesturing. "There's a whole group of soldiers inside, and they have bows aimed at us."

Eragon and Saphira halted just out of sight of the building. The warrior who had brought them said, "We can't get at them. The doors and windows are blocked, and they shoot at us if we try to chop our way in."

Eragon looked at Saphira. *Shall I, or shall you?*

I'll attend to it, she said, and jumped into the air with a rush of spreading wings.

The building shook, windows shattering, as Saphira landed on the roof. Eragon and the other warriors watched with awe as she fit the tips of her claws into the mortared grooves between the stones and, snarling from the effort, tore the building apart until she exposed the terrified soldiers, whom she killed like a terrier kills rats.

When Saphira returned to Eragon's side, the Varden edged away from her, clearly frightened by her display of ferocity. She ignored them and began licking her paws, cleaning the gore from her scales.

Have I ever told you how glad I am we're not enemies? Eragon asked.

No, but it's very sweet of you.

* * *

Throughout the city, the soldiers fought with a tenacity that impressed Eragon; they gave ground only when forced and made every attempt to slow the Varden's advance. Because of their determined resistance, the Varden did not arrive at the western side of the city, where the keep stood, until the first faint light of dawn began to spread across the sky.

The keep was an imposing structure. It was tall and square and adorned with numerous towers of differing height. The roof was made

of slate, so attackers could not set it on fire. In front of the keep was a large courtyard—in which were several low outbuildings and a row of four catapults—and encircling the lot was a thick curtain wall interspersed with smaller towers of its own. Hundreds of soldiers manned the battlements and hundreds more teemed within the courtyard. The only way to enter the courtyard on the ground was through a wide, arched passageway in the curtain wall, which was closed off by both an iron portcullis and a set of thick oaken doors.

Several thousand of the Varden stood pressed against the curtain wall, striving to break through the portcullis with the battering ram they had brought from the main gate of the city or else to surmount the walls with grappling hooks and ladders, which the defenders kept pushing away. Flocks of whining arrows arched back and forth over the wall. Neither side seemed to have the advantage.

The gate! said Eragon, pointing.

Saphira swept down from on high and cleared the parapet above the portcullis with a jet of billowing fire, smoke venting from her nostrils. She dropped onto the top of the wall, jarring Eragon, and said, *Go. I'll see to the catapults before they start lobbing rocks at the Varden.*

Be careful. He lowered himself to the parapet from her back.

It is they *who must be careful!* she replied. She snarled at the pikemen gathering around the catapults. Half of them turned and fled inside.

The wall was too high for Eragon to comfortably jump to the street below, so Saphira draped her tail over the side and wedged it between two merlons. Eragon sheathed Brisingr, then climbed down, using the spikes on her tail like rungs on a ladder. When he reached the tip, he released his hold and fell the remaining twenty feet. He rolled to lessen the impact as he landed amid the press of Varden.

"Greetings, Shadeslayer," said Blödhgarm, emerging from the crowd, along with the eleven other elves.

"Greetings." Eragon drew Brisingr again. "Why haven't you already opened the gate for the Varden?"

"The gate is protected by many spells, Shadeslayer. It would require much strength to break and shatter. My companions and I are here to protect you and Saphira, and we cannot fulfill our duty if we exhaust ourselves on other tasks."

Biting back a curse, Eragon said, "Would you rather Saphira and I exhaust ourselves, Blödhgarm? Will that make us safer?"

The elf stared at Eragon for a moment, his yellow eyes inscrutable, then he bowed his head slightly. "We shall open the gate at once, Shadeslayer."

"No, don't," growled Eragon. "Wait here."

Eragon pushed his way to the front of the Varden and strode toward the lowered portcullis. “Give me room!” he shouted, gesturing at the warriors. The Varden backed away from him, forming an open area twenty feet across. A javelin shot from a ballista glanced off his wards and flew spinning down a side street. Saphira roared from inside the courtyard, and there came the sounds of timbers breaking and of taut rope snapping in twain.

Grasping his sword with both hands, Eragon lifted it overhead and shouted, “Brisingr!” The blade burst into blue fire, and the warriors behind him uttered exclamations of amazement. Eragon stepped forward then and smote one of the crossbars of the portcullis. A blinding flash lit the wall and surrounding buildings as the sword sliced through the thick piece of metal. At the same time, Eragon noticed a sudden increase in his fatigue as Brisingr severed the wards protecting the portcullis. He smiled. As he had hoped, the spells of countermagic with which Rhunön had imbued Brisingr were more than sufficient to defeat the enchantments.

Moving at a quick but steady pace, Eragon cut as large a hole as he could in the portcullis, then stood aside as the loose piece of grating fell flat onto the stones of the street with a discordant clang. He stepped past the grating and walked forward to the oaken doors recessed farther within the curtain wall. He aligned Brisingr with the hairline crack between the two doors, put his weight behind the sword, and pushed the blade through the narrow gap and out the other side. Then he increased the flow of energy to the fire blazing around the blade until it was hot enough to burn its way through the dense wood as easily as a knife cuts through fresh bread. Copious amounts of smoke billowed from around the blade, making his throat sting and his eyes smart.

Eragon worked the sword upward, burning through the immense wooden beam that barred the doors shut from the inside. As soon as he felt the resistance against Brisingr’s blade lessen, he withdrew the sword and extinguished the flame. He wore thick gloves, so he did not shrink from grasping the glowing edges of one door and pulling it open with a mighty heave. The other door also swung outward, seemingly of its own accord, although a moment later, Eragon saw that it was Saphira who had pushed it open; she sat to the right of the entryway, peering at him with sparkling sapphire eyes. Behind her, the four catapults lay in ruins.

Eragon went to stand with Saphira as the Varden poured into the courtyard, filling the air with their clamorous battle-cries. Exhausted by his efforts, Eragon placed a hand over the belt of Beloth the Wise and bolstered his flagging strength with some of the energy he had stored within the twelve diamonds hidden inside the belt. He offered

the rest of it to Saphira, who was equally tired, but she declined, saying, *Keep it for yourself. You haven't that much left. Besides, what I really need is a meal and a full night's sleep*.

Eragon leaned against her and allowed his eyelids to drift halfway closed. *Soon*, he said. *Soon this will all be over*.

I hope so, she replied.

Among the warriors who streamed past was Angela, garbed in her strange, flanged armor of green and black and carrying her hûthvír, the double-bladed staff weapon of the dwarf priests. The herbalist paused next to Eragon and, with an impish expression, said, "An impressive display, but don't you think you're overdoing it a bit?"

"What do you mean?" asked Eragon, frowning.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Come now, was it really necessary to set your sword on fire?"

Eragon's expression cleared as he understood her objection. He laughed. "Not for the portcullis, no, but I enjoyed it. Besides, I can't help it. I named the sword *Fire* in the ancient language, and every time I say the word, the blade flares up like a branch of dry wood in a bonfire."

"You named your sword Fire?" Angela exclaimed with a note of incredulity. "Fire? What kind of a boring name is that? You might as well name your sword Blazing Blade and be done with it. Fire indeed. Humph. Wouldn't you rather have a sword called Sheepbiter or Chrysanthemum Cleaver or something else with imagination?"

"I already have one Sheepbiter here," said Eragon, and laid a hand on Saphira. "Why would I need another?"

Angela broke out into a wide smile. "So you're not entirely devoid of wit after all! There just might be hope for you." And she danced off toward the keep, twirling her double-bladed staff by her side and muttering, "Fire? Bah!"

A soft growl emanated from Saphira, and she said, *Be careful whom you call Sheepbiter, Eragon, or you might get bitten yourself*.

Yes, Saphira.

By then, Blödhgarm and his fellow elves had joined Eragon and Saphira in the courtyard, but Eragon ignored them and looked for Arya. When he spotted her, running alongside Jörmundur on his charger, Eragon hailed her and brandished his shield to attract her attention.

Arya heeded his call and loped over, her stride as graceful as a gazelle's. She had acquired a shield, a full-sized helm, and a mail hauberk since they had parted, and the metal of her armor gleamed in the gray half-light that pervaded the city. As she drew to a stop, Eragon said, "Saphira and I are going to enter the keep from above and try to capture Lady Lorana. Do you want to come with us?"

Arya agreed with a terse nod.

Springing from the ground onto one of Saphira's front legs, Eragon climbed into her saddle. Arya followed his example an instant later and sat close behind him, the links of her hauberk pressing against his back.

Saphira unfurled her velvety wings and took flight, leaving Blödhgarm and the other elves gazing up at her with looks of frustration.

"You should not abandon your guards so lightly," Arya murmured in Eragon's left ear. She wrapped her sword arm around his waist and held him tightly as Saphira wheeled above the courtyard.

Before Eragon could respond, he felt the touch of Glaedr's vast mind. For a moment, the city below vanished, and he saw and felt only what Glaedr saw and felt.

Little-stinging-hornet-arrows bounced off his belly as he rose above the scattered wood-caves of the two-legs-round-ears. The air was smooth and firm beneath his wings, perfect for the flying he would need to do. On his back, the saddle rubbed against his scales as Oromis altered his position.

Glaedr flicked his tongue out and tasted the enticing aroma of burnt-wood-cooked-meat-spilled-blood. He had been to this place many times before. In his youth, it had been known by a different name than Gil'ead, and then the only inhabitants had been the somber-laughing-quick-tongued-elves and the friends of elves. His previous visits had always been pleasant, but it pained him to remember the two nest-mates who had died here, slain by the twisted-mind-Forsworn.

The lazy-one-eye-sun hovered just above the horizon. To the north, the big-water-Isenstar was a rippling sheet of polished silver. Below, the herd of

pointed-ears commanded by Islanzadí was arrayed around the broken-anthill-city. Their armor glittered like crushed ice. A pall of blue smoke lay over the whole area, thick as cold morning mist.

And from the south, the small-angry-rip-claw-Thorn winged his way toward Gil'ead, bellowing his challenge for all to hear. Morzan-son-Murtagh sat upon his back, and in Murtagh's right hand, Zar'roc shone as bright as a nail.

Sorrow filled Glaedr as he beheld the two miserable hatchlings. He wished he and Oromis did not have to kill them. Once more, *he thought,* dragon must fight dragon and Rider must fight Rider, and all because of that egg-breaker-Galbatorix. *His mood grim, Glaedr quickened his flapping and spread his claws in preparation for tearing at his oncoming foes.*

Eragon's head whipped on his neck as Saphira lurched to one side and dropped a score of feet before she regained her equilibrium. *Did you see that as well?* she asked.

I did. Worried, Eragon glanced back at the saddlebags, where Glaedr's heart of hearts was hidden, and wondered if he and Saphira should try to help Oromis and Glaedr but then reassured himself with the knowledge that there were numerous spellcasters among the elves. His teachers would not want for assistance.

"What is wrong?" asked Arya, her voice loud in Eragon's ear.

Oromis and Glaedr are about to fight Thorn and Murtagh, said Saphira.

Eragon felt Arya stiffen against him. "How do you know?" she asked.

"I'll explain later. I just hope they don't get hurt."

"As do I," said Arya.

Saphira flew high above the keep, then floated downward on silent wings and alighted upon the spire of the tallest tower. As Eragon and Arya clambered onto the steep roof, Saphira said, *I will meet you in the chamber below. The window here is too small for me.* And she took off, the gusts from her wings buffeting them.

Eragon and Arya lowered themselves over the edge of the roof and dropped to a narrow stone ledge eight feet below. Ignoring the vertigo-inducing fall that awaited him if he slipped, Eragon inched along the ledge to a cross-shaped window, where he pulled himself into a large square room lined with sheaves of quarrels and racks of heavy crossbows. If anyone had been in the room when Saphira landed, they had already fled.

Arya climbed through the window after him. She inspected the room, then gestured at the stairs in the far corner and padded toward them, her leather boots silent on the stone floor.

As Eragon followed her, he sensed a strange confluence of energies

below them and also the minds of five people whose thoughts were closed to him. Wary of a mental attack, Eragon withdrew into himself and concentrated upon reciting a scrap of elvish poetry. He touched Arya on the shoulder and whispered, “Do you feel that?”

She nodded. “We should have brought Blödhgarm with us.”

Together, they descended the stairs, making every effort to be quiet. The next room in the tower was much larger than the last; the ceiling was over thirty feet high, and from it hung a lantern with faceted panes of glass. A yellow flame burned inside. Hundreds of oil paintings covered the walls: portraits of bearded men in ornate robes and expressionless women sitting amid children with sharp, flat teeth; gloomy, windswept seascapes depicting the drowning of sailors; and scenes of battle, where humans slaughtered bands of grotesque Urgals. A row of tall wooden shutters set within the northern wall opened onto a balcony with a stone balustrade. Opposite the window, near the far wall, was a collection of small round tables littered with scrolls, three padded chairs, and two oversized brass urns filled with bouquets of dried flowers. A stout, gray-haired woman garbed in a lavender dress sat in one of the chairs. She bore a strong resemblance to several of the men in the paintings. A silver diadem adorned with jade and topaz rested upon her head.

In the center of the room stood the three magicians Eragon had glimpsed before in the city. The two men and a woman were facing each other, the hoods of their robes thrown back and their arms extended out to each side, so that the tips of their fingers touched. They swayed in unison, murmuring an unfamiliar spell in the ancient language. A fourth person sat in the middle of the triangle they formed: a man garbed in an identical fashion, but who said nothing, and who grimaced as if in pain.

Eragon threw himself at the mind of one of the male spellcasters, but the man was so focused on his task, Eragon failed to gain entry to his consciousness and thus was unable to subordinate him to his will. The man did not even seem to notice the attack. Arya must have attempted the same thing, for she frowned and whispered, “They were trained well.”

“Do you know what they are doing?” he murmured.

She shook her head.

Then the woman in the lavender dress looked up and saw Eragon and Arya crouched upon the stone stairs. To Eragon’s surprise, the woman did not call for help but rather placed a finger upon her lips, then beckoned.

Eragon exchanged a perplexed glance with Arya. “It could be a trap,” he whispered.

“It most likely is,” she said.

“What should we do?”

“Is Saphira almost here?”

“Yes.”

“Then let us go and greet our host.”

Matching their steps, they padded down the remaining stairs and snuck across the room, never taking their eyes off the engrossed magicians. “Are you Lady Lorana?” asked Arya in a soft voice as they halted before the seated woman.

The woman inclined her head. “That I am, fair elf.” She turned her gaze upon Eragon then and said, “And are you the Dragon Rider of whom we have heard so much about recently? Are you Eragon Shadeslayer?”

“I am,” said Eragon.

A relieved expression appeared upon the woman’s distinguished face. “Ah, I had hoped you would come. You must stop them, Shadeslayer.” And she gestured at the magicians.

“Why don’t you order them to surrender?” whispered Eragon.

“I cannot,” said Lorana. “They answer only to the king and his new Rider. I have sworn myself to Galbatorix—I had no choice in the matter—so I cannot raise a hand against him or his servants; otherwise, I would have arranged their destruction myself.”

“Why?” asked Arya. “What is it you fear so much?”

The skin around Lorana’s eyes tightened. “They know they cannot hope to drive off the Varden as they are, and Galbatorix has not sent reinforcements to our aid. So they are attempting, I do not know how, to create a Shade in the hope that the monster will turn against the Varden and spread sorrow and confusion throughout your ranks.”

Horror enveloped Eragon. He could not imagine having to fight another Durza. “But a Shade might just as easily turn against them and everyone else in Feinster as it would against the Varden.”

Lorana nodded. “They do not care. They only wish to cause as much pain and destruction as they can before they die. They are insane, Shadeslayer. Please, you must stop them, for the sake of my people!”

As she finished speaking, Saphira landed upon the balcony outside the room, cracking the balustrade with her tail. She knocked aside the shutters with a single blow of her paw, breaking their frames like so much tinder, and then pushed her head and shoulders into the chamber and growled.

The magicians continued to chant, seemingly oblivious to her presence.

“Oh my,” said Lady Lorana, gripping the arms of her chair.

“Right,” said Eragon. He hefted Brisingr and started toward the magicians, as did Saphira from the opposite direction.

The world reeled around Eragon, and again he found himself

peering through Glaedr's eyes.

Red. Black. Flashes of throbbing yellow. Pain … Bone-bending pain in his belly and in the shoulder of his left wing. Pain as he had not felt for over a hundred years. Then relief as partner-of-his-life-Oromis healed his injuries.

Glaedr regained his balance and looked for Thorn. The little-red-shrike-dragon was stronger and faster than Glaedr had anticipated, due to Galbatorix's meddling.

Thorn slammed into Glaedr's left side, his weak side, where he had lost his foreleg. They spun around each other, plummeting toward the hard-flat-wing-crushing-ground. Glaedr snapped and tore and raked with his hind feet, trying to batter the smaller dragon into submission.

You will not best *me*, youngling, *he vowed to himself*. I was old before you were born.

White-dagger-claws scratched Glaedr along his ribs and underside. He flexed his tail and struck snarling-long-fang-Thorn across one leg, stabbing him in the thigh with a spike on his tail. The fighting had long since exhausted both of their invisible-spell-shields, leaving them vulnerable to every sort of wound.

When the twirling ground was only a few thousand feet away, Glaedr inhaled and drew back his head. He tightened his neck, clenched his belly, and drew forth the dense-liquid-of-fire from deep within his gut. The liquid ignited as it combined with the air in his throat. He opened his jaws to their full extent and sprayed the red dragon with fire, engulfing him in a blistering cocoon. The torrent of hungry-grasping-writhing-flames tickled the inside of Glaedr's cheeks.

He closed off his throat, terminating the flow of fire as he and the squirming-squealing-slash-claw-dragon pulled away from each other. From on his back, Glaedr heard Oromis say, "Their strength is fading; I can see it in their bearing. Another few minutes and Murtagh's concentration shall fail and I will be able to assume control over his thoughts. That or we shall slay them with sword and fang."

Glaedr growled in agreement, frustrated that he and Oromis dared not communicate with their minds, as they usually did. Rising on warm-wind-from-tilled-earth, he turned toward Thorn, whose limbs dripped with crimson blood, and roared and prepared to grapple with him once more.

Eragon stared at the ceiling, disoriented. He was lying on his back within the keep tower. Kneeling next to him was Arya, concern etched upon her face. She grasped him by an arm and helped him upright, steadying him as he wobbled. Across the room, Eragon saw Saphira shake her head, and he felt her own confusion.

The three magicians still stood with their arms outstretched, swaying and chanting in the ancient language. The words of their

spell rang with unusual force and lingered in the air long after they should have faded to silence. The man who sat at their feet gripped his knees, his entire body shuddering as he thrashed his head from side to side.

"What happened?" asked Arya in a strained undertone. She pulled Eragon closer and lowered her voice even further. "How can you know what Glaedr is thinking from so far away, and when his mind is closed even to Oromis? Forgive me for touching your thoughts without your permission, Eragon, but I was worried about your welfare. What sort of a bond do you and Saphira share with Glaedr?"

"Later," he said, and squared his shoulders.

"Did Oromis give you an amulet or some other trinket that allows you to contact Glaedr?"

"It would take too long to explain. Later, I promise."

Arya hesitated, then nodded and said, "I shall hold you to that."

Together, Eragon, Saphira, and Arya advanced toward the magicians and struck at a separate one each. A metallic peal filled the room as Brisingr glanced aside before it reached its intended target, wrenching Eragon's shoulder. Likewise, Arya's sword rebounded off a ward, as did Saphira's right front paw. Her claws screeched against the stone floor.

"Concentrate on this one!" Eragon shouted, and pointed at the tallest spellcaster, a pale man with a snarled beard. "Hurry, before they manage to summon any spirits!" Eragon or Arya could have attempted to circumvent or deplete the spellcasters' wards with spells of their own, but using magic against another magician was always a perilous proposition unless the magician's mind was under your control. Neither Eragon nor Arya wanted to risk being killed by a ward they were as yet ignorant of.

Attacking in turns, Eragon, Saphira, and Arya cut, stabbed, and battered at the bearded spellcaster for nearly a minute. None of their blows touched the man. Then, at last, after only the slightest hint of resistance, Eragon felt something give way beneath Brisingr, and the sword continued on its way and lopped off the spellcaster's head. The air in front of Eragon shimmered. At the same instant, he felt a sudden drain on his strength as his wards defended him from an unknown spell. The assault ceased after a few seconds, leaving him dizzy and light-headed. His stomach rumbled. He grimaced and fortified himself with energy from the belt of Beloth the Wise.

The only response the other two magicians evinced at the death of their companion was to increase the speed of their invocation. Yellow foam encrusted the corners of their mouths, and spittle flew from their lips, and the whites of their eyes showed, but still they made no attempt to flee or to attack.

Continuing on to the next spellcaster—a corpulent man with rings on his thumbs—Eragon, Saphira, and Arya repeated the process they had used on the first magician: alternating blows until they succeeded in wearing down his wards. It was Saphira who slew the man, knocking him through the air with a swipe of her claws. He hit the side of the staircase and cracked open his skull on the corner of a step. This time there was no magical retaliation.

As Eragon moved toward the female spellcaster, a cluster of multicolored lights hurtled into the room through the broken shutters and converged upon the man seated on the floor. The glowing spirits flashed with angry virulence as they whirled around the man, forming an impenetrable wall. He threw up his arms as if to shield himself and screamed. The air hummed and crackled with the energy that radiated from the flickering orbs. A sour, ironlike taste coated Eragon's tongue, and his skin prickled. The hair on the female spellcaster's head was standing on end. Across from her, Saphira hissed and arched her back, every muscle in her body rigid.

A bolt of fear shot through Eragon. *No!* he thought, feeling sick. *Not now. Not after all we've gone through*. He was stronger than he had been when he faced Durza in Tronjheim, but if anything, he was even more aware of just how dangerous a Shade could be. Only three warriors had ever survived the killing of a Shade: Laetrí the Elf, Irnstad the Rider, and himself—and he had no confidence he could duplicate the feat. *Blödhgarm, where are you?* Eragon shouted with his mind. *We need your help!*

And then everything around Eragon winked out of existence, and in its place he beheld:

Whiteness. Blank whiteness. The cold-soft-sky-water was soothing against Glaedr's limbs after the stifling heat of combat. He lapped at the air, welcoming the thin coat of moisture that accumulated on his dry-sticky-tongue.

He flapped once more and the sky-water parted before him, revealing the glaring-scorchback-sun and the hazy-green-brown-earth. Where is he? *Glaedr wondered. He swung his head, looking for Thorn. The little-red-shrike-dragon had fled high above Gil'ead, higher than any bird normally flew, where the air was thin and one's breath water-smoked.*

"Glaedr, behind us!" Oromis shouted.

Glaedr twisted, but he was too slow. The red dragon crashed into his right shoulder, knocking him tumbling. Snarling, Glaedr wrapped his single remaining foreleg around the nipping-scratching-ferocious-hatchling and strove to crush the life out of Thorn's squirming body. The red dragon bellowed and climbed halfway out of Glaedr's embrace, digging his claws into Glaedr's chest. Glaedr arched his neck and sank his teeth into Thorn's

left hind leg and, with it, held him in place, although the red dragon writhed and kicked like a pinned wildcat. Hot-salty-blood filled Glaedr's mouth.

As they plummeted downward, Glaedr heard the sound of swords striking shields as Oromis and Murtagh exchanged a flurry of blows. Thorn convulsed, and Glaedr glimpsed Morzan-son-Murtagh. Glaedr thought the human appeared frightened, but he was not entirely sure. Even after so long bonded with Oromis, he still had difficulty deciphering the expressions of two-legs-no-horns, what with their soft, flat faces and their lack of tails.

The clanging of metal ceased, and Murtagh shouted, "Curse you for not showing yourself sooner! Curse you! You could have helped us! You could have—" Murtagh seemed to choke on his tongue for a moment.

Glaedr grunted as an unseen force brought their fall to an abrupt halt, nearly shaking him loose from Thorn's leg, and then lifted the four of them up through the sky, higher and higher, until the broken-anthill-city was only a faint blotch below and even Glaedr had difficulty breathing in the rarefied air.

What is the youngling doing? *Glaedr wondered, concerned.* Is he trying to kill himself?

Then Murtagh resumed speaking, and when he did, his voice was richer and deeper than before, and it echoed as if he were standing in an empty hall. Glaedr felt the scales on his shoulders crawl as he recognized the voice of their ancient foe.

"So you survived, Oromis, Glaedr," said Galbatorix. His words were round and smooth, like those of a practiced orator, and their tone was deceptively friendly. "Long have I thought that the elves might be hiding a dragon or a Rider from my sight. It is gratifying to have my suspicions confirmed."

"Begone, foul oath-breaker!" cried Oromis. "You shall not have any satisfaction from us!"

Galbatorix chuckled. "Such a harsh greeting. For shame, Oromis-elda. Have the elves forgotten their fabled courtesy over the past century?"

"You deserve no more courtesy than a rabid wolf."

"Tut-tut, Oromis. Remember what you said to me when I stood before you and the other Elders: 'Anger is a poison. You must purge it from your mind or else it will corrupt your better nature.' You should heed your own advice."

"You cannot confuse me with your snake's tongue, Galbatorix. You are an abomination, and we shall see to it that you are eliminated, even if it costs us our lives."

"But why should it, Oromis? Why should you pit yourself against me? It saddens me that you have allowed your hate to distort your wisdom, for you were wise once, Oromis, perhaps the wisest member of our entire order. You were the first to recognize the madness eating away at my soul,

and it was you who convinced the other Elders to deny my request for another dragon egg. That was very wise of you, Oromis. Futile, but wise. And somehow you managed to escape from Kialandí and Formora, even after they had broken you, and then you hid until all but one of your enemies had died. That too was wise of you, elf."

A brief pause marked Galbatorix's speech. "There is no need to continue fighting me. I freely admit that I committed terrible crimes in my youth, but those days are long past, and when I reflect upon the blood I have shed, it torments my conscience. Still, what would you have of me? I cannot undo my deeds. Now, my greatest concern is ensuring the peace and prosperity of the empire over which I find myself lord and master. Cannot you see that I have lost my thirst for vengeance? The rage that drove me for so many years has burned itself to ashes. Ask yourself this, Oromis: who is responsible for the war that has swept across Alagaësia? Not I. The Varden were the ones who provoked this conflict. I would have been content to rule my people and leave the elves and the dwarves and the Surdans to their own devices. But the Varden could not leave well enough alone. It was they who chose to steal Saphira's egg, and they who cover the earth with mountains of corpses. Not I. You were wise once before, Oromis, and you can become wise once again. Give up your hatred and join me in Ilirea. With you by my side, we can bring an end to this conflict and usher in an era of peace that will endure for a thousand years or more."

Glaedr was not persuaded. He tightened his crushing-piercing-jaws, causing Thorn to yowl. The pain-noise seemed incredibly loud after Galbatorix's speech.

In clear, ringing tones, Oromis said, "No. You cannot make us forget your atrocities with a balm of honeyed lies. Release us! You have not the means to hold us here much longer, and I refuse to exchange pointless banter with a traitor like yourself."

"Bah! You are a senile old fool," said Galbatorix, and his voice acquired a harsh, angry cast. "You should have accepted my offer; you would have been first and foremost among my slaves. I will make you regret your mindless devotion to your so-called justice. And you are wrong. I can keep you thus as long as I want, for I have become as powerful as a god, and there are none who can stop me!"

"You shall not prevail," said Oromis. "Even gods do not endure forever."

At that Galbatorix uttered a foul oath. "Your philosophy does not constrain me, elf! I am the greatest of magicians, and soon I will be even greater still. Death will not take me. You, however, shall die. But first you will suffer. You will both suffer beyond imagining, and then I will kill you, Oromis, and I shall take your heart of hearts, Glaedr, and you will serve me until the end of time."

"Never!" exclaimed Oromis.

And Glaedr again heard the clash of swords on armor.

Glaedr had excluded Oromis from his mind for the duration of the fight, but their bond ran deeper than conscious thought, so he felt it when Oromis stiffened, incapacitated by the searing pain of his bone-blight-nerve-rot. Alarmed, Glaedr released Thorn's leg and tried to kick the red dragon away. Thorn howled at the impact but remained where he was. Galbatorix's spell held the two of them in place—neither able to move more than a few feet in any direction.

There was another metallic clang from above, and then Glaedr saw Naegling fall past him. The golden sword flashed and gleamed as it tumbled toward the ground. For the first time, the cold claw of fear gripped Glaedr. Most of Oromis's word-will-energy was stored within the sword, and his wards were bound to the blade. Without it, he would be defenseless.

Glaedr threw himself against the limits of Galbatorix's spell, struggling with all his might to break free. In spite of his efforts, however, he could not escape. And just as Oromis began to recover, Glaedr felt Zar'roc slash Oromis from shoulder to hip.

Glaedr howled.

He howled as Oromis had howled when Glaedr lost his leg.

An inexorable force gathered inside of Glaedr's belly. Without pausing to consider whether it was possible, he pushed Thorn and Murtagh away with a blast of magic, sending them flying like windblown leaves, and then tucked his wings against his sides and dove toward Gil'ead. If he could get there fast enough, then Islanzadí and her spellcasters would be able to save Oromis.

The city was too far away, though. Oromis's consciousness was faltering … fading … slipping away….

Glaedr poured his own strength into Oromis's ruined frame, trying to sustain him until they reached the ground. But for all the energy he gave to Oromis, he could not stop the bleeding, the terrible bleeding.

Glaedr … release me, *Oromis murmured with his mind.*

A moment later, in an even fainter voice, he whispered, Do not mourn me.

And then the partner of Glaedr's life passed into the void.

Gone.

Gone!

GONE!

Blackness. Emptiness.

He was alone.

A crimson haze descended over the world, throbbing in unison with his pulse. He flared his wings and looped back the way he had come, searching for Thorn and his Rider. He would not let them escape; he would catch them and tear at them and burn them until he had eradicated them from the world.

Glaedr saw the red-shrike-dragon diving toward him, and he roared his grief and redoubled his speed. The red dragon swerved at the last moment, in an attempt to flank him, but he was not fast enough to evade Glaedr, who lunged and snapped and bit off the last three feet of the red dragon's tail. A fountain of blood sprayed from the stump. Yelping in agony, the red dragon wriggled away and darted behind Glaedr. Glaedr started to twist around to face him, but the smaller dragon was too quick, too nimble. Glaedr felt a sharp pain at the base of his skull, and then his vision flickered and failed.

Where was he?

He was alone.

He was alone and in the dark.

He was alone and in the dark, and he could not move or see.

He could feel the minds of other creatures close by, but they were not the minds of Thorn and Murtagh but of Arya, Eragon, and Saphira.

And then Glaedr realized where he was, and the true horror of the situation broke upon him, and he howled into the darkness. He howled and he howled, and he abandoned himself to his agony, not caring what the future might bring, for Oromis was dead, and he was alone.

Alone!

With a start, Eragon returned to himself.

He was curled into a ball. Tears streaked his face. Gasping, he pushed himself up off the floor and looked for Saphira and Arya.

It took him a moment to comprehend what he saw.

The female spellcaster Eragon had been about to attack lay before him, slain by a single sword thrust. The spirits she and her companions had summoned were nowhere to be seen. Lady Lorana was still ensconced in her chair. Saphira was in the process of struggling to her feet on the opposite side of the room. And the man who had been sitting on the floor amid the three other spellcasters was standing next to him, holding Arya in the air by her throat.

The color had vanished from the man's skin, leaving him bone white. His hair, which had been brown, was now bright crimson, and when he looked at Eragon and smiled, Eragon saw that his eyes had become maroon. In every aspect of appearance and bearing, the man resembled Durza.

"Our name is Varaug," said the Shade. "Fear us." Arya kicked at him, but her blows seemed to have no effect.

The burning pressure of the Shade's consciousness pressed against Eragon's mind, trying to break down his defenses. The force of the attack immobilized Eragon; he could barely repel the burrowing tendrils of the Shade's mind, much less walk or swing a sword. For whatever reason, Varaug was even stronger than Durza, and Eragon

was not sure how long he could withstand the Shade's might. He saw that Saphira was also under attack; she sat stiff and motionless by the balcony, a snarl carved on her face.

The veins in Arya's forehead bulged, and her face turned red and purple. Her mouth was open, but she was not breathing. With the palm of her right hand, she struck the Shade's locked elbow and broke the joint with a loud crack. Varaug's arm sagged, and for a moment, Arya's toes brushed the floor, but then the bones in the Shade's arm popped back into place, and he lifted her even higher.

"You shall die," growled Varaug. "You shall all die for imprisoning us in this cold, hard clay."

Knowing that Arya's and Saphira's lives were in peril stripped Eragon of every emotion, save that of implacable determination. His thoughts as sharp and clear as a shard of glass, he drove himself at the Shade's seething consciousness. Varaug was too powerful, and the spirits that resided within him too disparate, for Eragon to overwhelm and control, so Eragon sought to isolate the Shade. He surrounded Varaug's mind with his own: every time Varaug attempted to reach out toward Saphira or Arya, Eragon blocked the mental ray, and every time the Shade attempted to shift his body, Eragon counteracted the urge with a command of his own.

They battled at the speed of thought, fighting back and forth along the perimeter of the Shade's mind, which was a landscape so jumbled and incoherent, Eragon feared it would drive him mad if he gazed at it for long. Eragon pushed himself to the utmost as he dueled with Varaug, striving to anticipate the Shade's every move, but he knew that their contest could only end with his own defeat. As fast as he was, Eragon could not outthink the numerous intelligences contained within the Shade.

Eragon's concentration eventually wavered, and Varaug seized upon the opportunity to force himself further into Eragon's mind, trapping him … transfixing him … suppressing his thoughts until Eragon could do no more than stare at the Shade with dumb rage. An excruciating tingling filled Eragon's limbs as the spirits raced through his body, coursing down every one of his nerves.

"Your ring is full of light!" exclaimed Varaug, his eyes widening with pleasure. "Beautiful light! It will feed us for a long time!"

Then he growled with anger as Arya grabbed his wrist and broke it in three places. She twisted free of Varaug's grip before he could heal himself and dropped to the ground, gasping for air. Varaug kicked at her, but she rolled out of the way. She reached for her fallen sword.

Eragon trembled as he struggled to cast off the Shade's oppressive presence.

Arya's hand closed around the hilt of her sword. A wordless bellow

escaped the Shade. He pounced on her, and they rolled across the floor, wrestling for control of the weapon. Arya shouted and struck Varaug in the side of his head with the pommel of the sword. The Shade went limp for an instant, and Arya scrambled backward, pushing herself upright.

In a flash, Eragon freed himself from Varaug. Without consideration for his own safety, he resumed his attack on the Shade's consciousness, his only thought to restrain the Shade for a few moments.

Varaug rose onto one knee, then faltered as Eragon redoubled his efforts.

"Get him!" Eragon shouted.

Arya lunged forward, her dark hair flying.…

And she stabbed the Shade through his heart.

Eragon winced and extricated himself from Varaug's mind even as the Shade recoiled from Arya, pulling himself off her blade. The Shade opened his mouth and uttered a piercing, dithering wail that shattered the panes of glass in the lantern above. He reached out toward Arya and tottered in her direction, then stopped as his skin faded and became transparent, revealing the dozens of glittering spirits trapped within the confines of his flesh. The spirits throbbed, growing in size, and Varaug's skin split along the bellies of his muscles. With a final burst of light, the spirits tore Varaug apart and fled the tower room, passing through the walls as if the stone were insubstantial.

Eragon's pulse gradually slowed. Then, feeling very old and very tired, he walked over to Arya, who stood leaning against a chair, cupping the front of her neck with a hand. She coughed, spitting up blood. Since she seemed incapable of talking, Eragon placed his hand over hers and said, "Waíse heill." As the energy to mend her injuries flowed out of him, Eragon's legs weakened, and he had to brace himself against the chair.

"Better?" he asked as the spell finished its work.

"Better," Arya whispered, and favored him with a weak smile. She motioned toward where Varaug had been. "We killed him.… We killed him, and yet we did not die." She sounded surprised. "So few have ever killed a Shade and lived."

"That is because they fought alone, not together, like us."

"No, not like us."

"I had you to help me in Farthen Dûr, and you had me to help you here."

"Yes."

"Now I shall have to call *you* Shadeslayer."

"We are both—"

Saphira startled them by loosing a long, mournful keen. Still

keening, she raked her claws across the floor, chipping and scratching the stones. Her tail whipped from side to side, smashing the furniture and the grim paintings on the walls. *Gone!* she said. *Gone! Gone forever!*

"Saphira, what's wrong?" exclaimed Arya. When Saphira did not answer, Arya repeated the question to Eragon.

Hating the words he spoke, Eragon said, "Oromis and Glaedr are dead. Galbatorix killed them."

Arya staggered as if she had been hit. "Ah," she said. She gripped the back of the chair so hard, her knuckles turned white. Tears filled her slanted eyes, then spilled over onto her cheeks and coursed down her face. "Eragon." She reached out and grasped his shoulder, and almost by accident, he found himself holding her in his arms. Eragon felt his own eyes grow wet. He clenched his jaw in an effort to maintain his composure; if he started crying, he knew he would not be able to stop.

He and Arya remained locked together for a long while, consoling each other, then Arya withdrew and said, "How did it happen?"

"Oromis had one of his seizures, and while he was paralyzed, Galbatorix used Murtagh to—" Eragon's voice broke, and he shook his head. "I'll tell you about it along with Nasuada. She should know about this, and I don't want to have to describe it more than once."

Arya nodded. "Then let us go and see her."

As Eragon and Arya escorted Lady Lorana down from the room in the tower, they encountered Blödhgarm and the eleven other elves running up the staircase four steps at a time.

"Shadeslayer! Arya!" exclaimed a female elf with long black hair. "Are you hurt? We heard Saphira's lament, and we thought one of you might have died."

Eragon glanced at Arya. His oath of secrecy to Queen Islanzadí would not allow him to discuss Oromis or Glaedr while in the presence of anyone not from Du Weldenvarden—such as Lady Lorana—without permission from the queen, Arya, or whoever might succeed Islanzadí to the knotted throne in Ellesméra.

She nodded and said, "I release you from your vow, Eragon, both of you. Speak of them to whomever you choose."

"No, we are not hurt," Eragon said. "However, Oromis and Glaedr have just died, slain in battle over Gil'ead."

As one, the elves cried out in shock and then began to ply Eragon with dozens of questions. Arya raised a hand and said, "Restrain yourselves. Now is not the time or place to satisfy your curiosity. There are still soldiers about, and we do not know who might be listening. Keep your sorrow hidden within your hearts until we are safe and secure." She paused and looked at Eragon, then said, "I will explain the full circumstances of their deaths to you once I know them myself."

"Nen ono weohnata, Arya Dröttningu," they murmured.

"Did you hear my call?" Eragon asked Blödhgarm.

"I did," the fur-covered elf said. "We came as fast as we could, but there were many soldiers between there and here."

Eragon twisted his hand over his chest in the elves' traditional gesture of respect. "I apologize for leaving you behind, Blödhgarm-elda. The heat of battle made me foolish and overconfident, and we nearly died because of my mistake."

"You need not apologize, Shadeslayer. We too made a mistake today, one which I promise we shall not repeat. From now on, we will fight alongside you and the Varden without reserve."

Together, they all trooped down the stairs to the courtyard outside. The Varden had killed or captured most of the soldiers within the keep, and the few men who were still fighting surrendered once they saw that Lady Lorana was in the custody of the Varden. Since the stairwell was too small for her, Saphira had descended by wing to the

courtyard and was waiting for them when they arrived.

Eragon stood with Saphira, Arya, and Lady Lorana while one of the Varden fetched Jörmundur. When Jörmundur joined them, they informed him of what had happened within the tower—which amazed him greatly—and then gave over Lady Lorana to his custody.

Jörmundur bowed to her. "You may rest assured, Lady, we shall treat you with the respect and dignity due your station. We may be your enemies, but we are still civilized men."

"Thank you," she replied. "I am relieved to hear it. However, my main concern now is for the safety of my subjects. If I might, I would like to speak with your leader, Nasuada, about her plans for them."

"I believe she wishes to speak with you as well."

As they parted, Lady Lorana said, "I am most grateful to you, elf, and to you as well, Dragon Rider, for killing that monster before he could wreak sorrow and destruction upon Feinster. Fate has placed us on opposite sides of this conflict, but that does not mean I cannot admire your bravery and prowess. We may never meet again, so fare thee well, both of you."

Eragon bowed and said, "Fare thee well, Lady Lorana."

"May the stars watch over you," said Arya.

Blödhgarm and the elves under his command accompanied Eragon, Saphira, and Arya as they searched Feinster for Nasuada. They found her riding her stallion through the gray streets, inspecting the damage to the city.

Nasuada greeted Eragon and Saphira with evident relief. "I'm glad you have finally returned. We've needed you here these past few days. I see you have a new sword, Eragon, a Dragon Rider's sword. Did the elves give it to you?"

"In an indirect way, yes." Eragon eyed the various people standing nearby and lowered his voice. "Nasuada, we must talk with you alone. It's important."

"Very well." Nasuada studied the buildings that lined the street, then pointed at a house that appeared abandoned. "Let us talk in there."

Two of Nasuada's guards, the Nighthawks, ran forward and entered the house. They reappeared a few minutes later and bowed to Nasuada, saying, "It's empty, my Lady."

"Good. Thank you." She dismounted her steed, handed the reins to one of the men in her retinue, and strode inside. Eragon and Arya followed.

The three of them wandered through the shabby building until they found a room, the kitchen, with a window large enough to accommodate Saphira's head. Eragon pushed open the shutters, and Saphira laid her head on the wooden counter. Her breath filled the

kitchen with the smell of charred meat.

"We may speak without fear," Arya announced after casting spells that would prevent anyone from eavesdropping on their conversation.

Nasuada rubbed her arms and shivered. "What is this all about, Eragon?" she asked.

Eragon swallowed, wishing that he did not have to dwell upon Oromis and Glaedr's fate. Then he said, "Nasuada … Saphira and I were not alone.… There was another dragon and another Rider fighting against Galbatorix."

"I knew it," breathed Nasuada, her eyes shining. "It was the only explanation that made sense. They were your teachers in Ellesméra, weren't they?"

They were, said Saphira, *but no more*.

"No more?"

Eragon pressed his lips together and shook his head, tears blurring his vision. "Just this morning they died at Gil'ead. Galbatorix used Thorn and Murtagh to kill them; I heard him speak to them with Murtagh's tongue."

The excitement drained from Nasuada's face, replaced by a dull, empty expression. She sank into the nearest chair and stared at the cinders in the cold fireplace. The kitchen was silent. At last she stirred and said, "Are you sure they are dead?"

"Yes."

Nasuada wiped her eyes on the hem of her sleeve. "Tell me about them, Eragon. Would you, please?"

So for the next half hour, Eragon spoke of Oromis and Glaedr. He explained how they had survived the fall of the Riders and why they had chosen to keep themselves hidden thereafter. He explained about their respective disabilities, and he spent some time describing their personalities and what it had been like to study under them. Eragon's sense of loss deepened as he remembered the long days he had spent with Oromis on the Crags of Tel'naeír and the many things the elf had done for him and Saphira. As he came to their encounter with Thorn and Murtagh at Gil'ead, Saphira lifted her head off the counter and began to keen again, her mournful wail soft and persistent.

Afterward, Nasuada sighed and said, "I wish I could have met Oromis and Glaedr, but alas, it was not to be.… There is one thing I still do not understand, Eragon. You said you *heard* Galbatorix speaking to them. How could you?"

"Yes, I would like to know that as well," said Arya.

Eragon looked for something to drink, but there was no water or wine in the kitchen. He coughed, then launched into an account of their recent trip to Ellesméra. Saphira occasionally made a comment, but for the most part, she left it to him to tell the story. Starting with

the truth about his parentage, Eragon proceeded in quick succession through the events of their stay, from their discovery of the brightsteel under the Menoa tree to the forging of Brisingr to his visit with Sloan. Last of all, he told Arya and Nasuada about the dragons' heart of hearts.

"Well," said Nasuada. She stood and walked the length of the kitchen and then back again. "You the son of Brom, and Galbatorix leeching off the souls of dragons whose bodies have died. It's almost too much to comprehend…." She rubbed her arms again. "At least we now know the true source of Galbatorix's power."

Arya stood motionless, breathless, her expression stunned. "The dragons are still alive," she whispered. She clasped her hands together in a prayer-like fashion and held them against her chest. "They are still alive after all these years. Oh, if only we could tell the rest of my race. How they would rejoice! And how terrible their wrath would be when they heard of the enslavement of the Eldunarí! We would run straight to Urû'baen, and we would not rest until we had freed the hearts of Galbatorix's control, no matter how many of us died in the process."

But we cannot tell them, said Saphira.

"No," said Arya, and lowered her gaze. "We cannot. But I wish we could."

Nasuada looked at her. "Please do not take offense, but I wish that your mother, Queen Islanzadí, had seen fit to share this information with us. We could have made use of it long ago."

"I agree," said Arya, frowning. "On the Burning Plains, Murtagh was able to defeat the two of you"—she indicated Eragon and Saphira—"because you did not know that Galbatorix might have given him some of the Eldunarí and thus you failed to act with appropriate caution. If not for Murtagh's conscience, you would both be trapped in Galbatorix's service even now. Oromis and Glaedr, and my mother too, had sound reasons for keeping the Eldunarí a secret, but their reticence was nearly our undoing. I will discuss this with my mother when next we speak."

Nasuada paced between the counter and the fireplace. "You have given me much to think about, Eragon…." She tapped the floor with the tip of her boot. "For the first time in the history of the Varden, we know of a way to kill Galbatorix that might actually succeed. If we can separate him from these heart of hearts, he will lose the better part of his strength, and then you and our other spellcasters will be able to overpower him."

"Yes, but how can we separate him from his hearts?" Eragon asked.

Nasuada shrugged. "I could not say, but I am sure it must be possible. From now on, you will work on devising a method. Nothing

else is as important."

Eragon felt Arya studying him with unusual concentration. Unsettled, he made a questioning face at her.

"I always wondered," said Arya, "why Saphira's egg appeared to you, and not somewhere in an empty field. It seemed too great a coincidence to have occurred purely by chance, but I could not think of any plausible explanation. Now I understand. I should have guessed that you were Brom's son. I did not know Brom well, but I did know him, and you share a certain resemblance."

"I do?"

"You should be proud to call Brom your father," said Nasuada. "By all accounts, he was a remarkable man. If not for him, the Varden wouldn't exist. It seems fitting that you are the one to carry on his work."

Then Arya said, "Eragon, may we see Glaedr's Eldunarí?"

Eragon hesitated, then went outside and retrieved the pouch from Saphira's saddlebags. Careful not to touch the Eldunarí, he loosened the drawstring at the top and allowed the pouch to slide down around the golden, gemlike stone. In contrast to when he had last seen it, the glow within the heart of hearts was dim and feeble, as if Glaedr were barely conscious.

Nasuada leaned forward and stared into the swirling center of the Eldunarí, her eyes gleaming with reflected light. "And Glaedr is really inside of here?"

He is, said Saphira.

"Can I speak with him?"

"You could try, but I doubt he would respond. He just lost his Rider. It will take him a long time to recover from the shock, if ever. Please leave him be, Nasuada. If he wished to speak with you, he would have done so already."

"Of course. It was not my intention to disturb him in his time of grief. I shall wait to meet him until such time as he has regained his composure."

Arya moved closer to Eragon and placed her hands on either side of the Eldunarí, her fingers less than an inch away from its surface. She gazed at the stone with an expression of reverence, seemingly lost within its depths, then whispered something in the ancient language. Glaedr's consciousness flared slightly, as if in response.

Arya lowered her hands. "Eragon, Saphira, you have been given the most solemn responsibility: the safekeeping of another life. Whatever happens, you must protect Glaedr. With Oromis gone, we shall need his strength and wisdom more than ever before."

Do not worry, Arya, we won't allow any misfortune to befall him, Saphira promised.

Eragon covered the Eldunarí with the pouch again and fumbled with the drawstring, exhaustion rendering him clumsy. The Varden had won an important victory and the elves had taken Gil'ead, but the knowledge brought him little joy. He looked at Nasuada and asked, "What now?"

Nasuada lifted her chin. "Now," she said, "we will march north to Belatona, and when we have captured it, we will proceed onward to Dras-Leona and seize it as well, and then to Urû'baen, where we will cast down Galbatorix or die trying. That is what we shall do now, Eragon."

After they left Nasuada, Eragon and Saphira agreed to leave Feinster for the Varden's camp so that they could both rest undisturbed by the cacophony of noises within the city. With Blödhgarm and the rest of Eragon's guards ranged around them, they walked toward the main gates of Feinster, Eragon still carrying Glaedr's heart of hearts in his arms. Neither of them spoke.

Eragon stared at the ground between his feet. He paid little attention to the men who ran or marched past; his part in the battle was finished, and all he wanted to do was lie down and forget the sorrows of the day. The last sensations he had felt from Glaedr still reverberated through his mind: *He was alone. He was alone and in the dark.… Alone!* Eragon's breath caught as a wave of nausea swept over him. *So that is what it's like to lose your Rider or your dragon. No wonder Galbatorix went insane.*

We are the last, Saphira said.

Eragon frowned, not understanding.

The last free dragon and Rider, she explained. *We are the only ones left. We are …*

Alone.

Yes.

Eragon stumbled as his foot struck a loose stone he had overlooked. Miserable, he closed his eyes for a moment. *We can't do this by ourselves*, he thought. *We can't! We're not ready*. Saphira agreed, and her grief and anxiety, combined with his, nearly incapacitated him.

When they arrived at the city gates, Eragon paused, reluctant to push his way through the large crowd gathered in front of the opening, trying to flee Feinster. He glanced around for another route. As his eyes passed over the outer walls, a sudden desire gripped him to see the city in the light of day.

Veering away from Saphira, he ran up a staircase that led to the top of the walls. Saphira uttered a short growl of annoyance and followed, half opening her wings as she jumped from the street to the parapet in a single bound.

They stood together on the battlements for the better part of an hour and watched as the sun rose. One by one, rays of pale gold light streaked across the verdant fields from the east, illuminating the countless motes of dust that drifted through the air. Where the rays struck a column of smoke, the smoke glowed orange and red and billowed with renewed urgency. The fires among the hovels outside the city walls had mostly died out, although since Eragon and Saphira had arrived, the fighting had set a score of houses within Feinster ablaze, and the pillars of flame that leaped up from the disintegrating houses lent the cityscape an eerie beauty. Behind Feinster, the shimmering sea stretched out to the far, flat horizon, where the sails of a ship plowing its way northward were just visible.

As the sun warmed Eragon through his armor, his melancholy gradually dissipated like the wreaths of mist that adorned the rivers below. He took a deep breath and exhaled, relaxing his muscles.

No, he said, *we are not alone. I have you, and you have me. And there is Arya and Nasuada and Orik, and many others besides who will help us along our way*.

And Glaedr too, said Saphira.

Aye.

Eragon gazed down at the Eldunarí that lay covered within his arms and felt a rush of sympathy and protectiveness toward the dragon who was trapped inside the heart of hearts. He hugged the stone closer to his chest and laid a hand upon Saphira, grateful for their companionship.

We can do this, he thought. *Galbatorix isn't invulnerable. He has a weakness, and we can use that weakness against him.… We can do this*.

We can, and we must, said Saphira.

For the sake of our friends and our family—

—and for the rest of Alagaësia—

—we must do this.

Eragon lifted Glaedr's Eldunarí over his head, presenting it to the sun and the new day, and he smiled, eager for the battles yet to come, so that he and Saphira might finally confront Galbatorix and kill the dark king.

HERE ENDS THE THIRD BOOK
OF THE INHERITANCE CYCLE.
THE STORY WILL CONTINUE AND CONCLUDE
IN BOOK FOUR.

ON THE ORIGIN OF NAMES:

To the casual observer, the various names an intrepid traveler will encounter throughout Alagaësia might seem but a random collection of labels with no inherent integrity, culture, or history. However, as with any land that different cultures—and in this case, different species—have repeatedly colonized, Alagaësia acquired names from a wide array of unique sources, among them the languages of the dwarves, elves, humans, and even Urgals. Thus, we can have Palancar Valley (a human name), the Anora River and Ristvak'baen (elven names), and Utgard Mountain (a dwarf name) all within a few square miles of each other.

While this is of great historical interest, practically it often leads to confusion as to the correct pronunciation. Unfortunately, there are no set rules for the neophyte. You must learn each name upon its own terms, unless you can immediately place its language of origin. The matter grows even more confusing when you realize that in many places the resident population altered the spelling and pronunciation of foreign words to conform to their own language. The Anora River is a prime example. Originally *anora* was spelled *äenora*, which means *broad* in the ancient language. In their writings, the humans simplified the word to *anora*, and this, combined with a vowel shift wherein *äe* (ay-eh) was said as the easier *a* (uh), created the name as it appears in Eragon's time.

To spare readers as much difficulty as possible, I have compiled the following list, with the understanding that these are only rough guidelines to the actual pronunciation. The enthusiast is encouraged to study the source languages in order to master their true intricacies.

Pronunciation:

Ajihad—AH-zhi-hod

Alagaësia—al-uh-GAY-zee-uh

Arya—AR-ee-uh

Blödhgarm—BLAWD-garm

Brisingr—BRISS-ing-gur

Carvahall—CAR-vuh-hall

Dras-Leona—DRAHS-lee-OH-nuh

Du Weldenvarden—doo WELL-den-VAR-den

Ellesméra—el-uhs-MEER-uh

Eragon—EHR-uh-gahn

Farthen Dûr—FAR-then DURE (*dure* rhymes with *lure*)

Galbatorix—gal-buh-TOR-icks

Gil'ead—GILL-ee-id

Glaedr—GLAY-dur

Hrothgar—HROTH-gar

Islanzadí—iss-lan-ZAH-dee

Jeod—JODE (rhymes with *load*)

Murtagh—MUR-tag (*mur* rhymes with *purr*)

Nasuada—nah-soo-AH-dah

Nolfavrell—NOLL-fah-vrel (*noll* rhymes with *toll*)

Oromis—OR-uh-miss

Ra'zac—RAA-zack

Saphira—suh-FEAR-uh

Shruikan—SHREW-kin

Sílthrim—SEAL-thrim (síl is a hard sound to transcribe; it's made by flicking the tip of the tongue off the roof of the mouth)

Skgahgrezh—skuh-GAH-grezh

Teirm—TEERM

Trianna—TREE-ah-nuh

Tronjheim—TRONJ-heem

Urû'baen—OO-roo-bane

Vrael—VRAIL

Yazuac—YAA-zoo-ack

Zar'roc—ZAR-rock

The Ancient Language:

Adurna rïsa.—Water, rise.

Agaetí Blödhren—Blood-oath Celebration (held once a century to honor the original pact between elves and dragons)

älfa-kona—elf woman

Äthalvard—an organization of elves dedicated to the preservation of their songs and poems

Atra du evarínya ono varda, Däthedr-vodhr.—May the stars watch over you, honored Däthedr.

Atra esterní ono thelduin, Eragon Shur'tugal.—May good fortune rule over you, Eragon Dragon Rider.

Atra guliä un ilian tauthr ono un atra ono waíse sköliro fra rauthr.—May luck and happiness follow you and may you be shielded from misfortune.

audr—up

Bjartskular—Brightscales

Blödhgarm—Bloodwolf

brisingr—fire

Brisingr, iet tauthr.—Fire, follow me.

Brisingr raudhr!—Red fire!

deyja—die

draumr kópa—dream stare

dröttningu—princess

Du deloi lunaea.—Smooth the earth/dirt.

Du Namar Aurboda—The Banishing of the Names

Du Vrangr Gata—The Wandering Path

edur—a tor or prominence

Eka eddyr aí Shur'tugal … Shur'tugal … Argetlam.—I am a Dragon Rider … Dragon Rider … Silver Hand.

Eka elrun ono.—I thank you.

elda—a gender-neutral honorific suffix of great praise, attached with a hyphen

Eldhrimner O Loivissa nuanen, dautr abr deloi/Eldhrimner nen ono weohnataí medh solus un thringa/Eldhrimner un fortha onr fëon vara/Wiol allr sjon.—Grow, O beautiful Loivissa, daughter of the earth/Grow as you would with sun and rain/Grow and put forth your flower of spring/For all to see.

Eldunarí—the heart of hearts

Erisdar—the flameless lanterns both the elves and the dwarves use (named after the elf who invented them)

faelnirv—elven liqueur

fairth—a picture taken by magical means on a shingle of slate

fell—mountain

finiarel—an honorific suffix for a young man of great promise, attached with a hyphen

flauga—fly

fram—forward

Fricai onr eka eddyr.—I am your friend.

gánga—go

Garjzla, letta!—Light, stop!

gedwëy ignasia—shining palm

Helgrind—The Gates of Death

Indlvarn—a certain type of pairing between a Rider and dragon

jierda—break; hit

könungr—king

Kuldr, rïsa lam iet un malthinae unin böllr.—Gold, rise to my hand and bind into an orb.

kveykva—lightning

lámarae—a fabric made by cross-weaving wool and nettle threads (similar in construction to linsey-woolsey, but of higher quality)

letta—stop

Liduen Kvaedhí—Poetic Script

loivissa—a blue, deep-throated lily that grows in the Empire

maela—quiet

naina—make bright

nalgask—a mixture of beeswax and hazelnut oil used to moisten the skin

Nen ono weohnata, Arya Dröttningu.—As you will, Princess Arya.

seithr—witch

Shur'tugal—Dragon Rider

slytha—sleep

Stenr rïsa!—Stone, rise!

svit-kona—a formal honorific for an elf woman of great wisdom

talos—a cactus found near Helgrind

thaefathan—thicken

Thorta du ilumëo!—Speak the truth!

vakna—awaken

vodhr—a male honorific suffix of middling praise, attached with a hyphen

Waíse heill!—Be healed!

yawë—a bond of trust

The Dwarf Language:

Ascûdgamln—fists of steel

Az Knurldrâthn—The Trees of Stone

Az Ragni—The River

Az Sartosvrenht rak Balmung, Grimstnzborith rak Kvisagûr—The Saga of King Balmung of Kvisagûr

Az Sindriznarrvel—The Gem of Sindri

barzûl—curse someone with ill fate

delva—a term of endearment among the dwarves; also a form of gold nodule indigenous to the Beor Mountains that the dwarves greatly prize

dûr—our

dûrgrimst—clan (literally, "our hall," or "our home")

dûrgrimstvren—clan war

eta—no

Eta! Narho ûdim etal os isû vond! Narho ûdim etal os formvn mendûnost brakn, az Varden, hrestvog dûr grimstnzhadn! Az Jurgenvren qathrid né dômar oen etal—No! I will not let that happen! I will not let these beardless fools, the Varden, destroy our country. The Dragon War left us weak and not—

Fanghur—dragon-like creatures that are smaller and less intelligent than their cousins (native to the Beor Mountains)

Farthen Dûr—Our Father

Feldûnost—frostbeard (a species of goat native to the Beor Mountains)

Gáldhiem—Bright/shining head

Ghastgar—spear-throwing contest akin to jousting and fought on the backs of Feldûnost

grimstborith—clan chief (literally, "hall chief"; plural is *grimstborithn*)

grimstcarvlorss—arranger of the house

grimstnzborith—ruler of the dwarves, whether king or queen (literally, "halls' chief")

hûthvír—double-bladed staff weapon used by Dûrgrimst Quan

Hwatum il skilfz gerdûmn!—Listen to mine words!

Ingeitum—fire workers; smiths

Isidar Mithrim—Star Rose (the star sapphire)

knurla—dwarf (literally, "one of stone"; plural is *knurlan*)

knurlaf—woman/she/her

knurlag—man/he/him

knurlagn—men

Knurlcarathn—stoneworkers; masons

Knurlnien—Stone Heart

Ledwonnû—Kílf's necklace; also used as a general term for *necklace*

menknurlan—unstone ones/those who are not, or are without, stone (the worst insult in Dwarvish; cannot be directly translated into English)

mérna—lake/pool

Nagra—giant boar, native to the Beor Mountains

Nal, Grimstnzborith Orik!—Hail, King Orik!

ornthrond—eagle eye

Ragni Darmn—River of Small Red Fish

Ragni Hefthyn—River Guard

Shrrg—giant wolf, native to the Beor Mountains

Skilfz Delva—Mine Delva (see *delva* for translation)

thriknzdal—the temper line on the blade of a differentially tempered weapon

Tronjheim—Helm of Giants

Ûn qroth Gûntera!—Thus spoke Gûntera!

Urzhad—giant cave bear, native to the Beor Mountains

Vargrimst—clanless/banished

Vrenshrrgn—War Wolves

werg—the dwarves' equivalent of *ugh* (used humorously in the place name Werghadn; *Werghadn* translates as either "the land of ugh" or, more liberally, "the ugly land")

The Nomad Language:

no—an honorific suffix attached with a hyphen to the main name of someone you respect

The Urgal Language:

Herndall—Urgal dams who rule their tribes

namna—woven strips containing Urgal family narratives that are placed by the entrances to their huts

nar—a title of great respect

Urgralgra—Urgals' name for themselves (literally, "those with horns")

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kvetha Fricaya. Greetings, Friends.

Brisingr was a fun, intense, and sometimes difficult book to write. When I started, I felt as if the story were a vast, three-dimensional puzzle that I had to solve without hints or instructions. I found the experience to be immensely satisfying, despite the challenges it occasionally posed.

Because of its complexity, *Brisingr* ended up much larger than I anticipated—so much larger, in fact, that I had to expand the series from three books to four. Thus, the Inheritance trilogy became the Inheritance cycle. I'm pleased with the change too. Having another volume in the series has allowed me to explore and develop the characters' personalities and relationships at a more natural pace.

As with *Eragon* and *Eldest*, I never would have been able to complete this book without the support of a whole host of talented people, to whom I am ever grateful. They are:

At home: Mom, for her food, tea, advice, sympathy, endless patience, and optimism; Dad, for his unique perspective, razor-sharp observations on story and prose, helping me to name the book, and for coming up with the idea of having Eragon's sword burst into flame every time he says its name (very cool); and my one and only sister, Angela, for once again consenting to reprise her character and for numerous pieces of information on names, plants, and all things wool.

At Writers House: Simon Lipskar, my agent, for his friendship, his hard work, and for giving me a much-needed kick in the pants early on in *Brisingr* (without which I might have taken another two years to finish the book); and his assistant Josh Getzler for all he does on behalf of Simon and the Inheritance cycle.

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At Listening Library: Gerard Doyle, who brings the world of Alagaësia to life with his voice; Taro Meyer for getting the pronunciation of my languages just right; Orli Moscowitz for pulling all the threads together; and Amanda D'Acierno, publisher of Listening Library.

Thank you all.

The Craft of the Japanese Sword by Leon and Hiroko Kapp and Yoshindo Yoshihara provided me with much of the information I needed to accurately describe the smelting and forging process in the chapter "Mind over Metal." I highly recommend the book to anyone who is interested in learning more about (specifically Japanese) swordmaking. Did you know that Japanese smiths used to start their fires by hammering on the end of a bar of iron until it was red-hot, then touching it to a cedar shingle that was coated with sulfur?

Also, for those who understood the reference to a "lonely god" when Eragon and Arya are sitting around the campfire, my only excuse is that the Doctor can travel everywhere, even alternate realities.

Hey, I'm a fan too!

Finally, and most importantly, thank you. Thank you for reading *Brisingr*. And thank you for sticking with the Inheritance cycle through all these years. Without your support, I never would have been able to write this series, and I can't imagine anything else I would rather be doing.

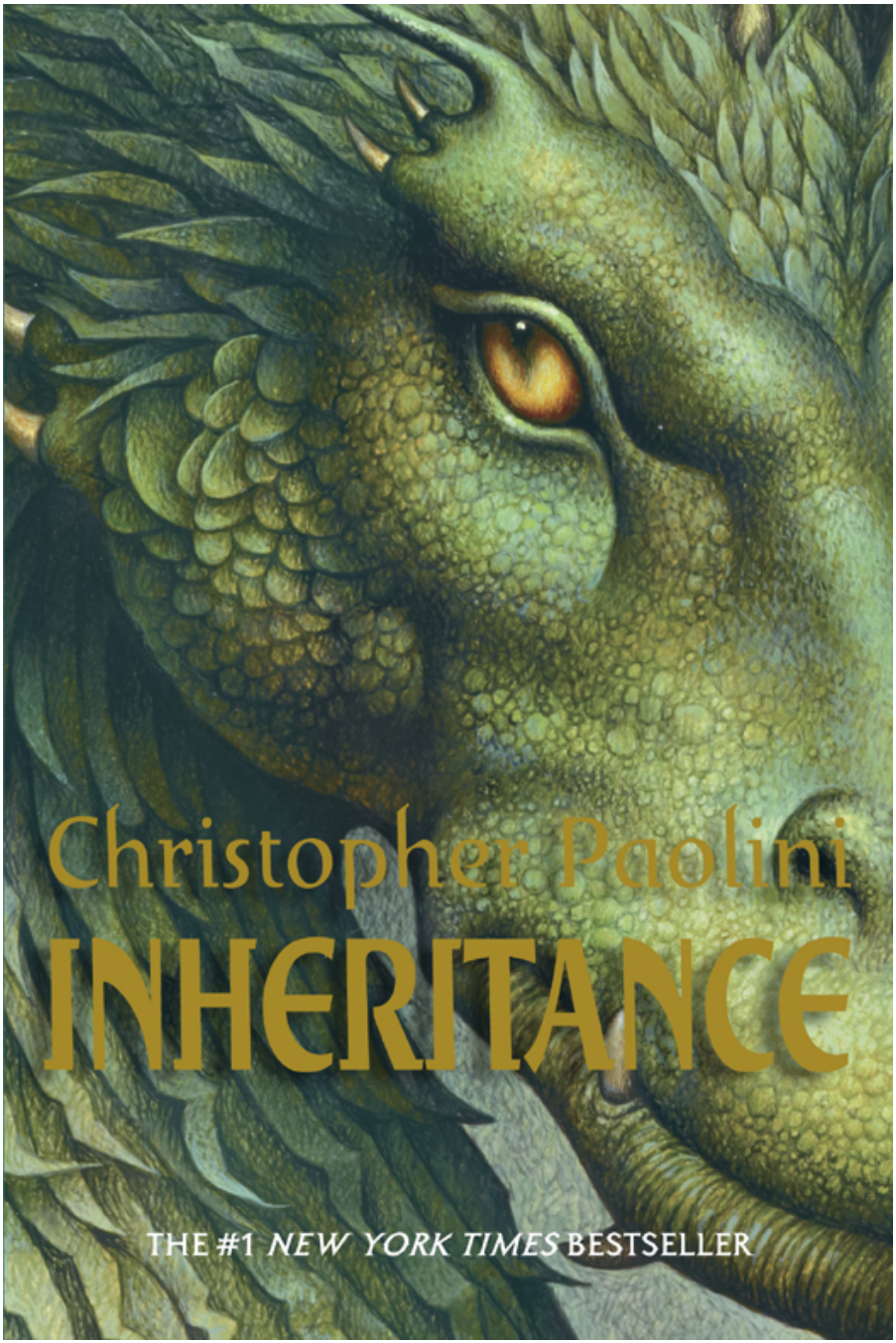
Once again Eragon and Saphira's adventures are over, and once again we have arrived at the end of this wandering path … but only for the time being. Many more miles still lie before us. Book Four will be published just as soon as I can finish it, and I can promise you, it's going to be the most exciting installment in the series. I can't wait for

you to read it!

Sé onr sverdar sitja hvass!

Christopher Paolini

September 20, 2008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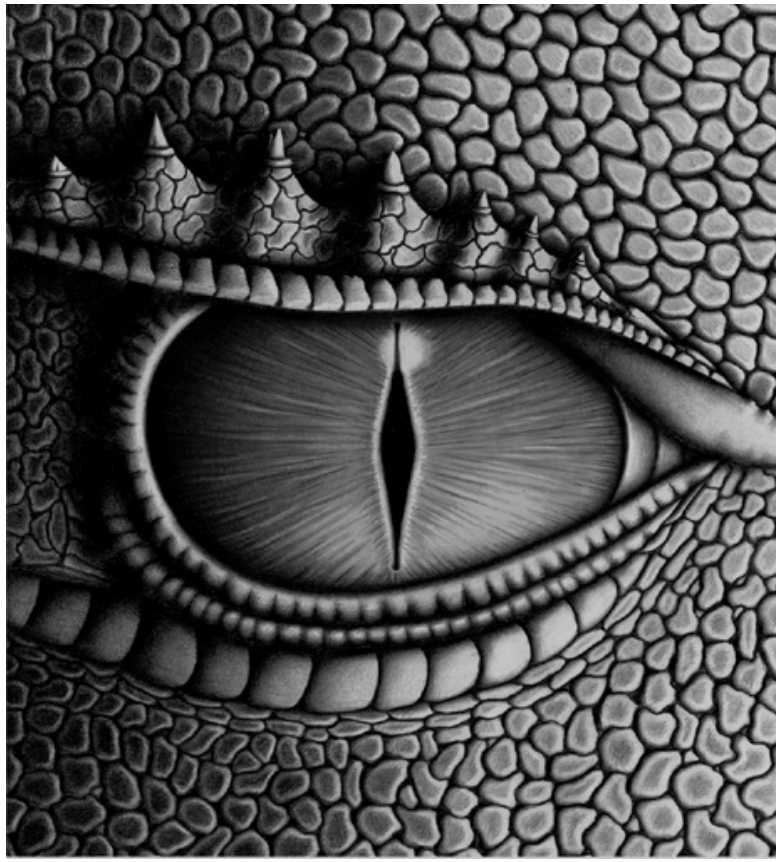

INHERITANCE

or

THE VAULT OF SOULS

INHERITANCE

BOOK FOUR

Christopher Paolini

ALFRED A. KNOPF
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As always, this book is for my family.
And also for the dreamers of dreams:
the many artists, musicians, and storytellers
who have made this journey possible.

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IN THE BEGINNING:
A History of *Eragon*, *Eldest*, and *Brisingr*

In the beginning, there were dragons: proud, fierce, and independent. Their scales were like gems, and all who gazed upon them despaired, for their beauty was great and terrible.

And they lived alone in the land of Alagaësia for ages uncounted.

Then the god Helzvog made the stout and sturdy dwarves from the stone of the Hadarac Desert.

And their two races warred much.

Then the elves sailed to Alagaësia from across the silver sea. They too warred with the dragons. But the elves were stronger than the dwarves, and they would have destroyed the dragons, even as the dragons would have destroyed the elves.

And so a truce was struck and a pact was sealed between the dragons and the elves. And by this joining, they created the Dragon Riders, who kept the peace throughout Alagaësia for thousands of years.

Then humans sailed to Alagaësia. And the horned Urgals. And the Ra'zac, who are the hunters in the dark and the eaters of men's flesh.

And the humans also joined the pact with the dragons.

Then a young Dragon Rider, Galbatorix, rose up against his own kind. He enslaved the black dragon Shruikan and he convinced thirteen other Riders to follow him. And the thirteen were called the Forsworn.

And Galbatorix and the Forsworn cast down the Riders and burnt their city on the isle of Vroengard and slew every dragon not their own, save for three eggs: one red, one blue, one green. And from each dragon they could, they took the heart of hearts—the Eldunarí—that holds the might and mind of the dragons, apart from their flesh.

And for two-and-eighty years, Galbatorix reigned supreme among the humans. The Forsworn died, but not he, for his strength was that of all the dragons, and none could hope to strike him down.

In the eighty-third year of Galbatorix's rule, a man stole from his castle the blue dragon egg. And the egg passed into the care of those who still fought against Galbatorix, those who are known as the Varden.

The elf Arya carried the egg between the Varden and the elves in search of the human or elf for whom it would hatch. And in this

manner, five-and-twenty years passed.

Then, as Arya traveled to the elven city of Osilon, a group of Urgals attacked her and her guards. With the Urgals was the Shade Durza: a sorcerer possessed by the spirits he had summoned to do his bidding. After the death of the Forsworn, he had become Galbatorix's most feared servant. The Urgals slew Arya's guards, and before they and the Shade captured her, Arya sent the egg away with magic, toward one who she hoped could protect it.

But her spell went awry.

And so it came to pass that Eragon, an orphan of only five-and-ten years, found the egg within the mountains of the Spine. He took the egg to the farm where he lived with his uncle, Garrow, and his only cousin, Roran. And the egg hatched for Eragon, and he raised the dragon therein. And her name was Saphira.

Then Galbatorix sent two of the Ra'zac to find and retrieve the egg, and they slew Garrow and burnt Eragon's home. For Galbatorix had enslaved the Ra'zac, and of them only a few remained.

Eragon and Saphira set out to avenge themselves on the Ra'zac. With them went the storyteller Brom, who had once been a Dragon Rider himself, ere the fall of the Riders. It was to Brom that the elf Arya had meant to send the blue egg.

Brom taught Eragon much about swordsmanship, magic, and honor. And he gave to Eragon Zar'roc, that had once been the sword of Morzan, first and most powerful of the Forsworn. But the Ra'zac slew Brom when next they met, and Eragon and Saphira only escaped with the help of a young man, Murtagh, son of Morzan.

During their travels, the Shade Durza captured Eragon in the city of Gil'ead. Eragon managed to free himself, and as he did, he freed Arya from her cell. Arya was poisoned and gravely wounded, so Eragon, Saphira, and Murtagh took her to the Varden, who lived among the dwarves in the Beor Mountains.

There Arya was healed, and there Eragon blessed a squalling infant by the name of Elva, blessed her to be shielded from misfortune. But Eragon spoke badly, and without realizing it, he cursed her, and his curse forced her to instead become a shield for others' misfortune.

Soon thereafter, Galbatorix sent a great army of Urgals to attack the dwarves and the Varden. And it was in the battle that followed that Eragon slew the Shade Durza. But Durza gave Eragon a grievous wound across his back, and Eragon suffered terrible pain because of it, despite the spells of the Varden's healers.

And in his pain, he heard a voice. And the voice said, *Come to me, Eragon. Come to me, for I have answers to all you ask*.

Three days after, the leader of the Varden, Ajihad, was ambushed and killed by Urgals under the command of a pair of magicians, twins,

who betrayed the Varden to Galbatorix. The twins also abducted Murtagh and spirited him away to Galbatorix. But to Eragon and everyone in the Varden, it looked as if Murtagh had died, and Eragon was much saddened.

And Ajihad's daughter, Nasuada, became leader of the Varden.

From Tronjheim, the seat of the dwarves' power, Eragon, Saphira, and Arya traveled to the northern forest of Du Weldenvarden, where live the elves. With them went the dwarf Orik, nephew of the dwarf king, Hrothgar.

In Du Weldenvarden, Eragon and Saphira met with Oromis and Glaedr: the last free Rider and dragon, who had lived in hiding all the past century, waiting to instruct the next generation of Dragon Riders. And Eragon and Saphira also met with Queen Islanzadí, ruler of the elves and mother to Arya.

While Oromis and Glaedr trained Eragon and Saphira, Galbatorix sent the Ra'zac and a group of soldiers to Eragon's home village of Carvahall, this time to capture his cousin, Roran. But Roran hid, and they would not have found him if not for the hatred of the butcher Sloan. For Sloan murdered a watchman so as to let the Ra'zac into the village, where they might take Roran unawares.

Roran fought his way free, but the Ra'zac stole from him Katrina: Roran's beloved and Sloan's daughter. Then Roran convinced the villagers to leave with him, and they journeyed through the mountains of the Spine, down the coast of Alagaësia, and to the southern country of Surda, which yet existed independent of Galbatorix.

The wound upon Eragon's back continued to torment him. But during the elves' Blood-oath Celebration, wherein they celebrate the pact between the Riders and the dragons, his wound was healed by the spectral dragon the elves invoke upon the conclusion of the festival. Moreover, the apparition gave Eragon strength and speed equal to those of the elves themselves.

Then Eragon and Saphira flew to Surda, where Nasuada had taken the Varden to launch an attack against Galbatorix's Empire. There the Urgals allied themselves with the Varden, for they claimed that Galbatorix had clouded their minds, and they would have their revenge against him. With the Varden, Eragon met again the girl Elva, who had grown with prodigious speed because of his spell. From a squalling infant to a girl of three or four she had become, and her gaze was dire indeed, for she knew the pain of all those around her.

And not far from the border of Surda, upon the blackness of the Burning Plains, Eragon, Saphira, and the Varden fought a great and bloody battle against Galbatorix's army.

In the midst of the battle, Roran and the villagers joined the Varden, as did the dwarves, who had marched after them from the Beor

Mountains.

But out of the east rose a figure clad in polished armor. And he rode upon a glittering red dragon. And with a spell, he slew King Hrothgar.

Then Eragon and Saphira fought the Rider and his red dragon. And they discovered the Rider was Murtagh, now bound to Galbatorix with oaths unbreakable. And the dragon was Thorn, second of the three eggs to hatch.

Murtagh defeated Eragon and Saphira with the strength of the Eldunarí that Galbatorix had given him. But Murtagh allowed Eragon and Saphira to go free, for Murtagh still bore friendship for Eragon. And because, as he told Eragon, they were brothers, both born of Morzan's favored consort, Selena.

Then Murtagh took Zar'roc, their father's sword, from Eragon, and he and Thorn withdrew from the Burning Plains, as did the rest of Galbatorix's forces.

Upon completion of the battle, Eragon, Saphira, and Roran flew to the dark tower of stone, Helgrind, that served as the Ra'zac's hiding place. They slew one of the Ra'zac—and the Ra'zac's foul parents, the Lethrblaka—and from Helgrind rescued Katrina. And in one of the cells, Eragon discovered Katrina's father, blind and half-dead.

Eragon considered killing Sloan for his betrayal, but rejected the idea. Instead, he put Sloan into a deep sleep and told Roran and Katrina that her father was dead. Then he asked Saphira to take Roran and Katrina back to the Varden while he hunted down the final Ra'zac.

Alone, Eragon slew the last remaining Ra'zac. Then he took Sloan away from Helgrind. After much thought, Eragon discovered Sloan's true name in the ancient language, the language of power and magic. And Eragon bound Sloan with his name and forced the butcher to swear that he would never see his daughter again. Then Eragon sent him to live among the elves. But what Eragon did not tell the butcher was that the elves would repair his eyes if he repented of his treason and murder.

Arya met Eragon halfway to the Varden, and together they returned, on foot and through enemy territory.

At the Varden, Eragon learned that Queen Islanzadí had sent twelve elven spellcasters, led by an elf named Blödhgarm, to protect him and Saphira. Eragon then removed as much of his curse as he could from the girl Elva, but she retained her ability to feel the pain of others, though she no longer felt the compulsion to save them from their misery.

And Roran married Katrina, who was pregnant, and for the first time in a long while, Eragon was happy.

Then Murtagh, Thorn, and a group of Galbatorix's men attacked the

Varden. With the help of the elves, Eragon and Saphira were able to hold them off, but neither Eragon nor Murtagh could defeat the other. It was a difficult battle, for Galbatorix had enchanted the soldiers so that they felt no pain, and the Varden suffered many casualties.

Afterward, Nasuada sent Eragon to represent the Varden among the dwarves while they chose their new king. Eragon was loath to go, for Saphira had to stay and protect the Varden's camp. But go he did.

And Roran served alongside the Varden, and he rose through their ranks, for he proved himself a skilled warrior and a leader of men.

While Eragon was among the dwarves, seven of them tried to assassinate him. An investigation revealed that the clan Az Sweldn rak Anhûin was behind the attack. The clanmeet continued, however, and Orik was chosen to succeed his uncle. Saphira joined Eragon for the coronation. And during it, she fulfilled her promise to repair the dwarves' cherished star sapphire, which she had broken during Eragon's battle with the Shade Durza.

Then Eragon and Saphira returned to Du Weldenvarden. There Oromis revealed the truth about Eragon's heritage: that he was not, in fact, Morzan's son but Brom's, though he and Murtagh did share the same mother, Selena. Oromis and Glaedr also explained the concept of the Eldunarí, which a dragon may choose to disgorge while living, though this must be done with great care, for whosoever owns the Eldunarí may use it to control the dragon it came from.

While in the forest, Eragon decided that he needed a sword to replace Zar'roc. Remembering the advice he had gotten from the werecat Solembum during his journeys with Brom, Eragon went to the sentient Menoa tree in Du Weldenvarden. He spoke with the tree, and the tree agreed to give up the brightsteel beneath its roots in exchange for an unnamed price.

Then the elf smith Rhunön—who had forged all of the Riders' swords—worked with Eragon to make a new blade for him. The sword was blue, and Eragon named it Brisingr—"fire." And the blade burst into flame whenever he spoke its name.

Then Glaedr gave trust of his heart of hearts to Eragon and Saphira, and they made their way back to the Varden, while Glaedr and Oromis joined the rest of their kind as they attacked the northern part of the Empire.

At the siege of Feinster, Eragon and Arya encountered four enemy magicians, one of whom was transformed into the Shade Varaug. And with Eragon's help, Arya slew Varaug.

As they did, Oromis and Glaedr fought Murtagh and Thorn. And Galbatorix reached out and took command of Murtagh's mind. And with Murtagh's arm, Galbatorix struck down Oromis, and Thorn slew Glaedr's body.

And though the Varden were victorious at Feinster, Eragon and Saphira mourned the loss of their teacher, Oromis. But still the Varden continued, and even now they march deeper into the Empire, toward the capital, Urû'baen, wherein sits Galbatorix, proud, confident, and disdainful, for his is the strength of the dragons.

Into the Breach

The dragon Saphira roared, and the soldiers before her quailed.

"With me!" shouted Eragon. He lifted Brisingr over his head, holding it aloft for all to see. The blue sword flashed bright and iridescent, stark against the wall of black clouds building in the west. "For the Varden!"

An arrow whizzed past him; he paid it no mind.

The warriors gathered at the base of the slope of rubble Eragon and Saphira were standing upon answered him with a single, full-throated bellow: "The Varden!" They brandished their own weapons and charged forward, scrambling up the tumbled blocks of stone.

Eragon turned his back to the men. On the other side of the mound lay a wide courtyard. Two hundred or so of the Empire's soldiers stood huddled within. Behind them rose a tall, dark keep with narrow slits for windows and several square towers, the tallest of which had a lantern shining in its upper rooms. Somewhere within the keep, Eragon knew, was Lord Bradburn, governor of Belatona—the city the Varden had been fighting to capture for several long hours.

With a cry, Eragon leaped off the rubble toward the soldiers. The men shuffled backward, although they kept their spears and pikes trained on the ragged hole Saphira had torn in the castle's outer wall.

Eragon's right ankle twisted as he landed. He fell to his knee and caught himself on the ground with his sword hand.

One of the soldiers seized the opportunity to dart out of formation and stab his spear at Eragon's exposed throat.

Eragon parried the thrust with a flick of his wrist, swinging Brisingr faster than either a human or an elf could follow. The soldier's face grew slack with fear as he realized his mistake. He tried to flee, but before he could move more than a few inches, Eragon lunged forward and took him in the gut.

With a pennant of blue and yellow flame streaming from her maw, Saphira jumped into the courtyard after Eragon. He crouched and tensed his legs as she struck the paved ground. The impact shook the entire courtyard. Many of the chips of glass that formed a large, colorful mosaic in front of the keep popped loose and flew spinning upward like coins bounced off a drum. Above, a pair of shutters banged open and closed in a window of the building.

The elf Arya accompanied Saphira. Her long black hair billowed wildly around her angular face as she sprang off the pile of rubble.

Lines of splattered blood striped her arms and neck; gore smeared the blade of her sword. She alit with a soft scuff of leather against stone.

Her presence heartened Eragon. There was no one else whom he would rather have fighting alongside him and Saphira. She was, he thought, the perfect shield mate.

He loosed a quick smile at her, and Arya responded in kind, her expression fierce and joyous. In battle, her reserved demeanor vanished, replaced by an openness that she rarely displayed elsewhere.

Eragon ducked behind his shield as a rippling sheet of blue fire appeared between them. From beneath the rim of his helm, he watched as Saphira bathed the cowering soldiers in a torrent of flames that flowed around them, yet caused them no harm.

A line of archers on the battlements of the castle keep let fly a volley of arrows at Saphira. The heat above her was so intense that a handful of the arrows burst into fire in midair and crumbled to ash, while the magical wards Eragon had placed around Saphira deflected the rest. One of the stray arrows rebounded off Eragon's shield with a hollow *thud*, denting it.

The plume of flame suddenly enveloped three of the soldiers, killing them so quickly, they did not even have time to scream. The other soldiers clustered in the center of the inferno, the blades of their spears and pikes reflecting flashes of bright blue light.

Try though she might, Saphira could not so much as singe the survivors. At last she abandoned her efforts and closed her jaws with a definitive *snap*. The fire's absence left the courtyard startlingly quiet.

It occurred to Eragon, as it had several times before, that whoever had given the soldiers their wards must have been a skilled and powerful magician. *Was it Murtagh?* he wondered. *If so, why aren't he and Thorn here to defend Belatona? Doesn't Galbatorix care to keep control of his cities?*

Eragon ran forward and, with a single stroke of Brisingr, lopped off the tops of a dozen polearms as easily as he had flicked off the seed heads of barley stalks when he was younger. He slashed the nearest soldier across the chest, slicing through his mail as if it were the flimsiest of cloth. A fountain of blood arose. Then Eragon stabbed the next soldier in line and struck the soldier to his left with his shield, knocking the man into three of his companions and bowling them over.

The soldiers' reactions seemed slow and clumsy to Eragon as he danced through their ranks, cutting them down with impunity. Saphira waded into the fray to his left—batting the soldiers into the air with her enormous paws, lashing them with her spiked tail, and biting and killing them with a shake of her head—while, to his right,

Arya was a blur of motion, every swing of her sword signaling death for another servant of the Empire. When Eragon spun around to evade a pair of spears, he saw the fur-covered elf Blödhgarm close behind, as well as the eleven other elves whose task it was to guard him and Saphira.

Farther back, the Varden poured into the courtyard through the gap in the castle's outer wall, but the men refrained from attacking; it was too dangerous to go anywhere near Saphira. Neither she nor Eragon nor the elves required assistance in disposing of the soldiers.

The battle soon swept Eragon and Saphira apart, carrying them to opposite ends of the courtyard. Eragon was not concerned. Even without her wards, Saphira was more than capable of defeating a large group of twenty or thirty humans by herself.

A spear thudded against Eragon's shield, bruising his shoulder. He whirled toward the thrower, a big, scarred man missing his lower front teeth, and sprinted at him. The man struggled to draw a dagger from his belt. At the last moment, Eragon twisted, tensed his arms and chest, and rammed his sore shoulder into the man's sternum.

The force of the impact drove the soldier backward several yards, whereupon he collapsed, clutching at his heart.

Then a hail of black-fletched arrows fell, killing or injuring many of the soldiers. Eragon shied away from the missiles and covered himself with his shield, even though he was confident his magic would protect him. It would not do to become careless; he never knew when an enemy spellcaster might fire an enchanted arrow that could breach his wards.

A bitter smile twisted Eragon's lips. The archers above had realized that their only hope of victory lay in somehow killing Eragon and the elves, no matter how many of their own they had to sacrifice to do so.

You're too late, thought Eragon with grim satisfaction. *You should have left the Empire while you still had the chance*.

The onslaught of clattering arrows gave him the chance to rest for a moment, which he welcomed. The attack on the city had begun at daybreak, and he and Saphira had been at its forefront the whole while.

Once the arrows ceased, Eragon transferred Brisingr to his left hand, picked up one of the soldiers' spears, and heaved it at the archers forty feet above. As Eragon had discovered, spears were difficult to throw accurately without substantial practice. It did not surprise him, then, when he missed the man he was aiming for, but he *was* surprised when he missed the entire line of archers on the battlements. The spear sailed over them and shattered against the castle wall overhead. The archers laughed and jeered, making rude gestures.

A swift movement at the periphery of his vision caught Eragon's

attention. He looked just in time to see Arya launch her own spear at the archers; it impaled two who were standing close together. Then Arya pointed at the men with her sword and said, “Brisingr!” and the spear burst into emerald-green fire.

The archers shrank from the burning corpses and, as one, fled from the battlements, crowding through the doorways that led to the upper levels of the castle.

“That’s not fair,” Eragon said. “I can’t use that spell, not without my sword flaring up like a bonfire.”

Arya gazed at him with a faint hint of amusement.

The fighting continued for another few minutes, whereupon the remaining soldiers either surrendered or tried to flee.

Eragon allowed the five men in front of him to run away; he knew they would not get far. After a quick examination of the bodies that lay sprawled around him to confirm that they were indeed dead, he looked back across the courtyard. Some of the Varden had opened the gates in the outer wall and were carrying a battering ram through the street leading to the castle. Others were assembling in ragged lines next to the keep door, ready to enter the castle and confront the soldiers within. Among them stood Eragon’s cousin, Roran, gesturing with his ever-present hammer while he issued orders to the detachment under his command. At the far end of the courtyard, Saphira crouched over the corpses of her kills, the area around her a shambles. Beads of blood clung to her gemlike scales, the spots of red in startling contrast to the blue of her body. She threw back her spiky head and roared her triumph, drowning out the clamor of the city with the ferocity of her cry.

Then, from inside the castle, Eragon heard the rattle of gears and chains, followed by the scrape of heavy wooden beams being drawn back. The sounds attracted everyone’s gaze to the doors of the keep.

With a hollow *boom*, the doors parted and swung open. A thick cloud of smoke from the torches within billowed outward, causing the nearest of the Varden to cough and cover their faces. From somewhere in the depths of the gloom came the drumming of ironclad hooves against the paving stones; then a horse and rider burst forth from the center of the smoke. In his left hand, the rider held what Eragon first took to be a common lance, but he soon noticed that it was made of a strange green material and had a barbed blade forged in an unfamiliar pattern. A faint glow surrounded the head of the lance, the unnatural light betraying the presence of magic.

The rider tugged on the reins and angled his horse toward Saphira, who began to rear onto her hind legs, in preparation for delivering a terrible, killing blow with her right front paw.

Concern clutched at Eragon. The rider was too sure of himself, the

lance too different, too eerie. Though her wards ought to protect her, Eragon was certain Saphira was in mortal danger.

I won't be able to reach her in time, he realized. He cast his mind toward the rider, but the man was so focused on his task that he did not even notice Eragon's presence, and his unwavering concentration prevented Eragon from gaining more than superficial access to his consciousness. Withdrawing into himself, Eragon reviewed a half-dozen words from the ancient language and composed a simple spell to stop the galloping war-horse in his tracks. It was a desperate act—for Eragon knew not if the rider was a magician himself or what precautions he might have taken against being attacked with magic—but Eragon was not about to stand by idly when Saphira's life was at risk.

Eragon filled his lungs. He reminded himself of the correct pronunciation of several difficult sounds in the ancient language. Then he opened his mouth to deliver the spell.

Fast as he was, the elves were faster still. Before he could utter a single word, a frenzy of low chanting erupted behind him, the overlapping voices forming a discordant and unsettling melody.

"Mäe—" he managed to say, and then the elves' magic took effect.

The mosaic in front of the horse stirred and shifted, and the chips of glass flowed like water. A long rift opened up in the ground, a gaping crevice of uncertain depth. With a loud scream, the horse plunged into the hole and pitched forward, breaking both of its front legs.

As horse and rider fell, the man in the saddle drew back his arm and threw the glowing lance toward Saphira.

Saphira could not run. She could not dodge. So she swung a paw at the dart, hoping to knock it aside. She missed, however—by a matter of inches—and Eragon watched with horror as the lance sank a yard or more into her chest, just under her collarbone.

A pulsing veil of rage descended over Eragon's vision. He drew upon every store of energy available to him—his body; the sapphire set in the pommel of his sword; the twelve diamonds hidden in the belt of Beloth the Wise wrapped round his waist; and the massive store within Aren, the elf ring that graced his right hand—as he prepared to obliterate the rider, heedless of the risk.

Eragon stopped himself, however, when Blödhgarm appeared, leaping over Saphira's left foreleg. The elf landed on the rider like a panther pouncing on a deer, and knocked the man onto his side. With a savage twist of his head, Blödhgarm tore open the man's throat with his long white teeth.

A shriek of all-consuming despair emanated from a window high above the open entrance to the keep, followed by a fiery explosion that ejected blocks of stone from within the building, blocks that

landed amid the assembled Varden, crushing limbs and torsos like dry twigs.

Eragon ignored the stones raining on the courtyard and ran to Saphira, barely aware of Arya and his guards accompanying him. Other elves, who had been closer, were already clustering around her, examining the lance that projected from her chest.

"How badly—Is she—" Eragon said, too upset to complete his sentences. He yearned to speak to Saphira with his mind, but as long as enemy spellcasters might be in the area, he dared not expose his consciousness to her, lest his foes spy on his thoughts or assume command over his body.

After a seemingly interminable wait, Wyrden, one of the male elves, said, "You may thank fate, Shadeslayer; the lance missed the major veins and arteries in her neck. It hit only muscle, and muscle we can mend."

"Can you remove it? Does it have any spells that would keep it from being—"

"We shall attend to it, Shadeslayer."

Grave as priests gathered before an altar, all the elves, save Blödhgarm, placed the palms of their hands on Saphira's breast and, like a whisper of wind ghosting through a stand of willow trees, they sang. Of warmth and growth they sang, of muscle and sinew and pulsing blood they sang, and of other, more arcane subjects. With what must have been an enormous effort of will, Saphira held her position throughout the incantation, though fits of tremors shook her body every few seconds. A thread of blood rolled down her chest from the shaft embedded within.

As Blödhgarm moved to stand next to him, Eragon spared a glance for the elf. Gore matted the fur on his chin and neck, darkening its shade from midnight blue to solid black.

"What was that?" Eragon asked, indicating the flames still dancing in the window high above the courtyard.

Blödhgarm licked his lips, baring his catlike fangs, before answering. "In the moment before he died, I was able to enter the soldier's mind, and through it, the mind of the magician who was assisting him."

"You killed the magician?"

"In a manner of speaking; I forced him to kill himself. I would not normally resort to such an extravagant display of theatrics, but I was … aggravated."

Eragon started forward, then checked himself when Saphira uttered a long, low moan as, without anyone touching it, the lance began to slide out of her chest. Her eyelids fluttered and she took a series of quick, shallow breaths while the last six inches of the lance emerged

from her body. The barbed blade, with its faint nimbus of emerald light, fell to the ground and bounced against the paving stones, sounding more like pottery than metal.

When the elves stopped singing and lifted their hands from Saphira, Eragon rushed to her side and touched her neck. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her how frightened he had been, to join his consciousness with hers. Instead, he settled for looking up into one of her brilliant blue eyes and asking, “Are you all right?” The words seemed paltry when compared with the depth of his emotion.

Saphira replied with a single blink, then lowered her head and caressed his face with a gentle puff of warm air from her nostrils.

Eragon smiled. Then he turned to the elves and said, “Eka elrun ono, älfya, wiol förn thornessa,” thanking them in the ancient language for their help. The elves who had participated in the healing, including Arya, bowed and twisted their right hands over the center of their chests in the gesture of respect peculiar to their race. Eragon noticed that more than half of the elves assigned to protect him and Saphira were pale, weak, and unsteady on their feet.

“Fall back and rest,” he told them. “You’ll only get yourselves killed if you stay. Go on, that’s an order!”

Though Eragon was sure they hated to leave, the seven elves responded with, “As you wish, Shadeslayer,” and withdrew from the courtyard, striding over the corpses and rubble. They appeared noble and dignified, even when at the limits of their endurance.

Then Eragon joined Arya and Blödhgarm, who were studying the lance, a strange expression on both their faces, as if they were uncertain how they ought to react. Eragon squatted next to them, careful not to allow any part of his body to brush against the weapon. He stared at the delicate lines carved around the base of the blade, lines that seemed familiar to him, although he was not sure why; at the greenish haft, which was made of a material neither wood nor metal; and again at the smooth glow that reminded him of the flameless lanterns that the elves and the dwarves used to light their halls.

“Is it Galbatorix’s handiwork, do you think?” Eragon asked. “Maybe he’s decided he would rather kill Saphira and me instead of capturing us. Maybe he believes we’ve actually become a threat to him.”

Blödhgarm smiled an unpleasant smile. “I would not deceive myself with such fantasies, Shadeslayer. We are no more than a minor annoyance to Galbatorix. If ever he truly wanted you or any of us dead, he only needs to fly forth from Urû’baen and engage us directly in battle, and we would fall before him like dry leaves before a winter storm. The strength of the dragons is with him, and none can withstand his might. Besides, Galbatorix is not so easily turned from

his course. Mad he may be, but cunning also, and above all else, determined. If he desires your enslavement, then he shall pursue that goal to the point of obsession, and nothing save the instinct of self-preservation shall deter him."

"In any event," said Arya, "this is not Galbatorix's handiwork; it is ours."

Eragon frowned. "Ours? This wasn't made by the Varden."

"Not by the Varden, but by an elf."

"But—" He stopped, trying to find a rational explanation. "But no elf would agree to work for Galbatorix. They would rather die than—"

"Galbatorix had nothing to do with this, and even if he did, he would hardly give such a rare and powerful weapon to a man who could not better guard it. Of all the instruments of war scattered throughout Alagaësia, this is the one Galbatorix would least want us to have."

"Why?"

With a hint of a purr in his low, rich voice, Blödhgarm said, "Because, Eragon Shadeslayer, *this* is a Dauthdaert."

"And its name is Niernen, the Orchid," said Arya. She pointed at the lines carved into the blade, lines that Eragon then realized were actually stylized glyphs from the elves' unique system of writing—curving, intertwined shapes that terminated in long, thornlike points.

"A Dauthdaert?" When both Arya and Blödhgarm looked at him with incredulity, Eragon shrugged, embarrassed by his lack of education. It frustrated him that, while growing up, the elves had enjoyed decades upon decades of study with the finest scholars of their race, and yet his own uncle, Garrow, had not even taught him his letters, deeming it unimportant. "I could only do so much reading in Ellesméra. What is it? Was it forged during the fall of the Riders, to use against Galbatorix and the Forsworn?"

Blödhgarm shook his head. "Niernen is far, far older than that."

"The Dauthdaertya," said Arya, "were born out of the fear and the hate that marked the final years of our war with the dragons. Our most skilled smiths and spellcasters crafted them out of materials we no longer understand, imbued them with enchantments whose wordings we no longer remember, and named them, all twelve of them, after the most beautiful of flowers—as ugly a mismatch as ever there was—for we made them with but one purpose in mind: we made them to kill dragons."

Revulsion overtook Eragon as he gazed at the glowing lance. "And did they?"

"Those who were present say that the dragons' blood rained from the sky like a summer downpour."

Saphira hissed, loud and sharp.

Eragon glanced back at her for a moment and saw out of the corner of his eye that the Varden were still holding their position before the keep, waiting for him and Saphira to retake the lead in the offensive.

"All of the Dauthdaertya were thought to have been destroyed or lost beyond recovery," said Blödhgarm. "Obviously, we were mistaken. Niernen must have passed into the hands of the Waldgrave family, and they must have kept it hidden here in Belatona. I would guess that when we breached the city walls, Lord Bradburn's courage failed him and he ordered Niernen brought from his armory in an attempt to stop you and Saphira. No doubt Galbatorix would be angry beyond reason if he knew that Bradburn had tried to kill you."

Although he was aware of the need for haste, Eragon's curiosity would not let him leave just yet. "Dauthdaert or not, you still haven't explained why Galbatorix wouldn't want us to have this." He motioned toward the lance. "What makes Niernen any more dangerous than that spear over there, or even Bris—" he caught himself before he uttered the entire name, "or my own sword?"

It was Arya who answered. "It cannot be broken by any normal means, cannot be harmed by fire, and is almost completely impervious to magic, as you yourself saw. The Dauthdaertya were designed to be unaffected by whatever spells the dragons might work and to protect their wielder from the same—a daunting prospect, given the strength, complexity, and unexpected nature of dragons' magic. Galbatorix may have wrapped Shruikan and himself in more wards than anyone else in Alagaësia, but it is possible that Niernen could pass through their defenses as if they don't even exist."

Eragon understood, and elation filled him. "We have to—"

A squeal interrupted him.

The sound was stabbing, slicing, shivering, like metal scraping against stone. Eragon's teeth vibrated in sympathy and he covered his ears with his hands, grimacing as he twisted around, trying to locate the source of the noise. Saphira tossed her head, and even through the din, he heard her whine in distress.

Eragon swept his gaze over the courtyard two separate times before he noticed a faint puff of dust rising up the wall of the keep from a foot-wide crack that had appeared beneath the blackened, partially destroyed window where Blödhgarm had killed the magician. As the squeal increased in intensity, Eragon risked lifting one of his hands off his ears to point at the crack.

"Look!" he shouted to Arya, who nodded in acknowledgment. He replaced his hand over his ear.

Without warning or preamble, the sound stopped.

Eragon waited for a moment, then slowly lowered his hands, for once wishing that his hearing were not quite so sensitive.

Just as he did, the crack jerked open wider—spreading until it was several feet across—and raced down the wall of the keep. Like a bolt of lightning, the crack struck and shattered the keystone above the doors to the building, showering the floor below with pebbles. The whole castle groaned, and from the damaged window to the broken keystone, the front of the keep began to lean outward.

"Run!" Eragon shouted at the Varden, though the men were already scattering to either side of the courtyard, desperate to get out from under the precarious wall. Eragon took a single step forward, every muscle in his body tense as he searched for a glimpse of Roran somewhere in the throng of warriors.

At last Eragon spotted him, trapped behind the last group of men by the doorway, bellowing madly at them, his words lost in the commotion. Then the wall shifted and dropped several inches—leaning even farther away from the rest of the building—pelting Roran with rocks, knocking him off balance, and forcing him to stumble backward under the overhang of the doorway.

As Roran straightened from a crouch, his eyes met Eragon's, and in his gaze Eragon saw a flash of fear and helplessness, quickly followed by resignation, as if Roran knew that, no matter how fast he ran, he could not possibly reach safety in time.

A wry smile touched Roran's lips.

And the wall fell.

HAMMERFALL

"No!" shouted Eragon as the wall of the keep tumbled down with a thunderous crash, burying Roran and five other men beneath a mound of stone twenty feet high and flooding the courtyard with a dark cloud of dust.

Eragon's shout was so loud, his voice broke, and slick, copper-tasting blood coated the back of his throat. He inhaled and doubled over, coughing.

"Vaetna," he gasped, and waved his hand. With a sound like rustling silk, the thick gray dust parted, leaving the center of the courtyard clear. Concerned as he was for Roran, Eragon barely noticed the strength the spell took from him.

"No, no, no, no," Eragon muttered. *He can't be dead. He can't, he can't, he can't.*... As if repetition might make it true, Eragon continued to think the phrase. But with every repetition, it became less a statement of fact or hope and more a prayer to the world at large.

Before him, Arya and the other warriors of the Varden stood coughing and rubbing their eyes with the palms of their hands. Many were hunched over, as if expecting a blow; others gaped at the front of the damaged keep. The rubble from the building spilled into the middle of the courtyard, obscuring the mosaic. Two and a half rooms on the second story of the keep, and one on the third—the room where the magician had expired so violently—stood exposed to the elements. The chambers and their furnishings seemed dirty and rather shabby in the full light of the sun. Within, a half-dozen soldiers armed with crossbows were scrambling back from the drop they now found themselves standing by. With much pushing and shoving, they hurried through the doors at the far ends of the rooms and vanished into the depths of the keep.

Eragon tried to guess the weight of a block in the pile of rubble; it must have been many hundreds of pounds. If he, Saphira, and the elves all worked together, he was sure that they could shift the stones with magic, but the effort would leave them weak and vulnerable. Moreover, it would take an impractically long time. For a moment, Eragon thought of Glaedr—the golden dragon was more than strong enough to lift the whole pile at once—but haste was of the essence, and Glaedr's Eldunarí would take too long to retrieve. In any case, Eragon knew that he might not even be able to convince Glaedr to talk with him, much less to help rescue Roran and the other men.

Then Eragon pictured Roran as he had appeared just before the deluge of stones and dust had hidden him from view, standing underneath the eaves of the doorway to the keep, and with a start, he realized what to do.

"Saphira, help them!" Eragon shouted as he cast aside his shield and bounded forward.

Behind him, he heard Arya say something in the ancient language—a short phrase that might have been "Hide this!" Then she had caught up to him, running with her sword in hand, ready to fight.

When he reached the base of the rubble, Eragon leaped as high as he could. He alit with a single foot upon the slanting face of a block and then jumped again, bounding from point to point like a mountain goat scaling the side of a gorge. He hated to risk disturbing the blocks, but climbing the pile was the fastest way to reach his destination.

With one last lunge, Eragon cleared the edge of the second story, then raced across the room. He shoved the door in front of him with such force that he broke the latch and hinges and sent the door flying into the wall of the corridor beyond, splitting the heavy oak planks.

Eragon sprinted down the corridor. His footsteps and his breathing sounded strangely muted to him, as if his ears were filled with water.

He slowed as he drew near an open doorway. Through it, he saw a study with five armed men pointing at a map and arguing. None of them noticed Eragon.

He kept running.

He sped around a corner and collided with a soldier walking in the opposite direction. Eragon's vision flashed red and yellow as his forehead struck the rim of the man's shield. He clung to the soldier, and the two of them staggered back and forth across the corridor like a pair of drunk dancers.

The soldier uttered an oath as he struggled to regain his balance. "What's wrong with you, you thrice-blasted—" he said, and then he saw Eragon's face, and his eyes widened. "You!"

Eragon balled his right hand and punched the man in the belly, directly underneath his rib cage. The blow lifted the man off his feet and smashed him into the ceiling. "Me," Eragon agreed as the man dropped to the floor, lifeless.

Eragon continued down the corridor. His already rapid pulse seemed to have doubled since he entered the keep; he felt as if his heart were about to burst out of his chest.

Where is it? he thought, frantic as he glanced through yet another doorway and saw nothing but an empty room.

At last, at the end of a dingy side passage, he caught sight of a winding staircase. He took the stairs five at a time, heedless of his own safety as he descended toward the first story, pausing only to push a

startled archer out of his way.

The stairs ended, and he emerged into a high-vaulted chamber reminiscent of the cathedral in Dras-Leona. He spun around, gathering quick impressions: shields and arms and red pennants hung on the walls; narrow windows close under the ceiling; torches mounted in wrought-iron brackets; empty fireplaces; long, dark trestle tables stacked along both sides of the hall; and a dais at the head of the room, where a robed and bearded man stood before a high-backed chair. Eragon was in the main hall of the castle. To his right, between him and the doors that led to the entrance of the keep, was a contingent of fifty or more soldiers. The gold thread in their tunics glittered as they stirred with surprise.

"Kill him!" the robed man ordered, sounding more frightened than lordly. "Whosoever kills him shall have a third of my treasure! So I promise!"

A terrible frustration welled up inside Eragon at being delayed once again. He tore his sword from its scabbard, lifted it over his head, and shouted:

"Brisingr!"

With a rush of air, a cocoon of wraithlike blue flames sprang into existence around the blade, running up toward the tip. The heat from the fire warmed Eragon's hand, arm, and the side of his face.

Then Eragon lowered his gaze to the soldiers. "Move," he growled.

The soldiers hesitated a moment more, then turned and fled.

Eragon charged forward, ignoring the panicked laggards within reach of his burning sword. One man tripped and fell before him; Eragon jumped completely over the soldier, not even touching the tassel on his helm.

The wind from Eragon's passage tore at the flames on the blade, stretching them out behind the sword like the mane of a galloping horse.

Hunching his shoulders, Eragon bulled past the double doors that guarded the entrance to the main hall. He dashed through a long, wide chamber edged with rooms full of soldiers—as well as gears, pulleys, and other mechanisms used for raising and lowering the gates of the keep—and then ran full tilt into the portcullis that blocked the way to where Roran had been standing when the keep wall collapsed.

The iron grating bent as Eragon slammed into it, but not enough to break the metal.

He staggered back a step.

He again channeled energy stored within the diamonds of his belt—the belt of Beloth the Wise—and into Brisingr, emptying the gemstones of their precious store as he stoked the sword's fire to an almost unbearable intensity. A wordless shout escaped him as he drew

back his arm and struck at the portcullis. Orange and yellow sparks sprayed him, pitting his gloves and tunic and stinging his exposed flesh. A drop of molten iron fell sizzling onto the tip of his boot. With a twitch of his ankle, he shook it off.

Three cuts he made, and a man-sized section of the portcullis fell inward. The severed ends of the grating glowed white-hot, lighting the area with their soft radiance.

Eragon allowed the flames rising from Brisingr to die out as he proceeded through the opening he had created.

First to the left, then to the right, and then to the left again he ran as the passage alternated directions, the convoluted path designed to slow the advance of troops if they managed to gain access to the keep.

When he rounded the last corner, Eragon saw his destination: the debris-choked vestibule. Even with his elflike vision, he could make out only the largest shapes in the darkness, for the falling stones had extinguished the torches on the walls. He heard an odd huffing and scuffling, as if some sort of clumsy beast were rooting through the rubble.

"Naina," said Eragon.

A directionless blue light illuminated the space. And there before him, covered in dirt, blood, ash, and sweat, with his teeth bared in a fearsome snarl, appeared Roran, grappling with a soldier over the corpses of two others.

The soldier winced at the sudden brightness, and Roran took advantage of the man's distraction to twist and push him to his knees, whereupon he grabbed the soldier's dagger from his belt and drove it up under the corner of his jaw.

The soldier kicked twice and then was still.

Panting for breath, Roran rose from the body, blood dripping from his fingers. He looked over at Eragon with a curiously glazed expression.

"About time you—" he said, and then his eyes rolled back into his head as he fainted.

In order to catch Roran before he struck the floor, Eragon had to drop Brisingr, which he was reluctant to do. Nevertheless, he opened his hand, and the sword clattered against the stones even as Roran's weight settled into his arms.

"Is he badly hurt?" Arya asked.

Eragon flinched, surprised to find her and Blödhgarm standing next to him. "I don't think so." He patted Roran's cheeks several times, smearing the dust on his skin. In the flat, ice-blue glare of Eragon's spell, Roran appeared gaunt, his eyes surrounded by bruised shadows, and his lips a purplish color, as if stained with the juice from berries. "Come on, wake up."

After a few seconds, Roran's eyelids twitched; then he opened them and looked at Eragon, obviously confused. Relief washed over Eragon, so strong he could taste it. "You blacked out for a moment," he explained.

"Ah."

He's alive! Eragon said to Saphira, risking a brief moment of contact.

Her pleasure was obvious. *Good. I will stay here and help the elves move the stones away from the building. If you need me, shout, and I'll find a way to reach you.*

Roran's mail tinkled as Eragon helped him onto his feet. "What of the others?" Eragon asked, and gestured toward the mound of rubble.

Roran shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"No one could have survived under there. I only escaped because … because I was partially sheltered by the eaves."

"And you? You're all right?" Eragon asked.

"What?" Roran frowned, seeming distracted, as if the thought had not even occurred to him. "I'm fine.… Wrist might be broken. It's not bad."

Eragon cast a meaningful glance at Blödhgarm. The elf's features tightened with a faint display of displeasure, but he went over to Roran and, in a smooth voice, said, "If I may.…" He extended a hand toward Roran's injured arm.

While Blödhgarm labored over Roran, Eragon picked up Brisingr, then stood guard with Arya at the entrance in case any soldiers were so foolhardy as to launch an attack.

"There, all done," Blödhgarm said. He moved away from Roran,

who rolled his wrist in a circle, testing the joint.

Satisfied, Roran thanked Blödhgarm, then lowered his hand and cast about the rubble-strewn floor until he found his hammer. He readjusted the position of his armor and looked out the entrance. “I’ve about had my fill of this Lord Bradburn,” he said in a deceptively calm tone. “He has held his seat overlong, I think, and ought to be relieved of his responsibilities. Wouldn’t you agree, Arya?”

“I would,” she said.

“Well then, let’s find the soft-bellied old fool; I would give him a few gentle taps from my hammer in memory of everyone we have lost today.”

“He was in the main hall a few minutes ago,” Eragon said, “but I doubt he stayed to await our return.”

Roran nodded. “Then we’ll have to hunt him down.” And with that, he strode forward.

Eragon extinguished his illuminating spell and hurried after his cousin, holding Brisingr at the ready. Arya and Blödhgarm stayed as close beside him as the convoluted passageway would allow.

The chamber that the passageway led to was abandoned, as was the main hall of the castle, where the only evidence of the dozens of soldiers and officials who had populated it was a helmet that lay on the floor, rocking back and forth in ever-decreasing arcs.

Eragon and Roran ran past the marble dais, Eragon restricting his speed so as not to leave Roran behind. They kicked down a door just to the left of the platform and rushed up the stairs beyond.

At each story, they paused so that Blödhgarm could search with his mind for any trace of Lord Bradburn and his retinue, but he found none.

As they reached the third level, Eragon heard a stampede of footsteps and saw a thicket of jabbing spears fill the curved archway in front of Roran. The spears cut Roran on the cheek and on his right thigh, coating his knee with blood. He bellowed like a wounded bear and rammed into the spears with his shield, trying to push his way up the last few steps and out of the stairwell. Men shouted frantically.

Behind Roran, Eragon switched Brisingr to his left hand, then reached around his cousin, grabbed one of the spears by the haft, and yanked it out of the grip of whoever was holding it. He flipped the spear around and threw it into the center of the men packed in the archway. Someone screamed, and a gap appeared in the wall of bodies. Eragon repeated the process, and his throws soon reduced the number of soldiers enough that, step by step, Roran was able to force the mass of men back.

As soon as Roran won clear of the stairs, the twelve remaining soldiers scattered across a wide landing fringed with balustrades, each

man seeking room to swing his weapon without obstruction. Roran bellowed again and leaped after the nearest soldier. He parried the man's sword, then stepped past his guard and struck the man on his helm, which rang like an iron pot.

Eragon sprinted across the landing and tackled a pair of soldiers who were standing close together. He knocked them to the ground, then dispatched each of them with a single thrust of Brisingr. An ax hurtled toward him, whirling end over end. He ducked and pushed a man over a balustrade before engaging two others who were trying to disembowel him with billed pikes.

Then Arya and Blödhgarm were moving among the men, silent and deadly, the elves' inherent grace making the violence appear more like an artfully staged performance than the sordid struggle most fights were.

In a rush of clanging metal, broken bones, and severed limbs, the four of them killed the rest of the soldiers. As always, the combat exhilarated Eragon; it felt to him like being shocked with a bucket of cold water, and it left him with a sense of clarity unequaled by any other activity.

Roran bent over and rested his hands on his knees, gasping for air as if he had just finished a race.

"Shall I?" asked Eragon, gesturing at the cuts on Roran's face and thigh.

Roran tested his weight on the wounded leg a few times. "I can wait. Let's find Bradburn first."

Eragon took the lead as they filed back into the stairwell and resumed their climb. At last, after another five minutes of searching, they found Lord Bradburn barricaded within the highest room of the keep's westernmost tower. With a series of spells, Eragon, Arya, and Blödhgarm disassembled the doors and the tower of furniture piled behind them. As they and Roran entered the chambers, the high-ranking retainers and castle guards who had gathered in front of Lord Bradburn blanched, and many began to shake. To Eragon's relief, he only had to kill three of the guards before the rest of the group placed their weapons and shields on the floor in surrender.

Then Arya marched over to Lord Bradburn, who had remained silent throughout, and said, "Now, will you order your forces to stand down? Only a few remain, but you can still save their lives."

"I would not even if I could," said Bradburn in a voice of such hate and sneering derision, Eragon almost struck him. "You'll have no concessions from me, elf. I'll not give up my men to filthy, unnatural creatures such as you. Death would be preferable. And do not think you can beguile me with honeyed words. I know of your alliance with the Urgals, and I would sooner trust a snake than a person who breaks

bread with those monsters."

Arya nodded and placed her hand over Bradburn's face. She closed her eyes, and for a time, both she and Bradburn were motionless. Eragon reached out with his mind, and he felt the battle of wills that was raging between them as Arya worked her way past Bradburn's defenses and into his consciousness. It took a minute, but at last she gained control of the man's mind, whereupon she set about calling up and examining his memories until she discovered the nature of his wards.

Then she spoke in the ancient language and cast a complex spell designed to circumvent those wards and to put Bradburn to sleep. When she finished, Bradburn's eyes closed and, with a sigh, he collapsed into her arms.

"She killed him!" shouted one of the guards, and cries of fear and outrage spread among the men.

As Eragon attempted to convince them otherwise, he heard one of the Varden's trumpets being winded far off in the distance. Soon another trumpet sounded, this one much closer, then another, and then he caught snatches of what he would have sworn were faint, scattered cheers rising from the courtyard below.

Puzzled, he exchanged glances with Arya; then they turned in a circle, looking out each of the windows set within the walls of the chamber.

To the west and south lay Belatona. It was a large, prosperous city, one of the largest in the Empire. Close to the castle, the buildings were imposing structures made of stone, with pitched roofs and oriel windows, while farther away they were constructed of wood and plaster. Several of the half-timbered buildings had caught fire during the fighting. The smoke filled the air with a layer of brown haze that stung eyes and throats.

To the southwest, a mile beyond the city, was the Varden's camp: long rows of gray woolen tents ringed by stake-lined trenches, a few brightly colored pavilions sporting flags and pennants, and stretched out on the bare ground, hundreds of wounded men. The healers' tents were already filled to capacity.

To the north, past the docks and warehouses, was Leona Lake, a vast expanse of water dotted with the occasional whitecap.

Above, the wall of black clouds that was advancing from the west loomed high over the city, threatening to envelop it within the folds of rain that fell skirtlike from its underside. Blue light flickered here and there in the depths of the storm, and thunder rumbled like an angry beast.

But nowhere did Eragon see an explanation for the commotion that had attracted his attention.

He and Arya hurried over to the window directly above the courtyard. Saphira and the men and elves working with her had just finished clearing away the stones in front of the keep. Eragon whistled, and when Saphira looked up, he waved. Her long jaws parted in a toothy grin, and she blew a streamer of smoke toward him.

"Ho! What news?" Eragon shouted.

One of the Varden standing on the castle walls raised an arm and pointed eastward. "Shadeslayer! Look! The werecats are coming! The werecats are coming!"

A cold tingle crawled down Eragon's spine. He followed the line of the man's arm eastward, and this time he saw a host of small, shadowy figures emerging from a fold in the land several miles away, on the other side of the Jiet River. Some of the figures went on four legs and some on two, but they were too far away for him to be sure if they were werecats.

"Could it be?" asked Arya, sounding amazed.

"I don't know.… Whatever they are, we'll find out soon enough."

KING CAT

Eragon stood on the dais in the main hall of the keep, directly to the right of Lord Bradburn's throne, his left hand on the pommel of Brisingr, which was sheathed. On the other side of the throne stood Jörmundur—senior commander of the Varden—holding his helmet in the crook of his arm. The hair at his temples was streaked with gray; the rest was brown, and all of it was pulled back into a long braid. His lean face bore the studiously blank expression of a person who had extensive experience waiting on others. Eragon noticed a thin line of red running along the underside of Jörmundur's right bracer, but Jörmundur showed no sign of pain.

Between them sat their leader, Nasuada, resplendent in a dress of green and yellow, which she had donned just moments before, exchanging the raiment of war for garb more suited to the practice of statecraft. She too had been marked during the fighting, as was evidenced by the linen bandage wrapped around her left hand.

In a low voice that only Eragon and Jörmundur could hear, Nasuada said, "If we can but gain their support …"

"What will they want in return, though?" asked Jörmundur. "Our coffers are near empty, and our future uncertain."

Her lips barely moving, she said, "Perhaps they wish nothing more of us than a chance to strike back at Galbatorix." She paused. "But if not, we shall have to find means other than gold to persuade them to join our ranks."

"You could offer them barrels of cream," said Eragon, which elicited a chortle from Jörmundur and a soft laugh from Nasuada.

Their murmured conversation came to an end as three trumpets sounded outside the main hall. Then a flaxen-haired page dressed in a tunic stitched with the Varden's standard—a white dragon holding a rose above a sword pointing downward on a purple field—marched through the open doorway at the far end of the hall, struck the floor with his ceremonial staff, and, in a thin, warbling voice, announced, "His Most Exalted Royal Highness, Grimrr Halfpaw, King of the Werecats, Lord of the Lonely Places, Ruler of the Night Reaches, and He Who Walks Alone."

A strange title, that: He Who Walks Alone, Eragon observed to Saphira.

But well deserved, I would guess, she replied, and he could sense her amusement, even though he could not see her where she lay coiled in

the castle keep.

The page stepped aside, and through the doorway strode Grimrr Halfpaw in the shape of a human, trailed by four other werecats, who padded close behind him on large, shaggy paws. The four resembled Solembum, the one other werecat Eragon had seen in the guise of an animal: heavy-shouldered and long-limbed, with short, dark ruffs upon their necks and withers; tasseled ears; and black-tipped tails, which they waved gracefully from side to side.

Grimrr Halfpaw, however, looked unlike any person or creature Eragon had ever seen. At roughly four feet tall, he was the same height as a dwarf, but no one could have mistaken him for a dwarf, or even for a human. He had a small pointed chin, wide cheekbones, and, underneath upswept brows, slanted green eyes fringed with winglike eyelashes. His ragged black hair hung low over his forehead, while on the sides and back it fell to his shoulders, where it lay smooth and lustrous, much like the manes of his companions. His age was impossible for Eragon to guess.

The only clothes Grimrr wore were a rough leather vest and a rabbit-skin loincloth. The skulls of a dozen or so animals—birds, mice, and other small game—were tied to the front of the vest, and they rattled against one another as he moved. A sheathed dagger protruded at an angle from under the belt of his loincloth. Numerous scars, thin and white, marked his nut-brown skin, like scratches on a well-used table. And, as his name indicated, he was missing two fingers on his left hand; they looked to have been bitten off.

Despite the delicacy of his features, there was no doubt that Grimrr was male, given the hard, sinewy muscles of his arms and chest, the narrowness of his hips, and the coiled power of his stride as he sauntered down the length of the hall toward Nasuada.

None of the werecats seemed to notice the people lined up on either side of their path watching them until Grimrr came level with the herbalist Angela, who stood next to Roran, knitting a striped tube sock with six needles.

Grimrr's eyes narrowed as he beheld the herbalist, and his hair rippled and spiked, as did that of his four guards. His lips drew back to reveal a pair of curved white fangs, and to Eragon's astonishment, he uttered a short, loud hiss.

Angela looked up from the sock, her expression languid and insolent. *"Cheep cheep,"* she said.

For a moment, Eragon thought the werecat was going to attack her. A dark flush mottled Grimrr's neck and face, his nostrils flared, and he snarled silently at her. The other werecats settled into low crouches, ready to pounce, their ears pressed flat against their heads.

Throughout the hall, Eragon heard the slither of blades being

partially drawn from their scabbards.

Grimrr hissed once more, then turned away from the herbalist and continued walking. As the last werecat in line passed Angela, he lifted a paw and took a surreptitious swipe at the strand of yarn that drooped from Angela's needles, just like a playful house cat might.

Saphira's bewilderment was equal to Eragon's own. *Cheep cheep?* she asked.

He shrugged, forgetting that she could not see him. *Who knows why Angela does or says anything?*

At last Grimrr arrived before Nasuada. He inclined his head ever so slightly, displaying with his bearing the supreme confidence, even arrogance, that was the sole province of cats, dragons, and certain highborn women.

"Lady Nasuada," he said. His voice was surprisingly deep, more akin to the low, coughing roar of a wildcat than the high-pitched tones of the boy he resembled.

Nasuada inclined her head in turn. "King Halfpaw. You are most welcome to the Varden, you and all your race. I must apologize for the absence of our ally, King Orrin of Surda; he could not be here to greet you, as he wished, for he and his horsemen are even now busy defending our westward flank from a contingent of Galbatorix's troops."

"Of course, Lady Nasuada," said Grimrr. His sharp teeth flashed as he spoke. "You must never turn your back on your enemies."

"Even so … And to what do we owe the unexpected pleasure of this visit, Your Highness? Werecats have always been noted for their secrecy and their solitude, and for remaining apart from the conflicts of the age, especially since the fall of the Riders. One might even say that your kind has become more myth than fact over the past century. Why, then, do you now choose to reveal yourselves?"

Grimrr lifted his right arm and pointed at Eragon with a crooked finger topped by a clawlike nail.

"Because of him," growled the werecat. "One does not attack another hunter until he has shown his weakness, and Galbatorix has shown his: he will not kill Eragon Shadeslayer or Saphira Bjartskular. Long have we waited for this opportunity, and seize it we will. Galbatorix will learn to fear and hate us, and at the last, he will realize the extent of his mistake and know that we were the ones responsible for his undoing. And how sweet that revenge will taste, as sweet as the marrow of a tender young boar.

"Time has come, human, for every race, even werecats, to stand together and prove to Galbatorix that he has not broken our will to fight. We would join your army, Lady Nasuada, as free allies, and help you achieve this."

What Nasuada was thinking, Eragon could not tell, but he and Saphira were impressed by the werecat's speech.

After a brief pause, Nasuada said, "Your words fall most pleasantly upon my ears, Your Highness. But before I can accept your offer, there are answers I must have of you, if you are willing."

With an air of unshakable indifference, Grimrr waved a hand. "I am."

"Your race has been *so* secretive and *so* elusive, I must confess, I had not heard tell of Your Highness until this very day. As a point of fact, I did not even know that your race *had* a ruler."

"I am not a king like your kings," said Grimrr. "Werecats prefer to walk alone, but even we must choose a leader when to war we go."

"I see. Do you speak for your whole race, then, or only for those who travel with you?"

Grimrr's chest swelled, and his expression became, if possible, even more self-satisfied. "I speak for all of my kind, Lady Nasuada," he purred. "Every able-bodied werecat in Alagaësia, save those who are nursing, has come here to fight. There are few of us, but none can equal our ferocity in battle. And I can also command the one-shapes, although I cannot speak for them, for they are as dumb as other animals. Still, they will do what we ask of them."

"One-shapes?" Nasuada inquired.

"Those you know as cats. Those who cannot change their skins, as we do."

"And you command their loyalty?"

"Aye. They admire us … as is only natural."

If what he says is true, Eragon commented to Saphira, *the werecats could prove to be incredibly valuable*.

Then Nasuada said, "And what is it you desire of us in exchange for your assistance, King Halfpaw?" She glanced at Eragon and smiled, then added, "We can offer you as much cream as you want, but beyond that, our resources are limited. If your warriors expect to be paid for their troubles, I fear they will be sorely disappointed."

"Cream is for kittens, and gold holds no interest for us," said Grimrr. As he spoke, he lifted his right hand and inspected his nails with a heavy-lidded gaze. "Our terms are thus: Each of us will be given a dagger to fight with, if we do not already have one. Each of us shall have two suits of armor made to fit, one for when on two legs we stand, and one for when on four. We need no other equipment than that—no tents, no blankets, no plates, no spoons. Each of us will be promised a single duck, grouse, chicken, or similar bird per day, and every second day, a bowl of freshly chopped liver. Even if we do not choose to eat it, the food will be set aside for us. Also, should you win this war, then whoever becomes your next king or queen—and all

who claim that title thereafter—will keep a padded cushion next to their throne, in a place of honor, for one of us to sit on, if we so wish."

"You bargain like a dwarven lawgiver," said Nasuada in a dry tone. She leaned over to Jörmundur, and Eragon heard her whisper, "Do we have enough liver to feed them all?"

"I think so," Jörmundur replied in an equally hushed voice. "But it depends on the size of the bowl."

Nasuada straightened in her seat. "Two sets of armor is one too many, King Halfpaw. Your warriors will have to decide whether they want to fight as cats or as humans and then abide by the decision. I cannot afford to outfit them for both."

If Grimrr had had a tail, Eragon was sure it would have twitched back and forth. As it was, the werecat merely shifted his position. "Very well, Lady Nasuada."

"There is one more thing. Galbatorix has spies and killers hidden everywhere. Therefore, as a condition of joining the Varden, you must consent to allow one of our spellcasters to examine your memories, so we may assure ourselves that Galbatorix has no claim on you."

Grimrr sniffed. "You would be foolish not to. If anyone is brave enough to read our thoughts, let them. But not her"—and he twisted to point at Angela. "Never her."

Nasuada hesitated, and Eragon could see that she wanted to ask why but restrained herself. "So be it. I will send for magicians at once, that we may settle this matter without delay. Depending on what they find—and it will be nothing untoward, I'm sure—I am honored to form an alliance between you and the Varden, King Halfpaw."

At her words, all of the humans in the hall broke out cheering and began to clap, including Angela. Even the elves appeared pleased.

The werecats, however, did not react, except to tilt their ears backward in annoyance at the noise.

AFTERMATH

Eragon groaned and leaned back against Saphira. Bracing his hands on his knees, he slid down over her bumpy scales until he was sitting on the ground, then stretched out his legs in front of him.

"I'm hungry!" he exclaimed.

He and Saphira were in the courtyard of the castle, away from the men who were laboring to clear it—piling stones and bodies alike into carts—and from the people streaming in and out of the damaged building, many of whom had been present at Nasuada's audience with King Halfpaw and were now leaving to attend to other duties. Blödhgarm and four elves stood nearby, watching for danger.

"Oi!" someone shouted.

Eragon looked up to see Roran walking toward him from the keep. Angela trailed a few steps behind, yarn flapping in the air as she half ran to keep up with his longer stride.

"Where are you off to now?" Eragon asked as Roran stopped before him.

"To help secure the city and organize the prisoners."

"Ah …" Eragon's gaze wandered across the busy courtyard before returning to Roran's bruised face. "You fought well."

"You too."

Eragon shifted his attention to Angela, who was once again knitting, her fingers moving so quickly, he could not follow what she was doing. *"Cheep cheep?"* he asked.

An impish expression overtook her face, and she shook her head, her voluminous curls bouncing. "A story for another time."

Eragon accepted her evasion without complaint; he had not expected her to explain herself. She rarely did.

"And you," said Roran, "where are you going?"

We're going to get some food, said Saphira, and nudged Eragon with her snout, her breath warm on him as she exhaled.

Roran nodded. "That sounds best. I'll see you at camp this evening, then." As he turned to leave, he added, "Give my love to Katrina."

Angela tucked her knitting into a quilted bag that hung at her waist. "I guess I'll be off as well. I have a potion brewing in my tent that I must attend to, and there's a certain werecat I want to track down."

"Grimrr?"

"No, no—an old friend of mine: Solembum's mother. If she's still alive, that is. I hope she is." She raised her hand to her brow, thumb

and forefinger touching in a circle, and, in an overly cheerful voice, said, “Be seeing you!” And with that, she sailed off.

On my back, said Saphira, and rose to her feet, leaving Eragon without support.

He climbed into the saddle at the base of her neck, and Saphira unfolded her massive wings with the soft, dry sound of skin sliding over skin. The motion created a gust of near-silent wind that spread out like ripples in a pond. Throughout the courtyard, people paused to look at her.

As Saphira lifted her wings overhead, Eragon could see the web of purplish veins that pulsed therein, each one becoming a hollow worm track as the flow of blood subsided between the beats of her mighty heart.

Then with a surge and a jolt, the world tilted crazily around Eragon as Saphira jumped from the courtyard to the top of the castle wall, where she balanced for a moment on the merlons, the stones cracking between the points of her claws. He grabbed the neck spike in front of him to steady himself.

The world tilted again as Saphira launched herself off the wall. An acrid taste and smell assaulted Eragon, and his eyes smarted as Saphira passed through the thick layer of smoke that hung over Belatona like a blanket of hurt, anger, and sorrow.

Saphira flapped twice, hard, and then they emerged from the smoke into the sunshine and soared over the fire-dotted streets of the city. Stilling her wings, Saphira glided in circles, allowing the warm air from below to lift her ever higher.

Tired as he was, Eragon savored the magnificence of the view: the growling storm that was about to swallow the whole of Belatona glowed white and brilliant along its leading edge, while farther away, the thunderhead wallowed in inky shadows that betrayed nothing of their contents, save when bolts of lightning shot through them. Elsewhere the gleaming lake and the hundreds of small, verdant farms that were scattered across the landscape also commanded his attention, but none were so impressive as the mountain of clouds.

As always, Eragon felt privileged to be able to look upon the world from so high above, for he was aware of how few people had ever had the chance to fly on a dragon.

With a slight shift of her wings, Saphira began to glide down toward the rows of gray tents that composed the Varden’s camp.

A strong wind sprang up from the west, heralding the imminent arrival of the storm. Eragon hunched over and wrapped his hands even more securely around the spike on her neck. He saw glossy ripples race across the fields below as the stalks bent under the force of the rising gale. The shifting grass reminded him of the fur of a great

green beast.

A horse screamed as Saphira swept over the rows of tents to the clearing that was reserved for her. Eragon half stood in the saddle as Saphira flared her wings and slowed to a near standstill over the torn earth. The impact as she struck knocked Eragon forward.

Sorry, she said. *I tried to land as softly as I could*.

I know.

Even as he dismounted, Eragon saw Katrina hurrying toward him. Her long auburn hair swirled about her face as she walked across the clearing, and the press of the wind exposed the bulge of her growing belly through the layers of her dress.

"What news?" she called, worry etched into every line of her face.

"You heard about the werecats …?"

She nodded.

"There's no real news other than that. Roran's fine; he said to give you his love."

Her expression softened, but her worry did not entirely disappear. "He's all right, then?" She motioned toward the ring she wore on the third finger of her left hand, one of the two rings Eragon had enchanted for her and Roran so they might know if one or the other was in danger. "I thought I felt something, about an hour ago, and I was afraid that …"

Eragon shook his head. "Roran can tell you about it. He got a few nicks and bruises, but other than that, he's fine. Scared me half to death, though."

Katrina's look of concern intensified. Then, with visible struggle, she smiled. "At least you're safe. Both of you."

They parted, and Eragon and Saphira made their way to one of the mess tents close to the Varden's cookfires. There they gorged themselves on meat and mead while the wind howled around them and bursts of rain pummeled the sides of the flapping tent.

As Eragon bit into a slab of roast pork belly, Saphira said, *Is it good? Is it scrumptious?*

"Mmm," said Eragon, rivulets of juice running down his chin.

Memories of the Dead

"Galbatorix is mad and therefore unpredictable, but he also has gaps in his reasoning that an ordinary person would not. If you can find those, Eragon, then perhaps you and Saphira can defeat him."

Brom lowered his pipe, his face grave. "I hope you do. My greatest desire, Eragon, is that you and Saphira will live long and fruitful lives, free from fear of Galbatorix and the Empire. I wish that I could protect you from all of the dangers that threaten you, but alas, that is not within my ability. All I can do is give you my advice and teach you what I can now *while I am still here.… My son. Whatever happens to you, know that I love you, and so did your mother. May the stars watch over you, Eragon Bromsson."*

Eragon opened his eyes as the memory faded. Above him, the ceiling of the tent sagged inward, as loose as an empty waterskin, after the battering it had received during the now-departed storm. A drop of water fell from the belly of a fold, struck his right thigh, and soaked through his leggings, chilling the skin beneath. He knew he would have to go tighten up the tent's support ropes, but he was reluctant to move from the cot.

And Brom never said anything to you about Murtagh? He never told you that Murtagh and I were half brothers?

Saphira, who was curled up outside the tent, said, *Asking again won't change my answer.*

Why wouldn't he, though? Why didn't he? He must have known about Murtagh. He couldn't not *have.*

Saphira's response was slow to come. *Brom's reasons were ever his own, but if I had to guess, I imagine he thought it more important to tell you how he cared for you, and to give you what advice he could, than to spend his time talking about Murtagh.*

He could have warned me, though! Just a few words would have sufficed.

I cannot say for certain what drove him, Eragon. You have to accept that there are some questions you will never be able to answer about Brom. Trust in his love for you, and do not allow such concerns to disturb you.

Eragon stared down his chest at his thumbs. He placed them side by side, to better compare them. His left thumb had more wrinkles on its second joint than did his right, while his right had a small, ragged scar that he could not remember getting, although it must have happened since the Agaetí Blödhren, the Blood-oath Celebration.

Thank you, he said to Saphira. Through her, he had watched and listened to Brom's message three times since the fall of Feinster, and each time he had noticed some detail of Brom's speech or movement that had previously escaped him. The experience comforted and satisfied him, for it fulfilled a desire that had plagued him his entire life: to know the name of his father and to know that his father cared for him.

Saphira acknowledged his thanks with a warm glow of affection.

Though Eragon had eaten and then rested for perhaps an hour, his weariness had not entirely abated. Nor had he expected it to. He knew from experience that it could take weeks to fully recover from the debilitating effects of a long, drawn-out battle. As the Varden approached Urû'baen, he and everyone else in Nasuada's army would have less and less time to recover before each new confrontation. The war would wear them down until they were bloody, battered, and barely able to fight, at which point they would still have to face Galbatorix, who would have been waiting for them in ease and comfort.

He tried not to think about it too much.

Another drop of water struck his leg, cold and hard. Irritated, he swung his legs off the edge of the cot and sat upright, then went over to the bare patch of dirt in one corner and knelt next to it.

"Deloi sharjalví!" he said, as well as several other phrases in the ancient language that were necessary to disarm the traps he had set the previous day.

The dirt began to seethe like water coming to a boil, and rising out of the churning fountain of rocks, insects, and worms, there emerged an ironbound chest a foot and a half in length. Reaching out, Eragon took hold of the chest and released his spell. The ground grew calm once more.

He set the chest on the now-solid dirt. "Ládrin," he whispered, and waved his hand past the lock with no keyhole that secured the hasp. It popped open with a *click*.

A faint golden glow filled the tent as he lifted the lid of the chest.

Nestled securely within the velvet-lined interior lay Glaedr's Eldunarí, the dragon's heart of hearts. The large, jewel-like stone glittered darkly, like a dying ember. Eragon cupped the Eldunarí between his hands, the irregular, sharp-edged facets warm against his palms, and stared into its pulsing depths. A galaxy of tiny stars swirled within the center of the stone, although their movement had slowed and there seemed to be far fewer than when Eragon had first beheld the stone in Ellesméra, when Glaedr had discharged it from his body and into Eragon and Saphira's care.

As always, the sight fascinated Eragon; he could have sat watching

the ever-changing pattern for days.

We should try again, said Saphira, and he agreed.

Together they reached out with their minds toward the distant lights, toward the sea of stars that represented Glaedr's consciousness. Through cold and darkness they sailed, then heat and despair and indifference so vast and so great, it sapped their will to do anything other than to stop and weep.

Glaedr … Elda, they cried over and over, but there was no answer, no shifting of the indifference.

At last they withdrew, unable to withstand the crushing weight of Glaedr's misery any longer.

As he returned to himself, Eragon became aware of someone knocking on the front pole of his tent, and then he heard Arya say, "Eragon? May I enter?"

He sniffed and blinked to clear his eyes. "Of course."

The dim gray light from the cloudy sky fell upon him as Arya pushed aside the entrance flap. He felt a sudden pang as his eyes met hers—green, slanted, and unreadable—and an ache of longing filled him.

"Has there been any change?" she asked, and came to kneel by him. Instead of armor, she was wearing the same black leather shirt, trousers, and thin-soled boots as when he had rescued her in Gil'ead. Her hair was damp from washing and hung down her back in long, heavy ropes. The scent of crushed pine needles attended her, as it so often did, and it occurred to Eragon to wonder whether she used a spell to create the aroma or if that was how she smelled naturally. He would have liked to ask her, but he did not dare.

In answer to her question, he shook his head.

"May I?" She indicated Glaedr's heart of hearts.

He moved out of the way. "Please."

Arya placed her hands on either side of the Eldunarí and then closed her eyes. While she sat, he took the opportunity to study her with an openness and intensity that would have been offensive otherwise. In every aspect, she seemed the epitome of beauty, even though he knew that another might say her nose was too long, or her face too angled, or her ears too pointed, or her arms too muscled.

With a sharp intake of breath, Arya jerked her hands away from the heart of hearts, as if it had burned her. Then she bowed her head, and Eragon saw her chin quiver ever so faintly. "He is the most unhappy creature I have ever met.… I would we could help him. I do not think he will be able to find his way out of the darkness on his own."

"Do you think …" Eragon hesitated, not wanting to give voice to his suspicion, then continued: "Do you think he will go mad?"

"He may have already. If not, then he dances on the very cusp of

insanity."

Sorrow came over Eragon as they both gazed at the golden stone.

When at last he was able to bring himself to speak again, he asked, "Where is the Dauthdaert?"

"Hidden within my tent even as you have hidden Glaedr's Eldunarí. I can bring it here, if you want, or I can continue to safeguard it until you need it."

"Keep it. I can't carry it around with me, or Galbatorix may learn of its existence. Besides, it would be foolish to store so many treasures in one place."

She nodded.

The ache inside of Eragon intensified. "Arya, I—" He stopped as Saphira saw one of the blacksmith Horst's sons—Albriech, he thought, although it was difficult to tell him from his brother, Baldor, because of the distortions in Saphira's vision—running toward the tent. The interruption relieved Eragon, as he had not known what he was going to say.

"Someone's coming," he announced, and closed the lid of the chest.

Loud, wet footsteps sounded in the mud outside. Then Albriech, for it was Albriech, shouted, "Eragon! Eragon!"

"What!"

"Mother's birth pains have just begun! Father sent me to tell you and to ask if you will wait with him, in case anything goes wrong and your skill with magic is needed. Please, if you can—"

Whatever else he said was lost to Eragon as he rushed to lock and bury the chest. Then he cast his cloak over his shoulders and was fumbling with the clasp when Arya touched him on the arm and said, "May I accompany you? I have some experience with this. If your people will let me, I can make the birth easier for her."

Eragon did not even pause to consider his decision. He motioned toward the entrance of the tent. "After you."

WHAT IS A MAN?

The mud clung to Roran's boots each time he lifted his feet, slowing his progress and making his already-tired legs burn from the effort. It felt as if the very ground were trying to pull off his shoes. Thick as it was, the mud was also slippery. It gave way under his heels at the worst moments, just when his position was the most precarious. And it was deep, too. The constant passage of men, animals, and wagons had turned the top six inches of earth into a nigh on impassable morass. A few patches of crushed grass remained along the edges of the track—which ran straight through the Varden's camp—but Roran suspected they would soon vanish as men sought to avoid the center of the lane.

Roran made no attempt to evade the muck; he no longer cared if his clothes stayed clean. Besides, he was so exhausted, it was easier to keep plodding in the same direction than to worry about picking a path from one island of grass to the next.

As he stumbled forward, Roran thought of Belatona. Since Nasuada's audience with the werecats, he had been setting up a command post in the northwest quarter of the city and doing his best to establish control over the quadrant by assigning men to put out fires, build barricades in the streets, search houses for soldiers, and confiscate weapons. It was an immense task, and he despaired of accomplishing what was needed, fearing that the city might erupt into open battle again. *I hope those idiots can make it through the night without getting killed.*

His left side throbbed, causing him to bare his teeth and suck in his breath.

Blasted coward.

Someone had shot at him with a crossbow from the roof of a building. Only the sheerest of luck had saved him; one of his men, Mortenson, had stepped in front of him at the exact moment the attacker had fired. The bolt had punched through Mortenson from back to belly and had still retained enough force to give Roran a nasty bruise. Mortenson had died on the spot, and whoever had shot the crossbow had escaped.

Five minutes later, an explosion of some sort, possibly magical, had killed two more of his men when they entered a stable to investigate a noise.

From what Roran understood, such attacks were common throughout the city. No doubt, Galbatorix's agents were behind many

of them, but the inhabitants of Belatona were also responsible—men and women who could not bear to stand by idly while an invading army seized control of their home, no matter how honorable the Varden's intentions might be. Roran could sympathize with the people who felt they had to defend their families, but at the same time, he cursed them for being so thick-skulled that they could not recognize the Varden were trying to help them, not hurt them.

He scratched at his beard while he waited for a dwarf to pull a heavily laden pony out of his way, then continued slogging forward.

As he drew near their tent, he saw Katrina standing over a tub of hot, soapy water, scrubbing a bloodstained bandage against a washboard. Her sleeves were rolled up past her elbows, her hair tied in a messy bun, and her cheeks flushed from her work, but she had never looked so beautiful to him. She was his comfort—his comfort and his refuge—and just seeing her helped ease the sense of numb dislocation that gripped him.

She noticed him and immediately abandoned her washing and ran toward him, drying her pink hands on the front of her dress. Roran braced himself as she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his chest. His side flared with pain, and he uttered a short grunt.

Katrina loosened her hold and leaned away, frowning. "Oh! Did I hurt you?"

"No … no. I'm just sore."

She did not question him but hugged him again, more gently, and looked up at him, her eyes glistening with tears. Holding her by the waist, he bent and kissed her, inexpressibly grateful for her presence.

Katrina slipped his left arm over her shoulders, and he allowed her to support part of his weight as they returned to their tent. With a sigh, Roran sat on the stump they used for a chair, which Katrina had placed next to the small fire she had built to heat the tub of water and over which a pot of stew was now simmering.

Katrina filled a bowl with stew and handed it to him. Then, from within the tent, she brought him a mug of ale and a plate with a half loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese. "Is there anything else you need?" she asked, her voice unusually hoarse.

Roran did not answer, but cupped her cheek and stroked it twice with his thumb. She smiled tremulously and laid a hand over his, then returned to washing and began to scrub with renewed vigor.

Roran stared at the food for a long time before he took a bite; he was still so tense, he doubted he could stomach it. After a few mouthfuls of bread, however, his appetite returned, and he began to consume the stew with eagerness.

When he was done, he placed the dishes on the ground and then sat warming his hands over the fire while he nursed the last few sips of

beer.

"We heard the crash when the gates fell," said Katrina, wringing a bandage dry. "They didn't hold for very long."

"No.… It helps to have a dragon on your side."

Roran gazed at her belly as she draped the bandage over the makeshift clothesline that ran from the peak of their tent across to a neighboring one. Whenever he thought of the child she was carrying, the child that the two of them had created, he felt an enormous sense of pride, but it was tinged with anxiety, for he did not know how he could hope to provide a safe home for their baby. Also, if the war was not over by the time Katrina gave birth, she intended to leave him and go to Surda, where she might raise their child in relative safety.

I can't lose her, not again.

Katrina immersed another bandage in the tub. "And the battle in the city?" she asked, churning the water. "How went it?"

"We had to fight for every foot. Even Eragon had a hard time of it."

"The wounded spoke of ballistae mounted on wheels."

"Aye." Roran wet his tongue with ale, then quickly described how the Varden had moved through Belatona and the setbacks they had encountered along the way. "We lost too many men today, but it could have been worse. Much worse. Jörmundur and Captain Martland planned the attack well."

"Their plan wouldn't have worked, though, if not for you and Eragon. You acquitted yourself most bravely."

Roran loosed a single bark of laughter: "Ha! And do you know why that is? I'll tell you. Not one man in ten is actually willing to attack the enemy. Eragon doesn't see it; he's always at the forefront of the battle, driving the soldiers before him, but I see it. Most of the men hang back and don't fight unless they are cornered. Or they wave their arms about and make a lot of noise but don't actually do anything."

Katrina looked appalled. "How can that be? Are they cowards?"

"I don't know. I think … I think that, perhaps, they just can't bring themselves to look a man in the face and kill him, although it seems easy enough for them to cut down soldiers whose backs are turned. So they wait for others to do what they cannot. They wait for people like me."

"Do you think Galbatorix's men are equally reluctant?"

Roran shrugged. "They might be. But then, they have no choice but to obey Galbatorix. If he orders them to fight, they fight."

"Nasuada could do the same. She could have her magicians cast spells to ensure that no one shirks their duty."

"What difference would there be between her and Galbatorix, then? In any case, the Varden wouldn't stand for it."

Katrina left her washing to come and kiss him on the forehead. "I'm

glad you can do what you do," she whispered. She returned to the tub and began scrubbing another strip of soiled linen over the washboard. "I felt something earlier, from my ring.… I thought maybe something had happened to you."

"I was in the middle of a battle. It wouldn't be surprising if you had felt a twinge every few minutes."

She paused with her arms in the water. "I never have before."

He drained the mug of ale, seeking to delay the inevitable. He had hoped to spare her the details of his misadventure in the castle, but it was plain that she would not rest until she knew the truth. Attempting to convince her otherwise would only lead her to imagine calamities far worse than what had actually occurred. Besides, it would be pointless for him to hold back when news of the event would soon be common throughout the Varden.

So he told her. He gave her a brief account and tried to make the collapse of the wall seem more like a minor inconvenience rather than something that had almost killed him. Still, he found it difficult to describe the experience, and he spoke haltingly, searching for the right words. When he finished, he fell silent, troubled by the remembrance.

"At least you weren't hurt," said Katrina.

He picked at a crack in the lip of the mug. "No."

The sound of sloshing water ceased, and he could feel her eyes heavy upon him.

"You've faced far greater danger before."

"Yes … I suppose."

Her voice softened. "What's wrong, then?" When he did not answer, she said, "There's nothing so terrible you can't tell me, Roran. You know that."

The edge of his right thumbnail tore as he picked at the mug again. He rubbed the sharp flap against his forefinger several times. "I thought I was going to die when the wall fell."

"Anyone might have."

"Yes, but the thing is, I didn't *mind*." Anguished, he looked at her. "Don't you understand? *I gave up*. When I realized I couldn't escape, I accepted it as meekly as a lamb led to slaughter, and I—" Unable to continue, he dropped the mug and hid his face in his hands. The swelling in his throat made it hard to breathe. Then he felt Katrina's fingers light upon his shoulders. "I gave up," he growled, furious and disgusted with himself. "I just stopped fighting.… For you … For our child." He choked on the words.

"Shh, shh," she murmured.

"I've never given up before. Not once.… Not even when the Ra'zac took you."

"I know you haven't."

"This fighting has to end. It can't go on like this.… I can't … I—" He raised his head and was horrified to see that she too was on the verge of tears. Standing, he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.… It won't happen again. Never again. I promise."

"I don't care about *that*," she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

Her reply stung him. "I know I was weak, but my word still ought to be worth something to you."

"That's not what I meant!" she exclaimed, and drew back to look at him accusingly. "You're a fool sometimes, Roran."

He smiled slightly. "I know."

She clasped her hands behind his neck. "I wouldn't think any less of you, regardless of what you felt when the wall came down. All that matters is that you're still alive.… There wasn't anything you could do when the wall fell, was there?"

He shook his head.

"Then you have nothing to be ashamed of. If you could have stopped it, or if you could have escaped but you didn't, then you would have lost my respect. But you did everything you could, and when you could do no more, you made peace with your fate, and you didn't rail needlessly against it. That is wisdom, not weakness."

He bowed and kissed her on the brow. "Thank you."

"And as far as I am concerned, you are the bravest, strongest, kindest man in all of Alagaësia."

This time he kissed her on the mouth. Afterward, she laughed, a short, quick release of pent-up tension, and they stood swaying together, as if dancing to a melody only they could hear.

Then Katrina gave him a playful push and went to finish the washing, and he settled back on the stump, content for the first time since the battle, despite his numerous aches and pains.

Roran watched the men, horses, and the occasional dwarf or Urgal slog past their tent, noting their wounds and the condition of their weapons and armor. He tried to gauge the general mood of the Varden; the only conclusion he reached was that everyone but the Urgals needed a good sleep and a decent meal, and that everyone, including the Urgals—especially the Urgals—needed to be scoured from head to foot with a hog's-hair brush and buckets of soapy water.

He also watched Katrina, and he saw how, as she worked, her initial good cheer gradually faded and she became ever more irritable. She kept scrubbing and scrubbing at several stains, but with little success. A scowl darkened her face, and she began to make small noises of frustration.

At last, when she had slapped the wad of fabric against the washboard, splashing foamy water several feet into the air, and leaned on the tub, her lips pressed tightly together, Roran pushed himself off the stump and made his way to her side.

"Here, let me," he said.

"It wouldn't be fitting," she muttered.

"Nonsense. Go sit down, and I'll finish.… Go on."

She shook her head. "No. You should be the one resting, not me. Besides, this isn't man's work."

He snorted with derision. "By whose decree? A man's work, or a woman's, is whatever needs to be done. Now go sit down; you'll feel better once you're off your feet."

"Roran, I'm fine."

"Don't be silly." He gently tried to push her away from the tub, but she refused to budge.

"It's not right," she protested. "What would people think?" She gestured at the men hurrying along the muddy lane next to their tent.

"They can think whatever they want. I married you, not them. If they believe I'm any less of a man for helping you, then they're fools."

"But—"

"But nothing. Move. Shoo. Get out of here."

"But—"

"I'm not going to argue. If you don't go sit, I'm going to carry you over there and tie you to that stump."

A bemused expression replaced her scowl. "Is that so?"

"Yes. Now go!" As she reluctantly ceded her position at the tub, he made a noise of exasperation. "Stubborn, aren't you?"

"Speak for yourself. You could teach a mule a thing or two."

"Not me. I'm not stubborn." Undoing his belt, he removed his mail shirt and hung it on the front pole of the tent, then peeled off his gloves and rolled up the sleeves of his tunic. The air was cool against his skin, and the bandages were colder still—they had grown chill while lying exposed on the washboard—but he did not mind, for the water was warm, and soon the cloth was as well. Frothy mounds of iridescent bubbles built up around his wrists as he pushed and pulled the material across the full length of the knobby board.

He glanced over and was pleased to see that Katrina was relaxing on the stump, at least as much as anyone could relax on such a rough seat.

"Do you want some chamomile tea?" she asked. "Gertrude gave me a handful of fresh sprigs this morning. I can make a pot for both of us."

"I'd like that."

A companionable silence developed between them as Roran

proceeded to wash the rest of the laundry. The task lulled him into a pleasant mood; he enjoyed doing something with his hands other than swinging his hammer, and being close to Katrina gave him a deep sense of satisfaction.

He was in the middle of wringing out the last item, and his freshly poured tea was waiting for him next to Katrina, when someone shouted their names from across the busy way. It took Roran a moment to realize it was Baldor running toward them through the mud, weaving between men and horses. He wore a pitted leather apron and heavy, elbow-length gloves that were smeared with soot and were so worn that the fingers were as hard, smooth, and shiny as polished tortoise shells. A scrap of torn leather held back his dark, shaggy hair, and a frown creased his forehead. Baldor was smaller than his father, Horst, and his older brother, Albriech, but by any other comparison, he was large and well muscled, the result of having spent his childhood helping Horst in his forge. None of the three had fought that day—skilled smiths were normally too valuable to risk in battle—although Roran wished Nasuada had let them, for they were able warriors and Roran knew he could count on them even in the most dire circumstances.

Roran put down the washing and dried his hands, wondering what could be amiss. Rising from the stump, Katrina joined him by the tub.

When Baldor reached them, they had to wait several seconds for him to regain his breath. Then, in a rush, he said, "Come quickly. Mother just went into labor, and—"

"Where is she?" asked Katrina in a sharp tone.

"At our tent."

She nodded. "We'll be there as fast as we can."

With a grateful expression, Baldor turned and sprinted away.

As Katrina ducked inside their tent, Roran poured the contents of the tub over the fire, extinguishing it. The burning wood hissed and cracked under the deluge, and a cloud of steam jetted upward in place of smoke, filling the air with an unpleasant smell.

Dread and excitement quickened Roran's movements. *I hope she doesn't die*, he thought, remembering the talk he had heard among the women concerning her age and overlong pregnancy. Elain had always been kind to him and to Eragon, and he was fond of her.

"Are you ready?" asked Katrina as she emerged from the tent, knotting a blue scarf around her head and neck.

He grabbed his belt and hammer from where they hung. "Ready. Let's go."

✦ ✦ ✦

The Price of Power

"There now, Ma'am. You won't be needing these anymore. And good riddance, I say."

With a soft rustle, the last strip of linen slid off Nasuada's forearms as her handmaid, Farica, removed the wrappings. Nasuada had worn bandages such as those since the day she and the warlord Fadawar had tested their courage against one another in the Trial of the Long Knives.

Nasuada stood staring at a long, ragged tapestry dotted with holes while Farica attended to her. Then she steeled herself and slowly lowered her gaze. Since winning the Trial of the Long Knives, she had refused to look at her wounds; they had appeared so horrendous when fresh, she could not bear to see them again until they were nearly healed.

The scars were asymmetrical: six lay across the belly of her left forearm, three on her right. Each of the scars was three to four inches long and straight as could be, save the bottom one on the right, where her self-control had faltered and the knife had swerved, carving a jagged line nearly twice the length of the others. The skin around the scars was pink and puckered, while the scars themselves were only a little bit lighter than the rest of her body, for which she was grateful. She had feared that they might end up white and silvery, which would have made them far more noticeable. The scars rose above the surface of her arm about a quarter of an inch, forming hard ridges of flesh that looked exactly as if smooth steel rods had been inserted underneath her skin.

Nasuada regarded the marks with ambivalence. Her father had taught her about the customs of their people as she was growing up, but she had spent her whole life among the Varden and the dwarves. The only rituals of the wandering tribes that she observed, and then only irregularly, were associated with their religion. She had never aspired to master the Drum Dance, nor participate in the arduous Calling of Names, nor—and this most particularly—best anyone in the Trial of the Long Knives. And yet now here she was, still young and still beautiful, and already bearing these nine large scars upon her forearms. She could order one of the magicians of the Varden to remove them, of course, but then she would forfeit her victory in the Trial of the Long Knives, and the wandering tribes would renounce her as their liegelord.

While she regretted that her arms were no longer smooth and round and would no longer attract the admiring glances of men, she was also proud of the scars. They were a testament to her courage and a visible sign of her devotion to the Varden. Anyone who looked at her would know the quality of her character, and she decided that meant more to her than appearance.

"What do you think?" she asked, and held out her arms toward King Orrin, who stood framed in the open window of the study, looking down at the city.

Orrin turned and frowned, his eyes dark beneath his furrowed brow. He had traded his armor of earlier for a thick red tunic and a robe trimmed with white ermine. "I find it unpleasant to look at," he said, and returned his attention to the city. "Cover yourself; it is inappropriate for polite society."

Nasuada studied her arms for a moment longer. "No, I don't think I will." She tugged on the lace cuffs of her half sleeves to straighten them, then dismissed Farica. She crossed the sumptuous dwarf-woven rug in the center of the room to join Orrin in inspecting the battle-torn city, where she was pleased to see that all but two of the fires along the western wall had been extinguished. Then she shifted her gaze to the king.

In the short while since the Varden and the Surdans had launched their attack against the Empire, Nasuada had watched Orrin grow ever more serious, his original enthusiasm and eccentricities vanishing beneath a grim exterior. At first she had welcomed the change, for she had felt he was becoming more mature, but as the war dragged on, she began to miss his eager discussions of natural philosophy, as well as his other quirks. In retrospect, she realized these had often brightened her day, even if she had sometimes found them aggravating. Moreover, the change had made him more dangerous as a rival; in his current mood, she could quite easily imagine him attempting to displace her as leader of the Varden.

Could I be happy if I married him? she wondered. Orrin was not unpleasant to look at. His nose was high and thin, but his jaw was strong and his mouth was finely carved and expressive. Years of martial training had given him a pleasing build. That he was intelligent was without doubt, and for the most part his personality was agreeable. However, if he had not been the king of Surda, and if he had not posed such a great threat to her position and to the Varden's independence, she knew that she would never have considered a match with him. *Would he make a good father?*

Orrin put his hands on the narrow stone sill and leaned against it. Without looking at her, he said, "You have to break your pact with the Urgals."

His statement took her aback. “And why is that?”

“Because they are hurting us. Men who would otherwise join us now curse us for allying ourselves with monsters and refuse to lay down their weapons when we arrive at their homes. Galbatorix’s resistance seems just and reasonable to them because of our concord with the Urgals. The common man does not understand why we joined with them. He does not know that Galbatorix used the Urgals himself, nor that Galbatorix tricked them into attacking Tronjheim under the command of a Shade. These are subtleties that you cannot explain to a frightened farmer. All he can comprehend is that the creatures he has feared and hated his whole life are marching toward his home, led by a huge, snarling dragon and a Rider who appears more elf than human.”

“We need the Urgals’ support,” said Nasuada. “We have too few warriors as it is.”

“We do not need them as badly as all that. You already know what I say is the truth; why else did you prevent the Urgals from participating in the attack on Belatona? Why else have you ordered them not to enter the city? Keeping them away from the battlefield isn’t enough, Nasuada. Word of them still spreads throughout the land. The only thing you can do to improve the situation is to end this ill-fated scheme before it causes us more harm.”

“I cannot.”

Orrin spun toward her, anger distorting his face. “Men are *dying* because you chose to accept Garzhvog’s help. My men, your men, those in the Empire … dead and *buried*. This alliance isn’t worth their sacrifice, and for the life of me, I cannot fathom why you continue to defend it.”

She could not hold his gaze; it reminded her too strongly of the guilt and recrimination that so often afflicted her when she was trying to fall asleep. Instead, she fixed her eyes on the smoke rising from a tower by the edge of the city. Speaking slowly, she said, “I defend it because I hope that preserving our union with the Urgals will save more lives than it will cost.… If we should defeat Galbatorix—”

Orrin uttered an exclamation of disbelief.

“It is by no means certain,” she said, “I know. But we must plan for the possibility. If we should defeat him, then it will fall to us to help our race recover from this conflict and build a strong new country out of the ashes of the Empire. And part of that process will be ensuring that, after a hundred years of strife, we finally have peace. I will not overthrow Galbatorix only to have the Urgals attack us when we are at our weakest.”

“They might anyway. They always have before.”

“Well, what else can we do?” she said, annoyed. “We have to try to

tame them. The closer we bind them to our cause, the less likely they will be to turn on us."

"I'll tell you what to do," he growled. "Banish them. Break your pact with Nar Garzhvog and send him and his rams away. If we win this war, then we can negotiate a new treaty with them, and we will be in a position to dictate whatever terms we want. Or better yet, send Eragon and Saphira into the Spine with a battalion of men to wipe them out once and for all, as the Riders should have done centuries ago."

Nasuada looked at him with disbelief. "If I ended our pact with the Urgals, they would likely be so angry, they would attack us forthwith, and we cannot fight both them and the Empire at the same time. To invite that upon ourselves would be the height of folly. If, in their wisdom, the elves, the dragons, and the Riders all decided to tolerate the existence of the Urgals—even though they could have destroyed them easily enough—then we ought to follow their example. They knew it would be wrong to kill all the Urgals, and so should you."

"Their wisdom—Bah! As if their *wisdom* has done them any good! Fine, leave some of the Urgals alive, but kill enough of them that they won't dare leave their haunts for a hundred years or more!"

The obvious pain in his voice and in the strained lines of his face puzzled Nasuada. She examined him with greater intensity, trying to determine the reason for his vehemence. After a few moments, an explanation presented itself that, upon reflection, seemed self-evident.

"Whom did you lose?" she asked.

Orrin balled up a fist and slowly, haltingly, brought it down upon the windowsill, as if he wanted to pound it with all his strength but did not dare. He thumped the sill twice more, then said, "A friend I grew up with in Borromeo Castle. I don't think you ever met him. He was one of the lieutenants in my cavalry."

"How did he die?"

"As you might expect. We had just arrived at the stables by the west gate and were securing them for our own use when one of the grooms ran out of a stall and stabbed him right through with a pitchfork. When we cornered the groom, he kept screaming stuff and nonsense about the Urgals and how he would never surrender.… It wouldn't have done the fool any good even if he had. I struck him down with my own hand."

"I'm sorry," said Nasuada.

The gems in Orrin's crown glittered as he nodded in acknowledgment.

"As painful as it is, you cannot allow your grief to dictate your decisions.… It isn't easy, I know—well I know it!—but you must be stronger than yourself, for the good of your people."

“Be stronger than myself,” he said in a sour, mocking voice.

“Yes. More is asked of us than of most people; therefore we must strive to be better than most if we are to prove ourselves worthy of that responsibility.… The Urgals killed my father, remember, but that did not prevent me from forging an alliance that could help the Varden. I won’t let anything stop me from doing what is best for them and for our army as a whole, no matter how painful it might be.” She lifted her arms, showing him the scars again.

“That is your answer, then? You will not break off with the Urgals?”

“No.”

Orrin accepted the news with an equanimity that unsettled her. Then he gripped the sill with both hands and returned to his study of the city. Adorning his fingers were four large rings, one of which bore the royal seal of Surda carved into the face of an amethyst: an antlered stag with sprigs of mistletoe wound between his feet standing over a harp and opposite an image of a tall, fortified tower.

“At least,” said Nasuada, “we didn’t encounter any soldiers who were enchanted not to feel pain.”

“The laughing dead, you mean,” Orrin muttered, using the term that she knew had become widespread throughout the Varden. “Aye, and not Murtagh nor Thorn either, which troubles me.”

For a time, neither of them spoke. Then she said, “How went your experiment last night? Was it a success?”

“I was too tired to assay it. I went to sleep instead.”

“Ah.”

After a few more moments, they both, by tacit agreement, went to the desk pushed against one wall. Mountains of sheets, tablets, and scrolls covered the desk. Nasuada surveyed the daunting landscape and sighed. Only half an hour earlier, the desk had been empty, swept clean by her aides.

She concentrated upon the all-too-familiar topmost report, an estimate of the number of prisoners the Varden had taken during the siege of Belatona, with the names of persons of importance noted in red ink. She and Orrin had been discussing the figures when Farica had arrived to remove her bandages.

“I can’t think of a way out of this tangle,” she admitted.

“We could recruit guards from among the men here. Then we wouldn’t have to leave quite so many of our own warriors behind.”

She picked up the report. “Maybe, but the men we need would be difficult to find, and our spellcasters are already dangerously overworked.…”

“Has Du Vrangr Gata discovered a way to break an oath given in the ancient language?” When she answered in the negative, he asked, “Have they made any headway at all?”

“None that is practical. I even asked the elves, but they have had no more luck in all their long years than we have these past few days.”

“If we don’t solve this, and soon, it could cost us the war,” said Orrin. “This one issue, right here.”

She rubbed her temples. “I know.” Before leaving the protection of the dwarves in Farthen Dûr and Tronjheim, she had tried to anticipate every challenge the Varden might face once they embarked on the offensive. The one they now confronted, however, had caught her completely by surprise.

The problem had first manifested itself in the aftermath of the Battle of the Burning Plains, when it had become apparent that all of the officers in Galbatorix’s army, and most of the ordinary soldiers as well, had been forced to swear their loyalty to Galbatorix and the Empire in the ancient language. She and Orrin had quickly realized they could never trust those men, not so long as Galbatorix and the Empire still existed, and perhaps not even if they were destroyed. As a result, they could not allow the men who wanted to defect to join the Varden, for fear of how their oaths might compel them to behave.

Nasuada had not been overly concerned by the situation at the time. Prisoners were a reality of war, and she had already made provisions with King Orrin to have their captives marched back to Surda, where they would be put to work building roads, breaking rocks, digging canals, and doing other hard labor.

It was not until the Varden seized the city of Feinster that she grasped the full size of the problem. Galbatorix’s agents had extracted oaths of loyalty not only from the soldiers in Feinster but also from the nobles, from many of the officials who served them, and from a seemingly random collection of ordinary people throughout the city—a fair number of whom she suspected the Varden had failed to identify. Those they knew of, however, had to be kept under lock and key, lest they try to subvert the Varden. Finding people they could trust, then, and who wanted to work with the Varden had proved far more difficult than Nasuada had ever expected.

Because of all the people who needed to be contained, she had had no choice but to leave twice the number of warriors in Feinster that she had intended. And, with so many imprisoned, the city was effectively crippled, forcing her to divert much-needed supplies from the main body of the Varden to keep the city from starving. They could not maintain the situation for long, and it would only worsen now that they were also in possession of Belatona.

“A pity the dwarves haven’t arrived yet,” said Orrin. “We could use their help.”

Nasuada agreed. There were only a few hundred dwarves with the Varden at the moment; the rest had returned to Farthen Dûr for the

burial of their fallen king, Hrothgar, and to wait for their clan chiefs to choose Hrothgar's successor, a fact that she had cursed countless times since. She had tried to convince the dwarves to appoint a regent for the duration of the war, but they were as stubborn as stone and had insisted upon carrying out their age-old ceremonies, though doing so meant abandoning the Varden in the middle of their campaign. In any event, the dwarves had finally selected their new king—Hrothgar's nephew, Orik—and had set out from the distant Beor Mountains to rejoin the Varden. Even at that moment, they were marching across the vast plains just north of Surda, somewhere between Lake Tüdosten and the Jiet River.

Nasuada wondered if they would be fit to fight when they arrived. As a rule, dwarves were hardier than humans, but they had spent most of the past two months on foot, and that could wear down the endurance of even the strongest creatures. *They must be tired of seeing the same landscape over and over again*, she thought.

"We have so many prisoners already. And once we take Dras-Leona …" She shook her head.

Appearing suddenly animated, Orrin said, "What if we bypass Dras-Leona entirely?" He shuffled through the slew of papers on the desk until he located a large, dwarf-drawn map of Alagaësia, which he draped over the scarps of administerial records. The tottering mounds underneath gave the land an unusual topography: peaks in the west of Du Weldenvarden; a bowl-like depression where the Beor Mountains lay; canyons and ravines throughout the Hadarac Desert; and rolling waves along the northernmost part of the Spine, born of the rows of scrolls below. "Look." With his middle finger, he traced a line from Belatona to the capital of the Empire, Urû'baen. "If we march straight there, we won't come anywhere near Dras-Leona. It would be difficult to traverse the whole stretch all at once, but we *could* do it."

Nasuada did not need to ponder his suggestion; she had already considered the possibility. "The risk would be too great. Galbatorix could still attack us with the soldiers he has stationed in Dras-Leona—which is no small number, if our spies are to be trusted—and then we'd end up fending off attacks from two directions at once. I know of no quicker way to lose a battle, or a war. No, we must capture Dras-Leona."

Orrin conceded the point with a slight dip of his head. "We need our men back from Aroughs, then. We need every warrior if we are to continue."

"I know. I intend to make sure that the siege is brought to an end before the week is out."

"Not by sending Eragon there, I hope."

"No, I have a different plan."

“Good. And in the meantime? What shall we do with these prisoners?”

“What we have done before: guards, fences, and padlocks. Maybe we can also bind the prisoners with spells to restrict their movement, so that we don’t have to keep watch over them so closely. Other than that, I see no solution, except to slaughter the whole lot of them, and I would rather—” She tried to imagine what she would not do in order to defeat Galbatorix. “I would rather not resort to such … *drastic* measures.”

“Aye.” Orrin stooped over the map, hunching his shoulders like a vulture as he glared at the squiggles of faded ink that marked the triangle of Belatona, Dras-Leona, and Urû’baen.

And so he remained until Nasuada said, “Is there anything else we must attend to? Jörmundur is waiting for his orders, and the Council of Elders has requested an audience with me.”

“I worry.”

“What about?”

Orrin swept a hand over the map. “That this venture was ill conceived from the start.… That our forces, and those of our allies, are dangerously scattered, and that if Galbatorix should take it in his head to join in the fight himself, he could destroy us as easily as Saphira could a herd of goats. Our entire strategy depends upon contriving a meeting between Galbatorix, Eragon, Saphira, and as many spellcasters as we can muster. Only a small portion of those spellcasters are currently among our ranks, and we won’t be able to gather the rest into a single place until we arrive at Urû’baen and meet with Queen Islanzadí and her army. Until that happens, we remain woefully vulnerable to attack. We are risking much on the assumption that Galbatorix’s arrogance will hold him in check until our trap has sprung shut around him.”

Nasuada shared his concerns. However, it was more important to shore up Orrin’s confidence than to commiserate with him, for if his resolve weakened, it would interfere with his duties and undermine the morale of his men. “We are not entirely defenseless,” she said. “Not anymore. We have the Dauthdaert now, and with it, I think we might actually be able to kill Galbatorix and Shruikan, should they emerge from within the confines of Urû’baen.”

“Perhaps.”

“Besides, it does no good to worry. We cannot hasten the dwarves here, nor speed our own progress toward Urû’baen, nor turn tail and flee. So I would not let our situation trouble you excessively. All we can do is strive to accept our fate with grace, whatever it might be. The alternative is to allow the thought of Galbatorix’s possible actions to unsettle our minds, and *that* I won’t do. I refuse to give him such

power over me.”

✦ ✦ ✦

RUDELY INTO THE LIGHT ...

A scream rang out: high, jagged, and piercing, almost inhuman in pitch and volume.

Eragon tensed as if someone had stabbed him with a needle. He had spent the better part of the day watching men fight and die—killing scores himself—yet he could not help but feel concern as he heard Elain's cries of anguish. The sounds she made were so terrible, he had begun to wonder if she would survive the birth.

Next to him, beside the barrel that served as his seat, Albriech and Baldor squatted on their hams, picking at the tattered blades of grass between their shoes. Their thick fingers shredded each scrap of leaf and stalk with methodical thoroughness before groping for the next. Sweat glistened on their foreheads, and their eyes were hard with anger and despair. Occasionally, they exchanged glances or looked across the lane at the tent where their mother was, but otherwise they stared at the ground and ignored their surroundings.

A few feet away, Roran sat on his own barrel, which lay on its side and wobbled whenever he moved. Clustered along the edge of the muddy lane were several dozen people from Carvahall, mostly men who were friends of Horst and his sons or whose wives were helping the healer Gertrude attend to Elain. And towering behind them was Saphira. Her neck was arched like a drawn bow, the tip of her tail twitched as if she were hunting, and she kept flicking her ruby-red tongue in and out of her mouth, tasting the air for any scents that might provide information about Elain or her unborn child.

Eragon rubbed a sore muscle in his left forearm. They had been waiting for several hours, and dusk was drawing near. Long black shadows stretched out from every object, reaching eastward as if striving to touch the horizon. The air had turned cool, and mosquitoes and lace-winged damselflies from the nearby Jiet River darted to and fro around them.

Another scream rent the silence.

The men stirred with unease, then made gestures to ward off bad luck and murmured to one another in voices intended only for those closest to them but which Eragon could hear with perfect clarity. They whispered about the difficulty of Elain's pregnancy; some solemnly stated that if she did not give birth soon, it would be too late for both her and the child. Others said things like "Hard for a man to lose a wife even in the best of times, but 'specially here, 'specially now," or

“It’s a shame, it is.…” Several blamed Elain’s troubles on the Ra’zac or on events that had occurred during the villagers’ journey to the Varden. And more than one muttered a distrustful remark about Arya being allowed to assist with the birth. “She’s an elf, not a human,” said the carpenter Fisk. “She ought to stick with her own kind, she should, and not go around meddling where she’s not wanted. Who knows what it is she really wants, eh?”

All that and more Eragon heard, but he hid his reactions and kept his peace, for he knew it would only make the villagers uncomfortable if they were aware of how sharp his hearing had become.

The barrel underneath Roran creaked as he leaned forward. “Do you think we should—”

“No,” said Albriech.

Eragon tugged his cloak closer around him. The chill was beginning to sink into his bones. He would not leave, though, not until Elain’s ordeal was over.

“Look,” said Roran with sudden excitement.

Albriech and Baldor swiveled their heads in unison.

Across the lane, Katrina exited the tent, carrying a bundle of soiled rags. Before the entrance flap fell shut again, Eragon caught a glimpse of Horst and one of the women from Carvahall—he was not sure who—standing at the foot of the cot where Elain was lying.

Without so much as a single sideways glance at those watching, Katrina half ran and half walked toward the fire where Fisk’s wife, Isold, and Nolla were boiling rags for reuse.

The barrel creaked twice more as Roran shifted his position. Eragon half expected him to start after Katrina, but he remained where he was, as did Albriech and Baldor. They, and the rest of the villagers, followed Katrina’s movements with unblinking attentiveness.

Eragon grimaced as Elain’s latest scream pierced the air, the cry no less excruciating than those previous.

Then the entrance to the tent was swept aside for a second time, and Arya stormed out, bare-armed and disheveled. Her hair fluttered about her face as she trotted over to three of Eragon’s elven guards, who were standing in a pool of shadow behind a nearby pavilion. For a few moments, she spoke urgently with one of them, a thin-faced elf woman named Invidia, then hurried back the way she had come.

Eragon caught up with her before she had covered more than a few yards. “How goes it?” he asked.

“Badly.”

“Why is it taking so long? Can’t you help her give birth any faster?”

Arya’s expression, which was already strained, became even more severe. “I could. I could have sung the child out of her womb in the first half hour, but Gertrude and the other women will only let me use

the simplest of spells."

"That's absurd! Why?"

"Because magic frightens them—and I frighten them."

"Then tell them you mean no harm. Tell them in the ancient language, and they'll have no choice but to believe you."

She shook her head. "It would only make matters worse. They would think I was trying to charm them against their will, and they would send me away."

"Surely Katrina—"

"She is the reason I was able to cast the spells I did."

Again Elain screamed.

"Won't they at least let you ease her pain?"

"No more than I already have."

Eragon spun toward Horst's tent. "Is that so," he growled between clenched teeth.

A hand closed around his left arm and held him in place. Puzzled, he looked back at Arya for an explanation. She shook her head. "Don't," she said. "These are customs older than time itself. If you interfere, you will anger and embarrass Gertrude and turn many of the females from your village against you."

"I don't care about that!"

"I know, but trust me: right now the wisest thing you can do is to wait with the others." As if to emphasize her point, she released his arm.

"I can't just stand by and let her suffer!"

"*Listen* to me. It's better if you stay. I will help Elain however I can, that I promise, but do not go in there. You will only cause strife and anger where none are needed.… Please."

Eragon hesitated, then snarled with disgust and threw up his hands as Elain screamed yet again. "Fine," he said, and leaned close to Arya, "but whatever happens, don't let her or the child die. I don't care what you have to do, but don't let them die."

Arya studied him with a serious gaze. "I would never allow a child to come to harm," she said, and resumed walking.

As she disappeared inside Horst's tent, Eragon returned to where Roran, Albriech, and Baldor were gathered and sank back down onto his barrel.

"Well?" Roran asked.

Eragon shrugged. "They're doing all they can. We just have to be patient.… That's all."

"Seemed as if she had a fair bit more than that to say," said Baldor.

"The meaning was the same."

The color of the sun shifted, becoming orange and crimson as it approached the terminating line of the earth. The few tattered clouds

that remained in the western sky, remnants of the storm that had blown past earlier, acquired similar hues. Flocks of swallows swooped overhead, making their supper out of the moths and flies and other insects flitting about.

Over time, Elain's cries gradually decreased in strength, fading from her earlier, full-throated screams to low, broken moans that made Eragon's hackles prickle. More than anything, he wanted to free her from her torments, but he could not bring himself to ignore Arya's advice, so he stayed where he was and fidgeted and bit his bruised nails and engaged in short, stilted conversations with Saphira.

When the sun touched the earth, it spread out along the horizon, like a giant yolk oozing free of its skin. Bats began to mingle among the swallows, the flapping of their leathery wings faint and frantic, their high-pitched squeaks almost painfully sharp to Eragon.

Then Elain uttered a shriek that drowned out every other sound in the vicinity, a shriek the likes of which Eragon hoped he would never hear again.

A brief but profound silence followed.

It ended as the loud, hiccupping wail of a newborn child emanated from within the tent—the age-old fanfare that announced the arrival of a new person into the world. At the sound, Albriech and Baldor broke out grinning, as did Eragon and Roran, and several of the waiting men cheered.

Their jubilation was short-lived. Even as the last of the cheers died out, the women in the tent began to keen, a shrill, heartrending sound that made Eragon go cold with dread. He knew what their lamentations meant, what they had always meant: that tragedy of the worst kind had struck.

"No," he said, disbelieving, as he hopped off the barrel. *She can't be dead. She can't be.… Arya promised.*

As if in response to his thought, Arya tore back the flap to the tent and ran toward him, bounding across the lane with impossibly long strides.

"What's happened?" Baldor asked as she slowed to a halt.

Arya ignored him and said, "Eragon, come."

"What's happened?" Baldor exclaimed angrily, and reached for Arya's shoulder. In a flash of seemingly instantaneous movement, she caught his wrist and twisted his arm behind his back, forcing him to stand hunched over, like a cripple. His face contorted with pain.

"If you want your baby sister to live, then stand aside and do not interfere!" She released him with a push, sending him sprawling into Albriech's arms, then whirled about and strode back toward Horst's tent.

"What *has* happened?" Eragon asked as he joined her.

Arya turned to face him, eyes burning. “The child is healthy, but she was born with a cat lip.”

Then Eragon understood the reason for the women’s outpouring of grief. Children cursed with a cat lip were rarely allowed to live; they were difficult to feed, and even if the parents could feed them, such children would suffer a miserable lot: shunned, ridiculed, and unable to make a suitable match for marriage. In most cases, it would have been better for all if the child had been stillborn.

“You have to heal her, Eragon,” said Arya.

“Me? But I’ve never … Why not you? You know more about healing than I do.”

“If I rework the child’s appearance, people will say I have stolen her and replaced her with a changeling. Well I know the stories your kind tells about my race, Eragon—too well. I will do it if I must, but the child will suffer for it ever after. You are the only one who can save her from such a fate.”

Panic clutched at him. He did not want to be responsible for the life of another person; he was already responsible for far too many.

“You have to heal her,” Arya said, her tone forceful. Eragon reminded himself how dearly elves treasured their children, as well as children of all races.

“Will you assist me if I need it?”

“Of course.”

As will I, said Saphira. *Must you even ask?*

“Right,” said Eragon, and gripped Brisingr’s pommel, his mind made up. “I’ll do it.”

With Arya trailing slightly behind, he marched over to the tent and pushed his way past the heavy woolen flaps. Candle smoke stung his eyes. Five women from Carvahall stood bunched together close to the wall. Their keening struck him like a physical blow. They swayed, trance-like, and tore at their clothes and hair as they wailed. Horst was by the end of the cot, arguing with Gertrude, his face red, puffy, and lined with exhaustion. For her part, the plump healer held a bundle of cloth against her bosom, a bundle that Eragon assumed contained the infant—although he could not see its face—for it wriggled and squalled, adding to the din. Gertrude’s round cheeks shone with perspiration, and her hair clung to her skin. Her bare forearms were streaked with various fluids. At the head of the cot, Katrina knelt on a round cushion, wiping Elain’s brow with a damp cloth.

Eragon hardly recognized Elain; her face was gaunt, and she had dark rings under her wandering eyes, which seemed incapable of focusing. A line of tears streamed from the outer corner of each eye, over her temples, and then vanished underneath the tangled locks of

her hair. Her mouth opened and closed, and she moaned unintelligible words. A bloodstained sheet covered the rest of her.

Neither Horst nor Gertrude noticed Eragon until he approached them. Eragon had grown since he had left Carvahall, but Horst still stood a head taller. As they both looked at him, a flicker of hope brightened the smith's bleak expression.

"Eragon!" He clapped a heavy hand on Eragon's shoulder and leaned against him, as if events had left him barely able to stand. "You heard?" It was not really a question, but Eragon nodded anyway. Horst glanced at Gertrude—a quick, darting glance—then his large, shovel-like beard moved from side to side as his jaw worked, and his tongue appeared between his lips as he wet them. "Can you … can you do anything for her, do you think?"

"Maybe," said Eragon. "I'll try."

He held out his arms. After a moment's hesitation, Gertrude deposited the warm bundle in his hold, then backed away, her demeanor troubled.

Buried within the folds of fabric was the girl's tiny, wrinkled face. Her skin was dark red, her eyes were swollen shut, and she appeared to be grimacing, as if she was angry at her recent mistreatment—a response that Eragon thought was perfectly reasonable. Her most striking feature, however, was the wide gap that extended from her left nostril to the middle of her upper lip. Through it, her small pink tongue was visible; it lay like a soft, moist slug, occasionally twitching.

"Please," said Horst. "Is there any way you can …"

Eragon winced as the women's keening struck a particularly shrill note. "I can't work here," he said.

As he turned to leave, Gertrude spoke up behind him, saying, "I'll come with you. One of us who knows how to care for a child needs to stay with her."

Eragon did not want Gertrude hovering about him while he tried to mend the girl's face, and he was about to tell her just that when he remembered what Arya had said about changelings. Someone from Carvahall, someone the rest of the villagers trusted, ought to bear witness to the girl's transformation, so that they could later assure people that the child was still the same person as she had been before.

"As you wish," he said, stifling his objections.

The baby squirmed in his arms and uttered a plaintive cry as he exited the tent. Across the lane, the villagers stood and pointed, and Albriech and Baldor started toward him. Eragon shook his head, and they stopped where they were and gazed after him with helpless expressions.

Arya and Gertrude took up positions on either side of Eragon as he

walked through the camp to his tent, and the ground trembled under their feet as Saphira followed. Warriors in the path quickly moved aside to let them pass.

Eragon strove to keep his steps as smooth as possible, in order to avoid jostling the child. A strong, musty aroma clung to the girl, like the smell of a forest floor on a warm summer day.

They had almost reached their destination when Eragon saw the witch-child, Elva, standing between two rows of tents next to the path, solemn-faced as she stared at him with her large violet eyes. She wore a black and purple dress with a long veil of lace that was folded back over her head, exposing the silvery, star-shaped mark, similar to his gedwëy ignasia, on her forehead.

Not a word did she say, nor did she attempt to slow or stop him. Nevertheless, Eragon understood her warning, for her very presence was a rebuke to him. Once before he had tampered with the fate of an infant, and with dire consequences. He could not allow himself to make such a mistake again, not only because of the harm it would cause, but because if he did, Elva would become his sworn enemy. Despite all his power, Eragon feared Elva. Her ability to peer into people's souls and divine everything that pained and troubled them—and to foresee everything that was about to hurt them—made her one of the most dangerous beings in all of Alagaësia.

Whatever happens, Eragon thought as he entered his dark tent, *I don't want to hurt this child.* And he felt a renewed determination to give her a chance to live the life that circumstances would have denied her.

A Cradle Song

Faint light from the dying sun seeped into Eragon's tent. Everything within was gray, as if it were carved from granite. With his elf vision, Eragon could see the shape of objects easily enough, but he knew that Gertrude would have trouble, so for her sake he said, "Naina hvitr un böllr," and set a small, glowing werelight floating in the air by the peak of the tent. The soft white orb produced no discernible heat but as much illumination as a bright lantern. He refrained from using the word *brisingr* in the spell, so as to avoid setting the blade of his sword on fire.

He heard Gertrude pause behind him, and he turned to see her staring at the werelight and clutching at the bag she had brought with her. Her familiar face reminded him of home and Carvahall, and he felt an unexpected lurch of homesickness.

She slowly lowered her gaze to his. "How you have changed," she said. "The boy I once sat watch over as he fought off a fever is long gone, I think."

"You know me still," he replied.

"No, I don't believe I do."

Her statement troubled him, but he could not afford to dwell on it, so he pushed it out of his mind and went to his cot. Gently, ever so gently, he transferred the newborn from his arms onto the blankets, as carefully as if she were made of glass. The girl waved a clenched fist at him. He smiled and touched it with the tip of his right forefinger, and she burbled softly.

"What do you intend to do?" asked Gertrude as she sat on the lone stool near the tent wall. "How will you heal her?"

"I'm not sure."

Just then, Eragon noticed that Arya had not accompanied them into the tent. He called her name, and a moment later, she answered from outside, her voice muffled by the thick fabric that separated them. "I am here," she said. "And here I shall wait. If you have need of me, you have but to cast your thoughts in my direction and I shall come."

Eragon frowned slightly. He had counted on having her close at hand during the procedure, to help him where he was ignorant and to correct him if he made any mistake. *Well, no matter. I can still ask her questions if I want to. Only this way, Gertrude will have no reason to suspect that Arya had anything to do with the girl*. He was struck by the precautions that Arya was taking in order to avoid arousing suspicion

that the girl was a changeling, and he wondered if she had once been accused of stealing someone's child.

The frame of the cot creaked as he slowly lowered himself onto it, facing the infant. His frown deepened. Through him, he felt Saphira watching the girl as she lay on the blankets, now dozing, seemingly oblivious to the world. Her tongue glistened within the cleft that split her upper lip.

What do you think? he asked.

Go slowly, so that you do not bite your tail by accident.

He agreed with her, then, feeling impish, asked, *And have you ever done that? Bitten your tail, I mean?*

She remained silently aloof, but he caught a brief flash of sensations: a medley of images—trees, grass, sunshine, the mountains of the Spine—as well as the cloying scent of red orchids and a sudden painful, pinching sensation, as if a door had slammed shut on her tail.

Eragon chuckled quietly to himself, then concentrated on composing the spells he thought he would need to heal the girl. It took quite a while, almost a half hour. He and Saphira spent most of that time going over the arcane sentences again and again, examining and debating every word and phrase—and even his pronunciation—in an attempt to ensure that the spells would do what he intended and nothing more.

In the midst of their silent conversation, Gertrude shifted in her seat and said, "She looks the same as ever. The work goes badly, doesn't it? There is no need to hide the truth from me, Eragon; I have dealt with far worse in my day."

Eragon raised his eyebrows and, in a mild voice, said, "The work has not yet begun."

And Gertrude sank back, subdued. From within her bag, she removed a ball of yellow yarn, a half-finished sweater, and a pair of polished birch knitting needles. Her fingers moved with practiced speed, quick and deft, as she began to knit and purl. The steady clacking of her needles comforted Eragon; it was a sound he had heard often during his childhood, one that he associated with sitting around a kitchen fireplace on cool autumn evenings, listening to the adults tell stories while they smoked a pipe or savored a draught of dark brown ale after a large dinner.

At last, when he and Saphira were satisfied that the spells were safe, and Eragon was confident that his tongue would not trip over any of the strange sounds of the ancient language, Eragon drew upon the combined strength of both their bodies and prepared to cast the first of the enchantments.

Then he hesitated.

When the elves used magic to coax a tree or a flower to grow in the

shape they desired, or to alter their body or that of another creature, they always, so far as he knew, couched the spell in the form of a song. It seemed only fitting that he should do the same. But he was acquainted with only a few of the elves' many songs and none of them well enough to accurately—or even adequately—reproduce such beautiful and complex melodies.

So, instead, he chose a song from the deepest recesses of his memory, a song that his aunt Marian had sung to him when he was little, before the sickness had taken her, a song that the women of Carvahall had crooned to their children from time immemorial when they tucked them under the covers for a long night's sleep: a lullaby—a cradle song. The notes were simple, easy to remember, and had a soothing quality that he hoped would help keep the infant calm.

He began, soft and low, letting the words roll forth slowly, the sound of his voice spreading through the tent like warmth from a fire. Before he used magic, he told the girl in the ancient language that he was her friend, that he meant her well, and that she should trust him.

She stirred in her sleep, as if in response, and her clenched expression softened.

Then Eragon intoned the first of the spells: a simple incantation that consisted of two short sentences, which he recited over and over again, like a prayer. And the small pink hollow where the two sides of the girl's divided lip met shimmered and crawled, as if a dormant creature were stirring beneath the surface.

What he was attempting was far from easy. The infant's bones, like those of every newborn child, were soft and cartilaginous, different from those of an adult and thus different from all of the bones he had mended during his time with the Varden. He had to be careful not to fill the gap in her mouth with the bone, flesh, and skin of an adult, or those areas would not grow properly along with the rest of her body. Also, when he repaired the gap in her upper palate and gums, he would have to move, straighten, and make symmetrical the roots of what would become her two front teeth, something he had never done before. And further complicating the process was the fact that he had never seen the girl without her deformity, so he was uncertain how her lip and mouth ought to appear. She looked like every other baby he had seen: round, pudgy, and lacking definition. He worried, then, that he might give her a face that appeared pleasant enough at the moment, but that would become strange and unattractive as the years passed.

So he proceeded cautiously, making only small changes at a time and pausing after each one to ponder the result. He started with the deepest layers of the girl's face, with the bones and cartilage, and slowly worked his way outward, singing all the while.

At a certain point, Saphira began to hum along with him from where she lay outside, her deep voice making the air vibrate. The werelight brightened and dimmed in accordance with the volume of her humming, a phenomenon that Eragon found exceedingly curious. He resolved to ask Saphira about it later.

Word by word, spell by spell, hour by hour, the night wore on, though Eragon paid no attention to the time. When the girl cried from hunger, he fed her with a trickle of energy. He and Saphira tried to avoid touching her mind with theirs—not knowing how the contact might affect her immature consciousness—but they still brushed against it occasionally; her mind felt vague and indistinct to Eragon, a thrashing sea of unmoderated emotions that reduced everything else in the world to insignificance.

Beside him, Gertrude's needles continued to clack, the only interruption in the rhythm coming when the healer lost count of her stitches or had to tink back several knits or purls in order to correct a mistake.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the fissure in the girl's gums and palate fused into a seamless whole, the two sides of her cat lip pulled together—her skin flowing like liquid—and her upper lip gradually formed a pink bow free of flaws.

Eragon fiddled and tweaked and worried over the shape of her lip for the longest while, until at last Saphira said, *It is done. Leave it*, and he was forced to admit that he could not improve the girl's appearance any more, only make it worse.

Then he let the cradle song fade to silence. His tongue felt thick and dry, his throat raw. He pushed himself off the cot and stood half crouched over it, too stiff to straighten up entirely.

In addition to the illumination from the werelight, a pale glow pervaded the tent, the same as when he had started. At first he was confused—surely the sun had already set!—but then he realized that the glow was coming from the east, not the west, and he understood. *No wonder I'm so sore. I've been sitting here the whole night through!*

And what about me? said Saphira. *My bones ache as much as yours*. Her admission surprised him; she rarely acknowledged her own discomfort, no matter how extreme. The fighting must have taken a greater toll on her than had first been apparent. As he reached that conclusion, and Saphira became aware of it, she withdrew from him slightly and said, *Tired or not, I can still crush however many soldiers Galbatorix sends against us*.

I know.

Returning the knitting to her bag, Gertrude stood and hobbled over to the cot. "Never did I think to see such a thing," she said. "Least of all from you, Eragon Bromsson." She peered at him inquiringly. "Brom

was your father, wasn't he?"

Eragon nodded, then croaked, "That he was."

"It seems fitting, somehow."

Eragon was not inclined to discuss the topic further, so he merely grunted and extinguished the werelight with a glance and a thought. Instantly, all went dark, save for the predawn glow. His eyes adjusted to the change faster than Gertrude's; she blinked and frowned and swung her head from side to side, as if unsure of where he stood.

The girl was warm and heavy in Eragon's arms as he picked her up. He was uncertain whether his weariness was due to the magic he had wrought or to the sheer length of time the task had taken him.

He gazed down at the girl and, feeling suddenly protective, murmured, "Sé ono waíse ilia." May you be happy. It was not a spell, not properly, but he hoped that maybe it could help her avoid some of the misery that afflicted so many people. Failing that, he hoped it would make her smile.

It did. A wide smile spread across her diminutive face, and with great enthusiasm, she said, "Gahh!"

Eragon smiled as well, then turned and strode outside.

As the entrance flaps fell away, he saw a small crowd gathered in a semicircle around the tent, some standing, some sitting, others squatting. Most he recognized from Carvahall, but Arya and the other elves were also there—somewhat apart from the rest—as well as several warriors of the Varden whose names he did not know. He spotted Elva lurking behind a nearby tent, her black lace veil lowered, hiding her face.

The group, Eragon realized, must have been waiting for hours, and he had not sensed anything of their presence. He had been safe enough with Saphira and the elves keeping watch, but that was no excuse for allowing himself to become so complacent.

I have to do better, he told himself.

At the forefront of the crowd stood Horst and his sons, looking worried. Horst's brow knotted as he gazed at the bundle in Eragon's arms, and he opened his mouth as if to say something, but no sound came forth.

Without pomp or ceremony, Eragon walked over to the smith and turned the girl so that he could see her face. For a moment, Horst did not move; then his eyes began to glisten and his expression changed to one of joy and relief so profound, it could have been mistaken for grief.

As he gave the girl to Horst, Eragon said, "My hands are too bloody for this kind of work, but I'm glad I was able to help."

Horst touched the girl's upper lip with the tip of his middle finger, then shook his head. "I can't believe it.… I can't believe it." He looked

at Eragon. “Elain and I are forevermore in your debt. If—”

“There is no debt,” Eragon said gently. “I only did what anyone would if they had the ability.”

“But you were the one who healed her, and it’s to you I’m grateful.”

Eragon hesitated, then bowed his head, accepting Horst’s gratitude. “What will you name her?”

The smith beamed at his daughter. “If it’s agreeable to Elain, I thought we might call her Hope.”

“Hope … A good name, that.” *And don’t we need some hope in our lives?* “And how is Elain?”

“Tired, but well.”

Then Albriech and Baldor clustered around their father, peering at their new sister, as did Gertrude—who had emerged from the tent soon after Eragon—and once their shyness faded, the rest of the villagers joined them. Even the group of curious warriors pressed close to Horst, craning their necks in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the girl.

After a while, the elves unfolded their long limbs and approached as well. Seeing them, people quickly stepped out of the way, clearing a path to Horst. The smith stiffened and pushed his jaw out like a bulldog’s as, one by one, the elves bent and examined the girl, sometimes whispering a word or two in the ancient language to her. They did not seem to notice or mind the suspicious stares that the villagers cast at them.

When only three elves were left in line, Elva darted out from behind the tent where she had been concealing herself and joined the end of the procession. She did not have to wait long before it was her turn to stand before Horst. Although he appeared reluctant, the smith lowered his arms and bent his knees, but he was so much taller than Elva, she had to rise up on the tips of her toes in order to see the infant. Eragon held his breath as she gazed at the formerly deformed child, unable to guess her reaction through her veil.

After a few seconds, Elva dropped back onto her heels. With a deliberate pace, she started down the path that ran past Eragon’s tent. Twenty yards away, she stopped and turned toward him.

He tilted his head and lifted an eyebrow.

She nodded, a short, abrupt movement, then continued on her way.

As Eragon watched her go, Arya sidled up to him. “You should be proud of what you have accomplished,” she murmured. “The child is sound and well formed. Not even our most skilled enchanters could improve on your gramarye. It is a great thing, what you have given this girl—a face and a future—and she will not forget it, I am sure.… None of us will.”

Eragon saw that she and all the elves were regarding him with a

look of newfound respect—but it was Arya's admiration and approval that meant the most to him. "I had the best of teachers," he replied in an equally low voice. Arya did not dispute his assertion. Together they watched the villagers mill around Horst and his daughter, talking excitedly. Without taking his eyes off them, Eragon leaned toward Arya and said, "Thank you for helping Elain."

"You're welcome. I would have been remiss not to."

Horst turned then and carried the child into the tent so that Elain might see her newborn daughter, but the knot of people showed no signs of dispersing. When Eragon was fed up with shaking hands and answering questions, he said farewell to Arya, then slipped off to his tent and tied the flaps closed behind him.

Unless we're under attack, I don't want to see anyone for the next ten hours, not even Nasuada, he said to Saphira as he threw himself onto his cot. *Will you tell Blödhgarm, please?*

Of course, she said. *Rest, little one, as will I.*

Eragon sighed and draped an arm over his face to block the morning light. His breathing slowed, his mind began to wander, and soon the strange sights and sounds of his waking dreams enveloped him—real, yet imaginary; vivid, yet transparent, as if the visions were made of colored glass—and, for a time, he was able to forget his responsibilities and the harrowing events of the past day. And all through his dreams, there wound the cradle song, like a whisper of wind, half heard, half forgotten, and it lulled him, with memories of his home, into a childlike peace.

No Rest for the Weary

Two dwarves, two men, and two Urgals—members of Nasuada's personal guard, the Nighthawks—were stationed outside the room in the castle where Nasuada had set up her headquarters.

They stared at Roran with flat, empty eyes. He kept his face equally as blank as he stared back.

It was a game they had played before.

Despite the Nighthawks' lack of expression, he knew they were busy figuring out the fastest and most efficient ways to kill him. He knew, because he was doing the same with regard to them, as he always did.

I'd have to backtrack as fast as I could … spread them out a bit, he decided. *The men would get to me first; they're faster than the dwarves, and they'd slow the Urgals behind them.… Have to get those halberds away from them. It'd be tricky, but I think I could—one of them, at least. Might have to throw my hammer. Once I had a halberd, I could keep the rest at a distance. The dwarves wouldn't stand much of a chance, then, but the Urgals would be trouble. Ugly brutes, those.… If I used that pillar as cover, I could—*

The ironbound door that stood between the two lines of guards creaked as it swung open. A brightly dressed page of ten or twelve stepped out and announced, louder than was necessary, "Lady Nasuada will see you now!"

Several of the guards twitched, distracted, and their stares wavered for a second. Roran smiled as he swept past them and into the room beyond, knowing that their lapse, slight as it was, would have allowed him to kill at least two before they could have retaliated. *Until next time*, he thought.

The room was large, rectangular, and sparsely decorated: a too-small rug lay on the floor; a narrow, moth-eaten tapestry hung from the wall to his left; and a single lancet window pierced the wall to his right. Other than that, the room was devoid of ornamentation. Shoved into one corner was a long wooden table piled high with books, scrolls, and loose sheets of paper. A few massive chairs—upholstered with leather fastened with rows of tarnished brass tacks—stood scattered about the table, but neither Nasuada nor the dozen people who bustled around her deigned to use them. Jörmundur was not there, but Roran was familiar with several of the other warriors present: some he had fought under, others he had seen in action during battle or heard tell of from the men in his company.

"—and I don't care if it does give him a 'pain in his goiter'!" she exclaimed, and brought her right hand down flat on the table with a loud *slap*. "If we don't have those horseshoes, and more besides, we might as well eat our horses for all the good they'll do us. Do I make myself understood?"

As one, the men she addressed answered in the affirmative. They sounded somewhat intimidated, even abashed. Roran found it both strange and impressive that Nasuada, a woman, was able to command such respect from her warriors, a respect that he shared. She was one of the most determined and intelligent people he had ever known, and he was convinced that she would have succeeded no matter where she had been born.

"Now go," said Nasuada, and as eight men filed past her, she motioned Roran to the table. He waited patiently as she dipped a quill in an inkpot and scribbled several lines onto a small scroll, then handed it to one of the pages and said, "For the dwarf Narheim. And this time, make sure you get his reply before you return, or I'll send you over to the Urgals to fetch and clean for them."

"Yes, my Lady!" said the boy, and sprinted off, half frightened out of his wits.

Nasuada began to leaf through a stack of papers in front of her. Without looking up, she said, "Are you well rested, Roran?"

He wondered why she was interested. "Not particularly."

"That's unfortunate. Were you up all night?"

"Part of it. Elain, the wife of our smith, gave birth yesterday, but—"

"Yes, I was informed. I take it that you didn't stand vigil until Eragon healed the child?"

"No, I was too tired."

"At least you had that much sense." Reaching across the table, she picked up another sheet of paper and scrutinized it before adding it to her pile. In the same matter-of-fact tone she had been using, she said, "I have a mission for you, Stronghammer. Our forces at Aroughs have encountered stiff resistance—more than we anticipated. Captain Brigman has failed to resolve the situation, and we need those men back now. Therefore, I am sending you to Aroughs to replace Brigman. A horse is waiting for you by the south gate. You will ride fast as you can to Feinster, then from Feinster to Aroughs. Fresh horses will be waiting for you every ten miles between here and Feinster. Past there, you will have to find replacements on your own. I expect you to reach Aroughs within four days. Once you have caught up on your rest, that will leave you approximately … three days to end the siege." She glanced up at him. "A week from today, I want our banner flying over Aroughs. I don't care how you do it, Stronghammer; I just want it done. If you can't, then I'll have no

choice but to send Eragon and Saphira to Aroughs, which will leave us barely able to defend ourselves should Murtagh or Galbatorix attack."

And then Katrina would be in danger, thought Roran. An unpleasant feeling settled in his gut. Riding to Aroughs in only four days would be a miserable ordeal, especially given how sore and bruised he was. Having to also capture the city in so little time would be compounding misery with madness. All in all, the mission was about as appealing as wrestling a bear with his hands tied behind his back.

He scratched his cheek through his beard. "I don't have any experience with sieges," he said. "Leastways, not like this. There must be someone else in the Varden who would be better suited to the task. What about Martland Redbeard?"

Nasuada made a dismissive motion. "He can't ride at full gallop with only one hand. You should have more confidence in yourself, Stronghammer. There are others among the Varden who know more about the arts of war, it's true—men who have been in the field longer, men who received instruction from the finest warriors of their father's generation—but when swords are drawn and battle is joined, it's not knowledge or experience that matters most, it's whether you can *win*, and that's a trick you seem to have mastered. What's more, you're lucky."

She put down the topmost papers and leaned on her arms. "You've proven that you can fight. You've proven that you can follow orders … when it pleases you, that is." He resisted the urge to hunch his shoulders as he remembered the bitter, white-hot bite of the whip cutting into his back after he had been disciplined for defying Captain Edric's orders. "You've proven that you can lead a raiding party. So, Roran Stronghammer, let us see if you are capable of something more, shall we?"

He swallowed. "Yes, my Lady."

"Good. I am promoting you to captain for the time being. If you succeed in Aroughs, you may consider the title permanent, at least until you demonstrate that you are deserving of either greater or lesser honors." Returning her gaze to the table, she began to sort through a morass of scrolls, evidently searching for something hidden underneath.

"Thank you."

Nasuada responded with a faint, noncommittal sound.

"How many men will I have under my command at Aroughs?" he asked.

"I gave Brigman a thousand warriors to capture the city. Of those, no more than eight hundred remain who are still fit for duty."

Roran nearly swore out loud. *So few*.

As if she had heard him, Nasuada said in a dry voice, "We were led

to believe that Aroughs's defenses would be easier to overwhelm than has been the case."

"I see. May I take two or three men from Carvahall with me? You said once that you would let us serve together if we—"

"Yes, yes"—she waved a hand—"I know what I said." She pursed her lips, considering. "Very well, take whomever you want, just so long as you leave within the hour. Let me know how many are going with you, and I'll see to it that the appropriate number of horses are waiting along the way."

"May I take Carn?" he asked, naming the magician he had fought alongside on several occasions.

She paused and stared at the wall for a moment, her eyes unfocused. Then, to his relief, she nodded and resumed digging in the jumble of scrolls. "Ah, here we are." She pulled out a tube of parchment tied with a leather thong. "A map of Aroughs and its environs, as well as a larger map of Fenmark Province. I suggest you study them both most carefully."

She handed him the tube, which he slipped inside his tunic. "And here," she said, giving him a rectangle of folded parchment sealed with a blob of red wax, "is your commission, and"—a second rectangle, thicker than the first—"here are your orders. Show them to Brigman, but don't let him keep them. If I remember correctly, you've never learned to read, have you?"

He shrugged. "What for? I can count and figure as well as any man. My father said that teaching us to read made no more sense than teaching a dog to walk on his hind legs: amusing, but hardly worth the effort."

"And I might agree, had you stayed a farmer. But you didn't, and you're not." She motioned toward the pieces of parchment he held. "For all you know, one of those might be a writ ordering your execution. You are of limited use to me like this, Stronghammer. I cannot send you messages without others having to read them to you, and if you need to report to me, you will have no choice but to trust one of your underlings to record your words accurately. It makes you easy to manipulate. It makes you untrustworthy. If you hope to advance any further in the Varden, I suggest you find someone to teach you. Now begone; there are other matters that demand my attention."

She snapped her fingers, and one of the pages ran over to her. Placing a hand on the boy's shoulder, she bent down to his level and said, "I want you to fetch Jörmundur directly here. You'll find him somewhere along the market street, where those three houses—" In the midst of her instructions, she stopped and raised an eyebrow as she noticed that Roran had not budged. "Is there something else,

Stronghammer?" she asked.

"Yes. Before I leave, I'd like to see Eragon."

"And why is that?"

"Most of the wards he gave me before the battle are gone now."

Nasuada frowned, then said to the page, "On the market street, where those three houses were burned. Do you know the place I mean? Right, off you go, then." She patted the boy on the back and stood upright as he ran out of the room. "It would be better if you didn't."

Her statement confused Roran, but he kept quiet, expecting that she would explain herself. She did, but in a roundabout way: "Did you notice how tired Eragon was during my audience with the werecats?"

"He could barely stay on his feet."

"Exactly. He's spread too thin, Roran. He can't protect you, me, Saphira, Arya, and who knows who else and still do what he has to. He needs to husband his strength for when he will have to fight Murtagh and Galbatorix. And the closer we get to Urû'baen, the more important it is that he be ready to face them at any given moment, night or day. We can't allow all of these other worries and distractions to weaken him. It was noble of him to heal the child's cat lip, but his doing so could have cost us the war!

"You fought without the advantage of wards when the Ra'zac attacked your village in the Spine. If you care about your cousin, if you care about defeating Galbatorix, you must learn to fight without them again."

When she finished, Roran bowed his head. She was right. "I'll depart at once."

"I appreciate that."

"By your leave …"

Turning, Roran strode toward the door. Just as he crossed the threshold, Nasuada called out, "Oh, and Stronghammer?"

He looked back, curious.

"Try not to burn down Aroughs, would you? Cities are rather hard to replace."

DANCING WITH SWORDS

Eragon drummed his heels against the side of the boulder he was sitting on, bored and impatient to be gone.

He, Saphira, and Arya—as well as Blödhgarm and the other elves—were lounging on the bank next to the road that ran eastward from the city of Belatona: eastward through fields of ripe, verdant crops; over a wide stone bridge that arched across the Jiet River; and then around the southernmost point of Leona Lake. There the road branched, one fork turning to the right, toward the Burning Plains and Surda, the other turning north, toward Dras-Leona and eventually Urû'baen.

Thousands of men, dwarves, and Urgals milled about before Belatona's eastern gate, as well as within the city itself, arguing and shouting as the Varden tried to organize itself into a cohesive unit. In addition to the ragtag blocks of warriors on foot, there was King Orrin's cavalry—a mass of prancing, snorting horses. And strung out behind the fighting part of the army was the supply train: a mile-and-a-half-long line of carts, wagons, and wheeled pens, flanked by the vast herds of horned cattle the Varden had brought from Surda and supplemented by what animals they had been able to appropriate from farmers along their path. From the herds and the supply train came the lowing of oxen, the braying of mules and donkeys, the honking of geese, and the whinnies and neighs of draft horses.

It was enough to make Eragon want to plug his ears.

You would think we would be better at this, considering how many times we've done it before, he commented to Saphira as he hopped down off the boulder.

She sniffed. *They ought to put me in charge; I could scare them into position in less than an hour, and then we wouldn't have to waste so much time waiting.*

The thought amused him. *Yes, I'm sure you could.… Be careful what you say, though, or Nasuada might just make you do it.*

Then Eragon's mind turned to Roran, whom he had not seen since the night he had healed Horst and Elain's child, and he wondered how his cousin was doing and worried about leaving him so far behind.

"Blasted fool thing to do," Eragon muttered, remembering how Roran had left without letting him renew his wards.

He's an experienced hunter, Saphira pointed out. *He will not be so foolish as to allow his prey to claw him.*

I know, but sometimes it can't be helped.… He had best be careful, that's all. I don't want him to come back a cripple or, worse, wrapped in a shroud.

A grim mood descended upon Eragon, then he shook himself and bounced up and down on his feet, restless and eager to do something physical before spending the next few hours sitting on Saphira. He welcomed the opportunity to fly with her, but he disliked the prospect of being tethered to the same twelve or so miles for the whole day, circling vulture-like over the slow-moving troops. On their own, he and Saphira could have reached Dras-Leona by late that very afternoon.

He trotted away from the road to a relatively flat stretch of grass. There, ignoring the looks from Arya and the rest of the elves, he drew Brisingr and assumed the on-guard position Brom had first taught him so long ago. He inhaled slowly and settled into a low stance, feeling the texture of the ground through the soles of his boots.

With a short, hard exclamation, he swept the sword up around his head and brought it down in a slanting blow that would have halved any man, elf, or Urgal, regardless of their armor. He stopped the sword less than an inch above the ground and held it there, the blade trembling ever so slightly in his grip. Against the backdrop of the grass, the blue of the metal appeared vivid, almost unreal.

Eragon inhaled again and lunged forward, stabbing the air as if it were a deadly enemy. One by one, he practiced the basic moves of sword fighting, focusing not so much on speed or strength but on precision.

When he was pleasantly warm from his skill work, he glanced round at his guards, who stood in a semicircle some distance away. "Will one of you cross swords with me for a few minutes?" he asked, raising his voice.

The elves looked at one another, their expressions unreadable; then the elf Wyrden stepped forward. "I will, Shadeslayer, if it pleases you. However, I would ask that you wear your helm while we spar."

"Agreed."

Eragon returned Brisingr to its sheath, then ran to Saphira and clambered up her side, cutting the pad of his left thumb on one of her scales as he did so. He was wearing his mail tunic, and his greaves and bracers too, but he had stowed his helm in one of the saddlebags, so that it would not roll off Saphira and become lost in the grass.

As he retrieved the helm, he saw the casket that contained Glaedr's heart of hearts wrapped in a blanket and nestled at the bottom of the saddlebag. He reached down and touched the knotted bundle, silently paying tribute to what remained of the majestic golden dragon, then closed the saddlebag and swung down from Saphira's back.

Eragon donned his arming cap and helm as he strode back to the greensward. He licked the blood off his thumb, then pulled on his gauntlets, hoping that the cut would not bleed too much into the glove. Using slight variations of the same spell, he and Wyrden placed thin barriers—invisible, save for the faint, rippling distortion they caused in the air—over the edges of their swords, so they could not cut anything. They also lowered the wards that protected them from physical danger.

Then he and Wyrden took up positions opposite each other, bowed, and raised their blades. Eragon stared into the elf's black, unblinking eyes, even as Wyrden stared at him. Keeping his gaze fixed on his opponent, Eragon felt his way forward and tried to inch around Wyrden's right side, where the right-handed elf would have more difficulty defending himself.

The elf slowly turned, crushing the grass beneath his heels as he kept his front oriented toward Eragon. After a few more steps, Eragon stopped. Wyrden was too alert and too experienced for Eragon to flank him; he would never catch the elf off balance. *Unless, of course, I can distract him.*

But before he could decide how to proceed, Wyrden feinted toward Eragon's right leg, as if to skewer him in the knee, then in midstroke, changed directions, twisting his wrist and arm to slash Eragon across his chest and neck.

Fast as the elf was, Eragon was faster still. As he spotted the shift in Wyrden's posture that betrayed his intentions, Eragon retreated a half step while bending his elbow and whipping his sword up past his face.

"Ha!" shouted Eragon as he caught Wyrden's sword on Brisingr. The blades produced a piercing *clang* as they collided.

With an effort, Eragon shoved Wyrden back, then leaped after him, battering him with a series of furious blows.

For several minutes, they fought upon the sward. Eragon landed the first touch—a light rap on Wyrden's hip—and the second as well, but thereafter, their duel was more equally matched, as the elf got the measure of him and began to anticipate his patterns of attack and defense. Eragon rarely had the opportunity to test himself against anyone as fast or strong as Wyrden, so he enjoyed the contest with the elf.

His pleasure, however, vanished when Wyrden landed four touches in quick succession: one on Eragon's right shoulder, two on his ribs, and a wicked draw cut across his abdomen. The blows smarted, but Eragon's pride smarted even more. It worried him that the elf had been able to slip past his guard so easily. If they had been fighting in earnest, Eragon knew that he would have been able to defeat Wyrden in their first few exchanges, but that thought was of little comfort.

You shouldn't let him hit you so much, observed Saphira.

Yes, I realize that, he growled.

Do you want me to knock him over for you?

No … not today.

His mood soured, Eragon lowered his blade and thanked Wyrden for sparring. The elf bowed and said, "You're welcome, Shadeslayer," then returned to his place among his comrades.

Eragon planted Brisingr in the ground between his boots—something he never would have done with a sword made of ordinary steel—and rested his hands on the pommel while he watched the men and animals jostling within the confines of the road that led from the vast stone city. The turbulence within the ranks had diminished substantially, and he guessed that it would not be long before the horns signaled the Varden to advance.

In the meantime, he was still restless.

He looked over at Arya, where she stood next to Saphira, and a smile gradually spread across his face. Resting Brisingr on his shoulder, he sauntered over and motioned toward her sword. "Arya, what about you? We've only sparred together that one time in Farthen Dûr." His grin widened, and he flourished Brisingr. "I've gotten a bit better since then."

"So you have."

"What say you, then?"

She cast a critical glance toward the Varden, then shrugged. "Why not?"

As they walked to the level patch of grass, he said, "You won't be able to best me quite so easily as before."

"I am sure you are right."

Arya prepared her sword, then they faced each other, some thirty feet apart. Feeling confident, Eragon advanced swiftly, already knowing where he was going to strike: at her left shoulder.

Arya held her ground and made no attempt to evade him. When he was less than four yards away, she smiled at him, a warm, brilliant smile that so enhanced her beauty, Eragon faltered, his thoughts dissolving into a muddle.

A line of steel flashed toward him.

He belatedly lifted Brisingr to deflect the blow. A jolt ran up his arm as the tip of the sword glanced off something solid—hilt, blade, or flesh he was not sure, but whatever it was, he knew that he had misjudged the distance and that his response had left him open to attack.

Before he could do much more than slow his forward momentum, another impact dashed his sword arm to the side; then a knot of pain formed in his midsection as Arya stabbed him, knocking him to the

ground.

Eragon grunted as he landed on his back and the air rushed out of him. He gaped at the sky and tried to inhale, but his abdomen was cramped as hard as a stone, and he could not draw air into his lungs. A constellation of crimson spots appeared before his eyes, and for a few uncomfortable seconds, he feared he would lose consciousness. Then his muscles released, and with a loud gasp, he resumed breathing.

Once his head cleared, he slowly got back to his feet, using Brisingr for support. He leaned on the sword, standing hunched like an old man while he waited for the ache in his stomach to subside.

"You cheated," he said between gritted teeth.

"No, I exploited a weakness in my opponent. There is a difference."

"You think … that is a *weakness*?"

"When we fight, yes. Do you wish to continue?"

He answered by yanking Brisingr out of the sod, marching back to where he had started, and raising his sword.

"Good," said Arya. She mirrored his pose.

This time Eragon was much more wary as he closed with her, and Arya did not stay in the same place. With careful steps, she advanced, her clear green eyes never leaving him.

She twitched, and Eragon flinched.

He realized he was holding his breath and forced himself to relax.

Another step forward, then he swung with all his speed and might.

She blocked his cut to her ribs and replied with a jab toward his exposed armpit. The blunted edge of her sword slid across the back of his free hand, scraping against the mail sewn onto his gauntlet as he slapped the blade away. At that moment, Arya's torso was exposed, but they were too close for Eragon to effectively slash or stab.

Instead, he lunged forward and struck at her breastbone with the pommel of his sword, thinking to knock her to the ground, as she had done to him.

She twisted out of the way, and the pommel went through the space where she had been as Eragon stumbled forward.

Without knowing quite how it had happened, he found himself standing motionless with one of Arya's arms wrapped around his neck and the cool, slippery surface of her spell-bound blade pressed against the side of his jaw.

From behind him, Arya whispered into his right ear, "I could have removed your head as easily as plucking an apple from a tree."

Then she released her hold and shoved him away. Angry, he whirled around and saw that she was already waiting for him, her sword at the ready and her expression determined.

Giving in to his anger, Eragon sprang after her.

Four blows they exchanged, each more terrible than the last. Arya struck first, chopping at his legs. He parried and slashed crosswise at her waist, but she skipped out of reach of Brisingr's glittering, sunlit edge. Without giving her an opportunity to retaliate, he followed up with a looping underhand cut, which she blocked with deceptive ease. Then she stepped forward and, with a touch as light as a hummingbird's wing, drew her sword across his belly.

Arya held her position at the conclusion of the stroke, her face mere inches from his. Her forehead glistened and her cheeks were flushed.

With exaggerated care, they disengaged.

Eragon straightened his tunic, then squatted next to Arya. His battle rage had burned itself out and left him focused, if not entirely at ease.

"I don't understand," he said quietly.

"You have become too accustomed to fighting Galbatorix's soldiers. They cannot hope to match you, so you take chances that would otherwise prove your undoing. Your attacks are too obvious—you should not rely on brute strength—and you have grown lax in your defense."

"Will you help me?" he asked. "Will you spar with me when you can?"

She nodded. "Of course. But if I cannot, then go to Blödhgarm for instruction; he is as skilled with a blade as I am. Practice is the only remedy you need, practice with the proper partners."

Eragon had just opened his mouth to thank her when he felt the presence of a consciousness other than Saphira's pressing against his mind, vast and frightening and filled with the most profound melancholy: a sadness so great, Eragon's throat tightened and the colors of the world seemed to lose their luster. And, in a slow, deep voice, as if speaking was a struggle of almost unbearable proportions, the golden dragon Glaedr said:

You must learn … to see what you are looking at.

Then the presence vanished, leaving behind a black void.

Eragon looked at Arya. She appeared as stricken as he was; she had heard Glaedr's words as well. Beyond her, Blödhgarm and the other elves stirred and murmured, while by the edge of the road, Saphira craned her neck as she tried to look at the saddlebags tied to her back.

They had all heard, Eragon realized.

Together he and Arya rose from the ground and sprinted over to Saphira, who said, *He will not answer me; wherever he was, he has returned, and he will not listen to anything but his sorrow. Here, see….*

Eragon joined his mind with hers, and with Arya's, and the three of them reached out with their thoughts toward Glaedr's heart of hearts, where it lay hidden within the saddlebags. What remained of the dragon felt more robust than before, but his mind was still closed to

outside communication, his consciousness listless and indifferent, as it had been ever since Galbatorix slew his Rider, Oromis.

Eragon, Saphira, and Arya tried to rouse the dragon from his stupor. However, Glaedr steadfastly ignored them, taking no more notice of them than a sleeping cave bear might of a few flies buzzing around his head.

And yet Eragon could not help but think that Glaedr's indifference was not as complete as it seemed, given his comment.

At last the three of them admitted defeat and withdrew to their respective bodies. As Eragon returned to himself, Arya said, "Perhaps if we could touch his Eldunarí …?"

Eragon sheathed Brisingr, then hopped onto Saphira's right foreleg and pulled himself into the saddle perched on the crest of her shoulders. He twisted round in his seat and began to work on the buckles of the saddlebags.

He had unfastened one of the buckles and was picking at the other when the brazen call of a horn rang forth from the head of the Varden, sounding the advance. At the signal, the vast train of men and animals lurched forward, their movements hesitant at first, but becoming smoother and more confident with every step.

Eragon glanced down at Arya, torn. She solved his dilemma by waving and saying, "Tonight, we will speak tonight. Go! Fly with the wind!"

He quickly rebuckled the saddlebag, then slid his legs through the rows of straps on either side of the saddle and pulled them tight, so he would not fall off Saphira in midair.

Then Saphira crouched and, with a roar of joy, leaped out over the road. The men below her ducked and cringed, and horses bolted as she unfurled her huge wings and flapped, driving herself away from the hard, unfriendly ground, up into the smooth expanse of the sky.

Eragon closed his eyes and tilted his face up, glad to finally be leaving Belatona. After spending a week in the city with nothing to do but eat and rest—for so Nasuada had insisted—he was eager to resume their journey toward Urû'baen.

When Saphira leveled off, hundreds of feet above the peaks and towers of the city, he said, *Will Glaedr recover, do you think?*

He will never be as he was.

No, but I hope that he will find a way to overcome his grief. I need his help, Saphira. There are so many things I still don't know. Without him, I have no one else to ask.

She was silent for a while, the only sound that of her wings. *We cannot hurry him*, she said. *He has been hurt in the worst way a dragon or Rider can be. Before he can help you, me, or anyone else, he must decide that he wants to continue living. Until he does, our words cannot reach*

him.

No Honor, No Glory, Only Blisters in Unfortunate Places

The belling of the hounds grew louder behind them, the pack of dogs howling for blood.

Roran tightened his grip on the reins and bent lower over the neck of his galloping charger. The pounding of the horse's hooves rolled through him like thunder.

He and his five men—Carn, Mandel, Baldor, Delwin, and Hamund—had stolen fresh horses from the stable of a manor house less than a half mile away. The grooms had not taken kindly to the theft. A show of swords had been sufficient to overcome their objections, but the grooms must have alerted the manor guards as soon as Roran and his companions had departed, for ten of the guards had set out after them, led by a pack of hunting dogs.

"There!" he shouted, and pointed toward a narrow strip of birch trees that extended from between two nearby hills, no doubt following the path of a stream.

At his word, the men pulled their horses off the well-traveled road and headed in the direction of the trees. The rough ground forced them to slow their headlong pace, but only slightly, despite the risk that the horses would step in a hole and break a leg or throw a rider. Dangerous as it was, allowing the hounds to catch them would be more dangerous still.

Roran dug his spurs into the sides of the horse and shouted "Yah!" as loudly as he could through his dust-clogged throat. The gelding leaped forward and, stride by stride, began to gain on Carn.

Roran knew that his horse would soon reach a point where it could no longer produce such bursts of speed, no matter how hard he jabbed it with his spurs or whipped it with the ends of his reins. He hated to be cruel, and he had no desire to ride the animal to death, but he would not spare the horse if it meant the failure of their mission.

As he drew level with Carn, Roran shouted, "Can't you hide our trail with a spell?"

"Don't know how!" Carn replied, barely audible over the rush of wind and the sound of the galloping horses. "It's too complicated!"

Roran swore and glanced over his shoulder. The hounds were rounding the last bend in the road. They seemed to fly over the

ground, their long, lean bodies lengthening and contracting at a violent rate. Even at that distance, Roran could make out the red of their tongues, and he fancied he saw a gleam of white fangs.

When they reached the trees, Roran turned and began to ride back into the hills, staying as close as he could to the line of birches without hitting low-hanging branches or fallen logs. The others did likewise, shouting at their horses to keep them from slowing as they raced up the incline.

To his right, Roran glimpsed Mandel hunched over his speckled mare, a feral snarl on his face. The younger man had impressed Roran with his stamina and fortitude over the past three days. Ever since Katrina's father, Sloan, had betrayed the villagers of Carvahall and killed Mandel's father, Byrd, Mandel had seemed desperate to prove himself the equal of any man in the village; he had acquitted himself with honor in the last two battles between the Varden and the Empire.

A thick branch hurtled toward Roran's head. He ducked, hearing and feeling the tips of dry twigs snapping against the top of his helm. A torn leaf tumbled down his face and covered his right eye for a moment; then the wind snatched it away.

The gelding's breathing became increasingly labored as they followed the rift deeper into the hills. Roran peeked under his arm and saw that the pack of hounds was less than a quarter mile away. Another few minutes, and they would surely overtake the horses.

Blast it, he thought. He raked his gaze back and forth across the densely packed trees to his left and the grassy hill to his right, searching for something—anything—that could help them lose their pursuers.

He was so fuzzy-headed from exhaustion, he almost missed it.

Twenty yards ahead of him, a crooked deer trail ran down the side of the hill, crossed his path, then disappeared into the trees.

"Whoa! … Whoa!" Roran shouted, leaning back in his stirrups and hauling on the reins. The gelding slowed to a trot, though it snorted with protest and tossed its head, trying to get the bit between its teeth. "Oh no you don't," Roran growled, and tugged on the reins even harder.

"Hurry!" he called to the rest of the group as he turned his horse and entered the thicket. The air was cool under the trees, almost chilly, which was a welcome relief, hot as he was from his exertion. He only had a moment to savor the sensation before the gelding pitched forward and began to stumble down the side of the bank toward the stream below. Dead leaves crackled under its iron-shod hooves. In order not to fall over the horse's neck and head, Roran had to lie almost flat against its back, his legs stuck out straight in front of him, knees locked.

When they reached the bottom of the gorge, the gelding clattered across the stony creek, splashing wings of water as high as Roran's knees. Roran paused at the far side to see whether the others were still with him. They were, riding nose to tail, down through the trees.

Above them, where they had entered the thicket, he could hear the yapping of the dogs.

We're going to have to turn and fight, he realized.

He swore again and spurred the gelding away from the stream, climbing the soft, moss-covered bank as he continued along the faintly marked trail.

Not far from the stream was a wall of ferns, and beyond that, a hollow. Roran spotted a fallen tree that he thought might serve as a makeshift barrier if it could be dragged into place.

I just hope they don't have bows, he thought.

He waved at his men. "Here!"

With a slap of the reins, he drove the gelding through the bracken and into the hollow, then slid out of the saddle, though he kept a tight hold on it. As his feet struck the ground, his legs gave out beneath him, and he would have fallen if not for the support. He grimaced and pressed his forehead against the shoulder of the horse, panting as he waited for the tremors in his legs to subside.

The rest of the group crowded around him, filling the air with the stink of sweat and the jingle of harnesses. The horses shuddered, their chests heaving, and yellow foam dripped from the corners of their mouths.

"Help me," he said to Baldor, and motioned at the fallen tree. They fit their hands under the thick end of the log and heaved it off the ground. Roran gritted his teeth as his back and thighs screamed with pain. Riding at full gallop for three days—combined with less than three hours of sleep for every twelve spent in the saddle—had left him frighteningly weak.

I might as well be going into battle drunk, sick, and beaten half out of my senses, Roran realized as he let go of the log and straightened upright. The thought unnerved him.

The six men positioned themselves in front of the horses, facing the trampled wall of ferns, and drew their weapons. Outside the hollow, the hunting cries of the hounds sounded louder than ever, their overeager yelps echoing off the trees in a raucous din.

Roran tensed and lifted his hammer higher. Then, interspersed with the barking of the dogs, he heard the strange, lilting melody of the ancient language emanating from Carn, and the power contained within the phrases caused the back of Roran's neck to prickle with alarm. The spellcaster uttered several lines in a short, breathless manner, speaking so quickly, the words melded together into an

indistinct babble. As soon as he finished, he gestured at Roran and the others and said in a strained whisper, “Get down!”

Without question, Roran dropped to his haunches. Not for the first time, he cursed the fact that he was unable to use magic himself. Of all the skills a warrior could possess, none was more useful; lacking it left him at the mercy of those who could reshape the world with nothing more than their will and a word.

The ferns in front of him rustled and shook; then a hound pushed its black-tipped snout through the foliage and peered at the hollow, nose twitching. Delwin hissed and raised his sword, as if to behead the dog, but Carn made an urgent noise in his throat and waved at him until he lowered his blade.

The dog furrowed its brow, appearing puzzled. It scented the air again, then licked its jowls with its engorged, purplish tongue, and withdrew.

As the fronds sprang back over the dog’s face, Roran slowly released the breath he had been holding. He looked at Carn and raised an eyebrow, hoping for an explanation, but Carn just shook his head and placed a finger over his lips.

A few seconds later, two more dogs wiggled their way through the undergrowth to inspect the hollow; then, like the first one, they backed out after a short while. Soon the pack began to whine and yip as they cast about among the trees, trying to figure out where their prey had gone.

As he sat waiting, Roran noticed that his leggings were mottled with several dark blotches along the inside of his thighs. He touched one of the discolored areas, and his fingers came away with a film of bloody liquid. Each blotch marked the location of a blister. Nor were they his only ones; he could feel blisters on his hands—where the reins had chafed the web of skin between his thumbs and forefingers—and on his heels, and in other, more uncomfortable places.

With an expression of distaste, he wiped his fingers against the ground. He looked at his men, at how they crouched and knelt, and he saw the discomfort on their faces whenever they moved and the slightly twisted grips with which they held their weapons. They were in no better condition than he was.

Roran decided that when they next stopped to sleep he would have Carn heal their sores. If the magician seemed too tired, however, Roran would refrain from having his own blisters healed; he would rather endure the pain than allow Carn to expend all of his strength before they arrived at Aroughs, for Roran suspected that Carn’s skills might very well prove useful in capturing the city.

Thinking of Aroughs and of the siege he was somehow supposed to win caused Roran to press his free hand against his breast to check

that the packet containing the orders he could not read and the commission he doubted he would be able to keep were still safely tucked in his tunic. They were.

After several long, tense minutes, one of the hounds began to bark excitedly somewhere in the trees upstream. The other dogs rushed in that direction and resumed the deep-chested baying that meant they were in close pursuit of their quarry.

When the clamor had receded, Roran slowly rose to his full height and swept his gaze over the trees and bushes. “All clear,” he said, keeping his voice subdued.

As the others stood, Hamund—who was tall and shaggy-haired and had deep lines next to his mouth, although he was only a year older than Roran—turned on Carn, scowling, and said, “Why couldn’t you have done that before, instead of letting us go riding willy-nilly over the countryside and almost breaking our necks coming down that hill?” He motioned back toward the stream.

Carn responded with an equally angry tone: “Because I hadn’t thought of it yet, that’s why. Given that I just saved you the inconvenience of having a host of small holes poked in your hide, I would think you might show a bit of gratitude.”

“Is that so? Well, I think that you ought to spend more time working on your spells *before* we’re chased halfway to who-knows-where and —”

Fearing that their argument could turn dangerous, Roran stepped between them. “Enough,” he said. Then he asked Carn, “Will your spell hide us from the guards?”

Carn shook his head. “Men are harder to fool than dogs.” He cast a disparaging look at Hamund. “Most of them, at least. I can hide us, but I can’t hide our trail.” And he indicated the crushed and broken ferns, as well as the hoofprints gouged into the damp soil. “They’ll know we’re here. If we leave before they catch sight of us, the dogs will draw them off and we’ll—”

“Mount up!” Roran ordered.

With an assortment of half-muttered curses and poorly concealed groans, the men climbed back onto their steeds. Roran glanced over the hollow one last time to make sure that they had not forgotten anything, then guided his charger to the head of the group and tapped the horse with his spurs.

And together they galloped out from under the shadow of the trees and away from the ravine as they resumed their seemingly never-ending journey to Aroughs. What he would do once they reached the city, though, Roran had not the slightest idea.

MOONEATER

Eragon rolled his shoulders as he walked through the Varden's camp, trying to work out the kink in his neck that he had acquired while sparring with Arya and Blödhgarm earlier that afternoon.

As he topped a small hill, which stood like a lone island amid the sea of tents, he rested his hands on his hips and paused to take in the view. Before him lay the dark spread of Leona Lake, gleaming in the twilight as the crests of the shallow waves reflected the orange torchlight from the camp. The road the Varden had been following lay between the tents and the shore: a broad strip of paving stones set with mortar that had been constructed, or so Jeod had informed him, long before Galbatorix had overthrown the Riders. A quarter mile to the north, a small, squat fishing village sat close against the water; Eragon knew its inhabitants were far from happy that an army was camped on their doorstep.

You must learn … to see what you are looking at.

Since leaving Belatona, Eragon had spent hours pondering Glaedr's advice. He was not certain exactly what the dragon had meant by it, as Glaedr had refused to say anything more after delivering his enigmatic statement, so Eragon had chosen to interpret his instruction literally. He had striven to truly *see* everything before him, no matter how small or apparently insignificant, and to understand the meaning of that which he beheld.

Try though he might, he felt as if he failed miserably. Wherever he looked, he saw an overwhelming amount of detail, but he was convinced there was even more that he was not perceptive enough to notice. Worse, he was rarely able to make sense of what he *was* aware of, like why there was no smoke rising from three of the chimneys in the fishing village.

Despite his sense of futility, the effort had proved helpful in at least one regard: Arya no longer defeated him every time they crossed blades. He had watched her with redoubled attention—studying her as closely as a deer he was stalking—and as a result, he had won a few of their matches. However, he still was not her equal, much less her better. And he did not know what he needed to learn—nor who could teach him—in order to become as skilled with a blade as she was.

Perhaps Arya is right, and experience is the only mentor that can help me now, Eragon thought. *Experience requires time, though, and time is what I have the least of. We'll be at Dras-Leona soon, and then Urû'baen.*

A few months, at the most, and we'll have to face Galbatorix and Shruikan.

He sighed and rubbed his face, trying to turn his mind in other, less troubling directions. Always he returned to the same set of doubts, worrying at them like a dog with a marrow bone, only with nothing to show for it other than a constant and increasing sense of anxiety.

Lost in rumination, he continued down the hill. He wandered among the shadowy tents, heading generally toward his own, but paying little attention to his exact path. As it invariably did, walking helped calm him. The men who were still about moved aside for him when they met and clapped a fist against their chests, usually accompanied by a soft greeting of "Shadeslayer," to which Eragon responded with a polite nod.

He had been walking for a quarter hour, stopping and starting in counterpoint to his thoughts, when the high-pitched tone of a woman describing something with great enthusiasm interrupted his reverie. Curious, he followed the sound until he arrived at a tent set apart from the rest, near the base of a gnarled willow tree, the only tree near the lake that the army had not chopped down for firewood.

There, under the ceiling of branches, was the strangest sight he had ever seen.

Twelve Urgals, including their war chief, Nar Garzhvog, sat in a semicircle around a low, flickering campfire. Fearsome shadows danced on their faces, emphasizing their heavy brows, broad cheekbones, and massive jaws, as well as the ridges on their horns, which sprouted from their foreheads and curved back and around the sides of their heads. The Urgals were bare-armed and bare-chested, except for the leather cuffs on their wrists and the woven straps they wore slung from shoulder to waist. In addition to Garzhvog, three other Kull were present. Their hulking size made the rest of the Urgals —not one of whom was under six feet tall—appear childishly small.

Scattered among the Urgals—among and *on* them—were several dozen werecats in their animal forms. Many of the cats sat upright before the fire, utterly still, not even moving their tails, their tufted ears pricked forward attentively. Others lay sprawled on the ground, or on the Urgals' laps, or in their arms. To Eragon's astonishment, he even spotted one werecat—a slim white female—resting curled atop the broad head of a Kull, her right foreleg draped over the edge of his skull and her paw pressed possessively against the middle of his brow. Tiny though the werecats were compared to the Urgals, they looked equally savage, and Eragon had no doubt whom he would rather face in battle; Urgals he understood, whereas werecats were … unpredictable.

On the other side of the fire, in front of the tent, was the herbalist

Angela. She was sitting cross-legged on a folded blanket, spinning a pile of carded wool into fine thread using a drop spindle, which she held out before her as if to entrance those who were watching. Both werecats and Urgals stared at her intently, their eyes never leaving her as she said:

"—but he was too slow, and the raging, red-eyed rabbit ripped out Hord's throat, killing him instantly. Then the hare fled into the forest, and out of recorded history. However"—and here Angela leaned forward and lowered her voice—"if you travel through those parts, as I have … sometimes, even to this day, you will come across a freshly killed deer or Feldûnost that looks as if it has been *nibbled* at, like a turnip. And all around it, you'll see the prints of an unusually large rabbit. Every now and then, a warrior from Kvôth will go missing, only to be found lying dead with his throat torn out … always with his throat torn out."

She resumed her former position. "Terrin was horribly upset by the loss of his friend, of course, and he wanted to chase after the hare, but the dwarves still needed his help. So he returned to the stronghold, and for three more days and three more nights the defenders held the walls, until their supplies were low and every warrior was covered in wounds.

"At last, on the morning of the fourth day, when all seemed hopeless, the clouds parted, and far in the distance, Terrin was amazed to see Mimring flying toward the stronghold at the head of a huge thunder of dragons. The sight of the dragons frightened the attackers so much, they threw down their weapons and fled into the wilderness." Angela's mouth quirked. "This, as you can imagine, made the dwarves of Kvôth rather happy, and there was much rejoicing.

"And when Mimring landed, Terrin saw, much to his surprise, that his scales had become as clear as diamonds, which, it is said, happened because Mimring flew so close to the sun—for in order to fetch the other dragons in time, he had had to fly *over* the peaks of the Beor Mountains, higher than any dragon has ever flown before or since. From then on, Terrin was known as the hero of the Siege of Kvôth, and his dragon was known as Mimring the Brilliant, on account of his scales, and they lived happily ever after. Although, if truth be told, Terrin always remained rather afraid of rabbits, even into his old age. And *that* is what really happened at Kvôth."

As she fell silent, the werecats began to purr, and the Urgals uttered several low grunts of approval.

"You tell a good story, Uluthrek," Garzhvog said, his voice sounding like the rumble of falling rock.

"Thank you."

"But not as I have heard it told," Eragon commented as he stepped

into the light.

Angela's expression brightened. "Well, you can hardly expect the dwarves to admit they were at the mercy of a rabbit. Have you been lurking in the shadows this whole time?"

"Only for a minute," he confessed.

"Then you missed the best part of the story, and I'm not about to repeat myself tonight. My throat is too dry now for talking at length."

Eragon felt the vibration through the soles of his boots as the Kull and the other Urgals got to their feet, much to the displeasure of the werecats resting on them, several of whom uttered yowls of protest as they dropped to the ground.

As he gazed at the collection of grotesque horned faces gathered around the fire, Eragon had to suppress the urge to grasp the hilt of his sword. Even after having fought, traveled, and hunted alongside the Urgals, and even after having sifted through the thoughts of several of them, being in their presence still gave him pause. He knew in his mind that they were allies, but his bones and his muscles could not forget the visceral terror that had gripped him during the numerous occasions when he had confronted their kind in battle.

Garzhvog removed something from the leather pouch he wore on his belt. Extending his thick arm over the fire, he handed it to Angela, who set down her spinning to accept the object with cupped hands. It was a rough orb of sea-green crystal, which twinkled like crusted snow. She slipped it inside the sleeve of her garment, then picked up her drop spindle.

Garzhvog said, "You must come to our camp sometime, Uluthrek, and we will tell you many stories of our own. We have a chanter with us. He is good; when you listen to him recite the tale of Nar Tulkhqa's victory at Stavarosk, your blood grows hot and you feel like bellowing at the moon and locking horns with even the strongest of your foes."

"That would depend on whether you have horns to lock," said Angela. "I would be honored to sit story with you. Perhaps tomorrow evening?"

The giant Kull agreed; then Eragon asked, "Where is Stavarosk? I've not heard of it before."

The Urgals shifted uneasily, and Garzhvog lowered his head and snorted like a bull. "What trickery is this, Firesword?" he demanded. "Do you seek to challenge me by insulting us so?" He opened and closed his hands with unmistakable menace.

Wary, Eragon said, "I meant no harm, Nar Garzhvog. It was an honest question; I've never heard the name of Stavarosk before."

A murmur of surprise spread among the Urgals. "How can this be?" said Garzhvog. "Do not all humans know of Stavarosk? Is it not sung of in every hall from the northern wastes to the Beor Mountains as our

greatest triumph? Surely, if nowhere else, the Varden must speak of it."

Angela sighed and, without looking up from her spinning, said, "You'd best tell them."

In the back of his mind, Eragon felt Saphira watching their exchange, and he knew that she was readying herself to fly from their tent to his side if a fight became unavoidable.

Choosing his words with care, he said: "No one has mentioned it to me, but then I have not been with the Varden for very long, and—"

"Drajl!" swore Garzhvog. "The lack-horned betrayer does not even have the courage to admit his own defeat. He is a coward and liar!"

"Who? Galbatorix?" Eragon asked cautiously.

A number of the werecats hissed at the mention of the king.

Garzhvog nodded. "Aye. When he came to power, he sought to destroy our race forever. He sent a vast army into the Spine. His soldiers crushed our villages, burned our bones, and left the earth black and bitter behind them. We fought—at first with joy, then with despair, but still we fought. It was the only thing we could do. There was nowhere for us to run, nowhere to hide. Who would protect the Urgralgra when even the Riders had been brought to their knees?

"We were lucky, though. We had a great war chief to lead us, Nar Tulkhqa. He had once been captured by humans, and he had spent many years fighting them, so he knew how you think. Because of that, he was able to rally many of our tribes under his banner. Then he lured Galbatorix's army into a narrow passage deep within the mountains, and our rams fell upon them from either side. It was a slaughter, Firesword. The ground was wet with blood, and the piles of bodies stood higher than my head. Even to this day, if you go to Stavarosk, you will feel the bones cracking under your feet, and you will find coins and swords and pieces of armor under every patch of moss."

"So it was you!" Eragon exclaimed. "All my life I've heard it said that Galbatorix once lost half his men in the Spine, but no one could tell me how or why."

"*More* than half his men, Firesword." Garzhvog rolled his shoulders and made a guttural noise in the back of his throat. "And now I see we must work to spread word of it if any are to know of our victory. We will track down your chanters, your bards, and we will teach them the songs concerning Nar Tulkhqa, and we will make sure that they remember to recite them often and loudly." He nodded once, as if his mind was made up—an impressive gesture considering the ponderous size of his head—then said, "Farewell, Firesword. Farewell, Uluthrek." Then he and his warriors lumbered off into the darkness.

Angela chuckled, startling Eragon.

"What?" he asked, turning to her.

She smiled. "I'm imagining the expression some poor lute player is going to have in a few minutes when he looks out his tent and sees twelve Urgals, four of them Kull, standing outside, eager to give him an education in Urgal culture. I'll be impressed if we don't hear him scream." She chuckled again.

Similarly amused, Eragon lowered himself to the ground and stirred the coals with the end of a branch. A warm, heavy weight settled in his lap, and he looked down to see the white werecat curled up on his legs. He raised a hand to pet her, then thought better of it and asked the cat, "May I?"

The werecat flicked her tail but otherwise ignored him.

Hoping that he was not doing the wrong thing, Eragon tentatively began to rub the creature's neck. A moment later, a loud, throbbing purr filled the night air.

"She likes you," Angela observed.

For some reason, Eragon felt inordinately pleased. "Who is she? I mean, that is, who are you? What is your name?" He cast a quick glance at the werecat, worried that he had offended her.

Angela laughed quietly. "Her name is Shadowhunter. Or rather, that is what her name means in the language of the werecats. Properly, she is …" Here the herbalist uttered a strange coughing, growling sound that made the nape of Eragon's neck crawl. "Shadowhunter is mated to Grimrr Halfpaw, so one might say that she is queen of the werecats."

The purring increased in volume.

"I see." Eragon looked around at the other werecats. "Where is Solembum?"

"Busy chasing a long-whiskered female who is half his age. He's acting as foolish as a kitten … but then, everyone's entitled to a little foolishness once in a while." Catching the spindle with her left hand, she stopped its motion and wound the newly formed thread around the base of the wooden disk. Then she gave the spindle a twist to start it spinning again and resumed drafting from the batt of wool in her other hand. "You look as if you are full to bursting with questions, Shadeslayer."

"Whenever I meet you, I always end up feeling more confused than before."

"Always? That's rather absolutist of you. Very well, I will attempt to be informative. Ask away."

Skeptical of her apparent openness, Eragon considered what he would like to know. Finally: "A thunder of dragons? What did you—"

"*That* is the proper term for a flock of dragons. If ever you had heard one in full flight, you would understand. When ten, twelve, or

more dragons flew past overhead, the very air would reverberate around you, as if you were sitting inside a giant drum. Besides, what else could you call a group of dragons? You have your murder of ravens, your convocation of eagles, your gaggle of geese, your raft of ducks, your band of jays, your parliament of owls, and so on, but what about dragons? A *hunger* of dragons? That doesn't sound quite right. Nor does referring to them as a *blaze* or a *terror*, although I'm rather fond of *terror*, all things considered: a terror of dragons.… But no, a flock of dragons is called a thunder. Which you would know if your education had consisted of more than just learning how to swing a sword and conjugate a few verbs in the ancient language."

"I'm sure you're right," he said, humoring her. Through his ever-present link with Saphira, he sensed her approval of the phrase "a thunder of dragons," an opinion he shared; it was a fitting description.

He thought for a moment longer, then asked, "And why did Garzhvog call you Uluthrek?"

"It is the title the Urgals gave me long, long ago, when I traveled among them."

"What does it mean?"

"Mooneater."

"Mooneater? What a strange name. How did you come by it?"

"I ate the moon, of course. How else?"

Eragon frowned and concentrated on petting the werecat for a minute. Then: "Why did Garzhvog give you that stone?"

"Because I told him a story. I thought that was obvious."

"But what is it?"

"A piece of rock. Didn't you notice?" She clucked with disapproval. "Really, you ought to pay better attention to what's going on around you. Otherwise, someone's liable to stick a knife in you when you're not looking. And then whom would I exchange cryptic remarks with?" She tossed her hair. "Go on, ask me another question. I'm rather enjoying this game."

He cocked an eyebrow at her and, although he was certain it was pointless, he said, *"Cheep cheep?"*

The herbalist brayed with laughter, and some of the werecats opened their mouths in what appeared to be toothy smiles. However, Shadowhunter seemed displeased, for she dug her claws into Eragon's legs, making him wince.

"Well," said Angela, still laughing, "if you *must* have answers, that's as good a story as any. Let's see.… Several years ago, when I was traveling along the edge of Du Weldenvarden, way out to the west, miles and miles from any city, town, or village, I happened upon Grimrr. At the time, he was only the leader of a small tribe of werecats, and he still had full use of both his paws. Anyway, I found

him toying with a fledgling robin that had fallen out of its nest in a nearby tree. I wouldn't have minded if he had just killed the bird and eaten it—that's what cats are supposed to do, after all—but he was torturing the poor thing: pulling on its wings; nibbling its tail; letting it hop away, then knocking it over." Angela wrinkled her nose with distaste. "I *told* him that he ought to stop, but he only growled and ignored me." She fixed Eragon with a stern gaze. "I don't *like* it when people ignore me. So, I took the bird away from him, and I wiggled my fingers and cast a spell, and for the next week, whenever he opened his mouth, he chirped like a songbird."

"He *chirped*?"

Angela nodded, beaming with suppressed mirth. "I've never laughed so hard in my life. None of the other werecats would go anywhere near him for the whole week."

"No wonder he hates you."

"What of it? If you don't make a few enemies every now and then, you're a coward—or worse. Besides, it was worth it to see his reaction. Oh, he was angry!"

Shadowhunter uttered a soft warning growl and tightened her claws again.

Grimacing, Eragon said, "Maybe it would be best to change the subject?"

"Mmm."

Before he could suggest a new topic, a loud scream rang out from somewhere in the middle of the camp. The cry echoed three times over the rows of tents before fading into silence.

Eragon looked at Angela, and she at him, and then they both began to laugh.

RUMORS AND WRITING

It's late, said Saphira as Eragon sauntered toward his tent, beside which she lay coiled, sparkling like a mound of azure coals in the dim light of the torches. She regarded him with a single, heavy-lidded eye.

He crouched by her head and pressed his brow against hers for several moments, hugging her spiky jaw. *So it is*, he said at last. *And you need your rest after flying into the wind all day. Sleep, and I'll see you in the morning.*

She blinked once in acknowledgment.

Inside his tent, Eragon lit a single candle for comfort. Then he pulled off his boots and sat on his cot with his legs folded under him. He slowed his breathing and allowed his mind to open and expand outward to touch all of the living things around him, from the worms and the insects in the ground to Saphira and the warriors of the Varden, and even the few remaining plants nearby, the energy from which was pale and hard to see compared with the burning brilliance of even the smallest animal.

For a long while, he sat there, empty of thoughts, aware of a thousand sensations, the sharp and the subtle, concentrating on nothing but the steady inflow and outflow of air in his lungs.

Off in the distance, he heard men talking as they stood around a watchfire. The night air carried their voices farther than they intended, far enough that his keen ears were able to make out their words. He could sense their minds as well, and he could have read their thoughts had he wanted, but instead he chose to respect their innermost privacy and merely listen.

A deep-voiced fellow was saying, "—and the way they stare down their noses at you, as if you're the lowest of the low. Half the time they won't even talk to you when you ask them a friendly question. They just turn their shoulder and walk away."

"Aye," said another man. "And their women—as beautiful as statues and about half as inviting."

"That's because you're a right ugly bastard, Svern, that's why."

"It's not my fault my father had a habit of seducing milkmaids wherever he went. Besides, you're hardly one to point fingers; you could give children nightmares with that face of yours."

The deep-voiced warrior grunted; then someone coughed and spat, and Eragon heard the sizzle of moisture evaporating as it struck a piece of burning wood.

A third speaker entered the conversation: “I don’t like the elves any more than you do, but we need them to win this war.”

“What if they turn on us afterward, though?” asked the deep-voiced man.

“Hear, hear,” added Svern. “Look what happened at Ceunon and Gil’ead. All his men, all his power, and Galbatorix still couldn’t stop them from swarming over the walls.”

“Maybe he wasn’t trying,” suggested the third speaker.

A long pause followed.

Then the deep-voiced man said, “Now, there’s a singularly unpleasant thought.… Still, whether he was or wasn’t, I don’t see how we could hold off the elves if they decided to reclaim their old territories. They’re faster and stronger than we are, and unlike us, there’s not one of them who can’t use magic.”

“Ah, but we have Eragon,” Svern countered. “He could drive them back to their forest all by himself, if he wanted to.”

“Him? Bah! He looks more like an elf than he does his own flesh and blood. I wouldn’t count on his loyalty any more than the Urgals’.”

The third man spoke up again: “Have you noticed, he’s always freshly shaven, no matter how early in the morning we break camp?”

“He must use magic for a razor.”

“Goes against the natural order of things, it does. That and all the other spells being tossed around nowadays. Makes you want to hide in a cave somewhere and let the magicians kill each other off without any interference from us.”

“I don’t seem to recall you complaining when the healers used a spell instead of a pair of tongs to remove that arrow from your shoulder.”

“Maybe, but the arrow never would have ended up in my shoulder if it weren’t for Galbatorix. And it’s him and his magic that’s caused this whole mess.”

Someone snorted. “True enough, but I’d bet every last copper I have that, Galbatorix or no, you still would’ve ended up with an arrow sticking out of you. You’re too mean to do anything other than fight.”

“Eragon saved my life in Feinster, you know,” said Svern.

“Aye, and if you bore us with the story one more time, I’ll have you scrubbing pots for a week.”

“Well, he did.…”

There was another silence, which was broken when the deep-voiced warrior sighed. “We need a way to protect ourselves. That’s the problem. We’re at the mercy of the elves, the magicians—ours and theirs—and every other strange creature that roams the land. It’s all well and fine for the likes of Eragon, but we’re not so fortunate. What we need is—”

"What we need," said Svern, "are the Riders. They'd put the world in order."

"*Pfft.* With what dragons? You can't have Riders without dragons. Besides, we still wouldn't be able to defend ourselves, and that's what bothers me. I'm not a child to go hiding behind my mother's skirts, but if a Shade were to appear out of the night, there isn't a blasted thing we could do to keep it from tearing our heads off."

"That reminds me, did you hear about Lord Barst?" asked the third man.

Svern uttered a sound of agreement. "I heard he ate his heart afterward."

"What's this now?" asked the deep-voiced warrior.

"Barst—"

"Barst?"

"You know, the earl with an estate up by Gil'ead—"

"Isn't he the one who drove his horses into the Ramr just to spite—"

"Aye, that's the one. Anyway, so he goes to this village and orders all the men to join Galbatorix's army. Same story as always. Only, the men refuse, and they attack Barst and his soldiers."

"Brave," said the deep-voiced man. "Stupid, but brave."

"Well, Barst was too clever for them; he had archers posted around the village before he went in. The soldiers kill half the men and thrash the rest within an inch of their lives. No surprise there. Then Barst takes the leader, the man who started the fight, and he grabs him by the neck, and with his bare hands, he pulls his head right off!"

"No."

"Like a chicken. And what's worse, he ordered the man's family burned alive as well."

"Barst must be as strong as an Urgal to tear off a man's head," said Svern.

"Maybe there's a trick to it."

"Could it be magic?" asked the deep-voiced man.

"By all accounts, he's always been strong—strong and smart. When he was just a young man, he's said to have killed a wounded ox with a single blow of his fist."

"Still sounds like magic to me."

"That's because you see evil magicians lurking in every shadow, you do."

The deep-voiced warrior grunted, but did not speak.

After that, the men dispersed to walk their rounds, and Eragon heard nothing more from them. At any other time, their conversation might have disturbed him, but because of his meditation, he remained unperturbed throughout, although he made an effort to remember what they said, so that he could consider it properly later.

Once his thoughts were in order, and he felt calm and relaxed, Eragon closed off his mind, opened his eyes, and slowly unfolded his legs, working the stiffness out of his muscles.

The motion of the candle flame caught his eye, and he stared at it for a minute, enthralled by the contortions of the fire.

Then he went over to where he had dropped Saphira's saddlebags earlier and removed the quill, the brush, the bottle of ink, and the sheets of parchment that he had begged off Jeod several days before, as well as the copy of *Domia abr Wyrda* that the old scholar had given him.

Returning to the cot, Eragon placed the heavy book well away from him, so as to minimize the chances of spilling ink on it. He laid his shield across his knees, like a tray, and spread the sheets of parchment over the curved surface. A sharp, tannic odor filled his nostrils as he unstoppered the bottle and dipped the quill into the oak-gall ink.

He touched the nib of the feather against the lip of the bottle, to draw off the excess liquid, then carefully made his first stroke. The quill produced a faint scratching sound as he wrote out the runes of his native language. When he finished, he compared them to his efforts from the previous night, to see if his handwriting had improved —only a small amount—as well as to the runes in *Domia abr Wyrda*, which he was using as his guide.

He went through the alphabet three more times, paying special attention to the shapes that he had the most difficulty forming. Then he began to write down his thoughts and observations concerning the day's events. The exercise was useful not only because it provided him with a convenient means of practicing his letters, but also because it helped him better understand everything he had seen and done over the course of the day.

Laborious as it was, he enjoyed the writing, for he found the challenges it presented stimulating. Also, it reminded him of Brom, of how the old storyteller had taught him the meaning of each rune, which gave Eragon a sense of closeness with his father that otherwise eluded him.

After he had said everything he wished to say, he washed the quill clean, then exchanged it for the brush and selected a sheet of parchment that was already half covered with rows of glyphs from the ancient language.

The elves' mode of writing, the Liduen Kvaedhí, was far harder to reproduce than the runes of his own race, owing to the glyphs' intricate, flowing shapes. Nevertheless, he persisted for two reasons: He needed to maintain his familiarity with the script. And if he was going to write anything in the ancient language, he thought it wiser to do it in a form that most people were unable to understand.

Eragon had a good memory, but even so, he had found he was starting to forget many of the spells Brom and Oromis had taught him. Thus he had decided to compile a dictionary of every word he knew in the ancient language. Although it was hardly an original idea, he had not appreciated the value of such a compendium until very recently.

He worked on the dictionary for another few hours, whereupon he returned his writing supplies to the saddlebags and took out the chest containing Glaedr's heart of hearts. He tried to rouse the old dragon from his stupor, as he had so many times before, and as always, he failed. Eragon refused to give up, however. Sitting next to the open chest, he read aloud to Glaedr from *Domia abr Wyrda* about the dwarves' many rites and rituals—few of which Eragon was familiar with—until it was the coldest, darkest part of the night.

Then Eragon set aside the book, extinguished the candle, and lay down on the cot to rest. He wandered through the fantastic visions of his waking dreams for only a short while; once the first hint of light appeared in the east, he rolled upright to begin the whole cycle anew.

AROUGHS

It was midmorning when Roran and his men arrived at the cluster of tents next to the road. The camp appeared gray and indistinct through the haze of exhaustion that clouded Roran's vision. A mile to the south lay the city of Aroughs, but he was able to make out only the most general features: glacier-white walls, yawning entryways containing barred gates, and many thickly built square stone towers.

He clung to the front of the saddle as they trotted into the camp, their horses near to collapsing. A scraggly-looking youngster ran up to him and grabbed the bridle of his mare, pulling on it until the animal stumbled to a stop.

Roran stared down at the boy, not sure what had just happened, and after a long moment croaked, "Bring me Brigman."

Without a word, the boy took off between the tents, kicking up dust with his bare heels.

It seemed to Roran that he sat waiting for over an hour. The mare's uncontrollable panting matched the rushing of blood in his ears. When he looked at the ground, it appeared as if it were still moving, receding tunnel-like toward a point infinitely far away. Somewhere, spurs clinked. A dozen or so warriors gathered nearby, leaning on spears and shields, their faces open displays of curiosity.

From across the camp, a broad-shouldered man in a blue tunic limped toward Roran, using a broken spear as a staff. He had a large, full beard, though his upper lip was shaved and it glittered with perspiration—whether from pain or heat Roran could not tell.

"You're Stronghammer?" he said.

Roran grunted an affirmative. He released his cramped grip on the saddle, reached inside his tunic, and handed Brigman the battered rectangle of parchment that contained his orders from Nasuada.

Brigman broke the wax seal with his thumbnail. He studied the parchment, then lowered it and gazed at Roran with a flat expression.

"We've been expecting you," he said. "One of Nasuada's pet spellcasters contacted me four days ago and said you had departed, but I didn't think you would arrive so soon."

"It wasn't easy," said Roran.

Brigman's bare upper lip curled. "No, I'm sure it wasn't … sir." He handed the parchment back. "The men are yours to command, Stronghammer. We were about to launch an attack on the western gate. Perhaps you would care to lead the charge?" The question was

as pointed as a dagger.

The world seemed to tilt around Roran, and he gripped the saddle tighter. He was too tired to bandy words with anyone and do it well, and he knew it.

"Order them to stand down for the day," he said.

"Have you lost your wits? How else do you expect us to capture the city? It took us all morning to prepare the attack, and I'm not going to sit here twiddling my thumbs while you catch up on your sleep. Nasuada expects us to end the siege within a few days, and by Angvard, I'll see it done!"

In a voice pitched so low that only Brigman could hear, Roran growled, "You'll tell the men to stand down, or I'll have you strung up by your ankles and whipped for breaking orders. I'm not about to approve any sort of attack until I've had a chance to rest and look at the situation."

"You're a fool, you are. That would—"

"If you can't hold your tongue and do your duty, I'll thrash you myself—right here and now."

Brigman's nostrils flared. "In your state? You wouldn't stand a chance."

"You're wrong," said Roran. And he meant it. He was not sure how he might beat Brigman right then, but he knew in the deepest fibers of his being that he could.

Brigman seemed to struggle with himself. "Fine," he spat. "It wouldn't be good for the men to see us sprawling in the dirt anyway. We'll stay where we are, if that's what you want, but I won't be held accountable for the waste of time. Be it on your head, not mine."

"As it always is," said Roran, his throat tight with pain as he swung down from the mare. "Just as you're responsible for the mess you've made of this siege."

Brigman's brow darkened, and Roran saw the man's dislike of him curdle and turn to hate. He wished that he had chosen a more diplomatic response.

"Your tent is this way."

It was still morning when Roran woke.

A soft light diffused through the tent, lifting his spirits. For a moment, he thought he had only fallen asleep for a few minutes. Then he realized he felt too bright and alert for that to be the case.

He cursed quietly to himself, angry that he had allowed an entire day to slip through his fingers.

A thin blanket covered him, mostly unneeded in the balmy southern weather, especially since he was wearing his boots and clothes underneath. He pulled it off, then tried to sit upright.

A choked groan escaped him as his entire body seemed to stretch and tear. He fell back and lay gasping at the fabric above. The initial shock soon subsided, but it left behind a multitude of throbbing aches —some worse than others.

It took him several minutes to gather his strength. With a massive effort, he rolled onto his side and swung his legs over the edge of the cot. He stopped to catch his breath before attempting the seemingly impossible task of standing.

Once he was on his feet, he smiled sourly. It was going to be an interesting day.

The others were already up and waiting for him when he made his way out of the tent. They looked worn and haggard; their movements were as stiff as his own. After exchanging greetings, Roran motioned toward the bandage on Delwin's forearm, where a tavern keeper had cut him with a paring knife. "Has the pain gone down?"

Delwin shrugged. "It's not so bad. I can fight if need be."

"Good."

"What do you intend to do first?" Carn asked.

Roran eyed the rising sun, calculating how much time remained until noon. "Take a walk," he said.

Starting from the center of the camp, Roran led his companions up and down each row of tents, inspecting the condition of the troops as well as the state of their equipment. Occasionally, he stopped to question a warrior before moving on. For the most part, the men were tired and disheartened, although he noticed their mood seemed to improve when they caught sight of him.

Roran's tour ended at the southern edge of the camp, as he had planned. There he and the others stopped to gaze at the imposing edifice that was Aroughs.

The city had been built in two tiers. The first was low and spread out and contained the majority of buildings, while the second, smaller tier occupied the top of a long, gentle rise, which was the tallest point for miles around. A wall encircled both levels of the city. Five gates were visible within the outer wall: two of them opened to roads that entered the city—one from the north and one from the east—and the other three sat astride canals that flowed southward, into the city. On the other side of Aroughs lay the restless sea, where the canals presumably emptied.

At least they don't have a moat, he thought.

The north-facing gate was scratched and scarred from a battering ram, and the ground in front of it was torn up with what Roran recognized as the tracks of battle. Three catapults, four ballistae of the sort he had knowledge of from his time on the *Dragon Wing*, and two ramshackle siege towers were arrayed before the outer wall. A handful

of men hunkered next to the machines of war, smoking pipes and playing dice on patches of leather. The machines appeared pitifully inadequate compared with the monolithic mass of the city.

The low, flat land surrounding Aroughs sloped downward toward the sea. Hundreds of farms dotted the green plain, each marked by a wooden fence and at least one thatched hut. Sumptuous estates stood here and there: sprawling stone manors protected by their own high walls and, Roran assumed, by their own guards. No doubt they belonged to the nobles of Aroughs, and perhaps certain well-off merchants.

"What do you think?" he asked Carn.

The magician shook his head, his drooping eyes even more mournful than usual. "We might as well lay siege to a mountain for all the good it'll do."

"Indeed," observed Brigman, walking up to them.

Roran kept his own observations to himself; he did not want the others to know how discouraged he was. *Nasuada is mad if she believes we can capture Aroughs with only eight hundred men. If I had eight thousand, and Eragon and Saphira to boot, then I might be sure of it. But not like this….*

Yet he knew he had to find a way, for Katrina's sake, if nothing else.

Without looking at him, Roran said to Brigman, "Tell me about Aroughs."

Brigman twisted his spear several times, grinding the butt of it into the ground, before he replied: "Galbatorix had foresight; he saw to it that the city was fully stocked with food before we cut off the roads between here and the rest of the Empire. Water, as you can see, they have no shortage of. Even if we diverted the canals, they would still have several springs and wells inside the city. They could conceivably hold out until winter, if not longer, although I'd wager they'd be right sick of eating turnips before all was said and done. Also, Galbatorix garrisoned Aroughs with a fair number of soldiers—more than twice what we have—in addition to their usual contingent."

"How do you know this?"

"An informant. However, he had no experience with military strategy, and he provided us with an overly confident assessment of Aroughs's weaknesses."

"Ah."

"He also promised us that he would be able to let a small force of men into the city under the cover of dark."

"And?"

"We waited, but he never appeared, and we saw his head mounted over the parapet the following morning. It's still there, by the eastern gate."

“So it is. Are there other gates besides these five?”

“Aye, three more. By the docks, there’s a water gate wide enough for all three streams to run out at once, and next to it a dry gate for men and horses. Then there’s another dry gate over at that end”—he pointed toward the western side of the city—“same as the others.”

“Can any of them be breached?”

“Not quickly. By the shore, we haven’t room to maneuver properly or withdraw out of range of the soldiers’ stones and arrows. That leaves us with these gates, and the western one as well. The lay of the land is much the same all around the city, except for the shore, so I chose to concentrate our attack on the nearest gate.”

“What are they made of?”

“Iron and oak. They’ll stand for hundreds of years unless we knock them down.”

“Are they protected by any spells?”

“I wouldn’t know, seeing as how Nasuada didn’t see fit to send one of her magicians with us. Halstead has—”

“Halstead?”

“Lord Halstead, ruler of Aroughs. You must have heard of him.”

“No.”

A brief pause followed, wherein Roran could sense Brigman’s contempt for him growing. Then the man continued, “Halstead has a conjurer of his own: a mean, sallow-looking creature we’ve seen atop the walls, muttering into his beard and trying to strike us down with his spells. He seems to be singularly incompetent, because he hasn’t had much luck, save for two of the men I had on the battering ram, whom he managed to set on fire.”

Roran exchanged glances with Carn—the magician appeared even more worried than before—but he decided it would be better to discuss the matter in private.

“Would it be easier to break through the gates on the canals?” he asked.

“Where would you stand? Look at how they’re recessed within the wall, without so much as a step for purchase. What’s more, there are slits and trapdoors in the roof of the entryway, so they can pour boiling oil, drop boulders, or fire crossbows at anyone foolish enough to venture in there.”

“The gates can’t be solid all the way down, or they would block the water.”

“You’re right about that. Below the surface is a latticework of wood and metal with holes large enough that they don’t impede the flow overly much.”

“I see. Are the gates kept lowered into the water most of the time, even when Aroughs isn’t under siege?”

“At night for certain, but I believe they were left open during the daylight hours.”

“Mmh. And what of the walls?”

Brigman shifted his weight. “Granite, polished smooth, and fit so closely together, you can’t even slide a knife blade between the blocks. Dwarf work, I’d guess, from before the fall of the Riders. I’d also guess that the walls are filled with packed rubble, but I can’t say for sure, since we haven’t cracked the outer sheathing yet. They extend at least twelve feet below ground and probably more, which means we can’t tunnel under them or weaken them with sapping.”

Stepping forward, Brigman pointed at the manors to the north and west. “Most of the nobles have retreated into Aroughs, but they left men behind to protect their property. They’ve given us some trouble, attacking our scouts, stealing our horses, that sort of thing. We captured two of the estates early on”—he indicated a pair of burnt-out husks a few miles away—“but holding them was more trouble than it was worth, so we sacked them and put them to the torch. Unfortunately, we don’t have enough men to secure the rest.”

Baldor spoke then. “Why do the canals feed into Aroughs? It doesn’t look as if they’re used for watering crops.”

“You don’t need to water here, lad, any more than a northman needs to cart in snow during the winter. Staying dry is more a problem than not.”

“Then what are they used for?” Roran inquired. “And where do they come from? You can’t expect me to believe the water is drawn from the Jiet River, so many leagues away.”

“Hardly,” scoffed Brigman. “There are lakes in the marshes north of us. It’s brackish, unwholesome water, but the people here are accustomed to it. A single channel carries it from the marshes to a point about three miles away. There the channel divides into the three canals you see here, and they run over a series of falls, which power the mills that grind flour for the city. The peasants cart their grain to the mills at harvesttime, and then the sacks of flour are loaded onto barges and floated down to Aroughs. It’s also a handy way of moving other goods, like timber and wine, from the manor houses to the city.”

Roran rubbed the back of his neck as he continued to examine Aroughs. What Brigman had told him intrigued him, but he was not sure how it could help. “Is there anything else of significance in the surrounding countryside?” he asked.

“Only a slate mine farther south along the coast.”

He grunted, still thinking. “I want to visit the mills,” he said. “But first I want to hear a full account of your time here, and I want to know how well provisioned we are with everything from arrows to biscuits.”

"If you'll follow me … Stronghammer."

The next hour Roran spent in conference with Brigman and two of his lieutenants, listening and asking questions as they recounted each of the assaults they had launched against the city walls, as well as cataloging the stocks of supplies left to the warriors under his command.

At least we're not short of weapons, Roran thought as he counted the number of dead. Yet even if Nasuada had not set a time limit upon his mission, the men and horses did not have enough food to stay camped before Aroughs for more than another week.

Many of the facts and figures that Brigman and his lackeys related came from writing on scrolls of parchment. Roran strove to conceal the fact that he could not decipher the rows of angular black marks by insisting that the men read everything to him, but it irritated him that he was at the mercy of others. *Nasuada was right*, he realized. *I have to learn to read, else I cannot tell if someone is lying to me when they say that a piece of parchment says one thing or another.… Maybe Carn can teach me on our return to the Varden*.

The more Roran learned about Aroughs, the more he began to sympathize with Brigman's plight; capturing the city was a daunting task with no obvious solution. Despite his dislike for the man, Roran thought that the captain had done as well as could be expected under the circumstances. He had failed, Roran believed, not because he was an incompetent commander, but because he lacked the two qualities that had granted Roran victory time and time again: daring and imagination.

Upon finishing his review, Roran and his five companions rode with Brigman to inspect Aroughs's walls and gates from a closer, but still safe, distance. Sitting in a saddle again was incredibly painful for Roran, but he bore it without complaint.

As their steeds clattered onto the stone-paved road next to the camp and began to trot toward the city, Roran noticed that, on occasion, the horses' hooves produced a peculiar noise when they struck the ground. He remembered hearing a similar sound, and being bothered by it, during their final day of traveling.

Looking down, he saw that the flat stones that formed the surface of the road seemed to be set within tarnished silver, the veins of which formed an irregular, cobweb-like pattern.

Roran called out to Brigman and asked him about it, whereupon Brigman shouted, "The dirt here makes for poor mortar, so instead they use lead to hold the stones in place!"

Roran's initial reaction was disbelief, but Brigman appeared serious. He found it astonishing that any metal could be so common that

people would squander it on building a road.

So they trotted down the lane of stone and lead toward the gleaming city beyond.

They studied Aroughs's defenses with great attentiveness. But their increased proximity revealed nothing new and only served to reinforce Roran's impression that the city was nigh on impregnable.

He guided his horse over to Carn's. The magician was staring at Aroughs with a glazed expression, his lips moving silently, as if he were talking to himself. Roran waited until he stopped, then quietly asked, "Are there any spells on the gates?"

"I think so," Carn replied, equally subdued, "but I'm not sure how many or what their intended purpose is. I'll need more time to tease out the answers."

"Why is it so difficult?"

"It's not, really. Most spells are easy to detect, unless someone has made an effort to hide them, and even then, the magic usually leaves certain telltale traces if you know what to look for. My concern is that one or more of the spells might be traps set to prevent people from meddling with the gates' enchantments. If that's so, and I approach them directly, I'll be sure to trigger them, and then who knows what will happen? I might dissolve into a puddle before your very eyes, which is a fate I would rather avoid, if I have my way."

"Do you want to stay here while we continue on?"

Carn shook his head. "I don't think it would be wise to leave you unguarded while we're away from camp. I'll return after sundown and see what I can do then. Besides, it would help if I were closer to the gates, and I don't dare go any nearer now, when I'm in plain sight of the sentinels."

"As you wish."

When Roran was satisfied they had learned everything they could by looking at the city, he had Brigman lead them to the nearest set of mills.

They were much as Brigman had described. The water in the canal flowed over three consecutive twenty-foot falls. At the base of each fall was a waterwheel, edged with buckets. The water splashed into the buckets, driving the machine round and round. The wheels were connected by thick axles to three identical buildings that stood stacked one above the other along the terraced bank and which contained the massive grindstones needed to produce the flour for Aroughs's population. Though the wheels were moving, Roran could tell they were disengaged from the complex arrangement of gears hidden inside the buildings, for he did not hear the rumble of the grindstones turning in their places.

He dismounted by the lowest mill and walked up the path between

the buildings, eyeing the sluice gates that were above the falls and that controlled the amount of water released into them. The gates were open, but a deep pool of water still lay beneath each of the three slowly spinning wheels.

He stopped halfway up the hill and planted his feet on the edge of the soft, grassy bank, crossed his arms, and tucked his chin against his chest while he pondered how he could possibly capture Aroughs. That there was a trick or a strategy that would allow him to crack open the city like a ripe gourd, he was confident, but the solution eluded him.

He thought until he was tired of thinking, and then he gave himself over to the creaking of the turning axles and the splashing of the falling water.

Soothing as those sounds were, a thorn of unease still rankled him, for the place reminded him of Dempton's mill in Therinsford, where he had gone to work the day the Ra'zac had burned down his home and tortured his father, mortally wounding him.

Roran tried to ignore the memory, but it stayed with him, twisting in his gut.

If only I had waited another few hours to leave, I could have saved him. Then the more practical part of Roran replied: *Yes, and the Ra'zac would have killed me before I could have even raised a hand. Without Eragon to protect me, I would have been as helpless as a newborn babe*.

With a quiet step, Baldor joined him by the edge of the canal. "The others are wondering: have you decided on a plan?" he asked.

"I have ideas, but no plan. What of you?"

Baldor crossed his arms as well. "We could wait for Nasuada to send Eragon and Saphira to our aid."

"Bah."

For a while, they watched the never-ending motion of the water below them. Then Baldor said, "What if you just asked them to surrender? Maybe they'll be so frightened when they hear your name, they'll throw open the gates, fall at your feet, and beg for mercy."

Roran chuckled briefly. "I doubt word of me has reached all the way to Aroughs. Still …" He ran his fingers through his beard. "It might be worth a try, to put them off balance if nothing else."

"Even if we gain entrance to the city, can we hold it with so few men?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

A pause grew between them; then Baldor said, "How far we have come."

"Aye."

Again, the only sound was that of the water and of the turning wheels. Finally, Baldor said, "The snowmelt must not be as great here as it is at home. Otherwise, the wheels would be half underwater

come springtime."

Roran shook his head. "It doesn't matter how much snow or rain they get. The sluice gates can be used to limit the amount of water that runs over the wheels, so they don't turn too fast."

"But once the water rises to the top of the gates?"

"Hopefully, the day's grinding is finished by then, but in any case, you uncouple the gears, raise the gates, and …" Roran trailed off as a series of images flashed through his mind, and his whole body flushed with warmth, as if he had drunk an entire tankard of mead in a single gulp.

Could I? he thought wildly. *Would it really work, or … It doesn't matter; we have to try. What else can we do?*

He strode out to the center of the berm that held back the middlemost pond and grasped the spokes that stuck out from the tall wooden screw used to raise and lower the sluice gate. The screw was stiff and hard to move, even though he set his shoulder against it and pushed with all his weight.

"Help me," he said to Baldor, who had remained on the bank, watching with puzzled interest.

Baldor carefully made his way to where Roran stood. Together they managed to close the sluice gate. Then, refusing to answer any questions, Roran insisted that they do the same with both the uppermost and the lowermost gates.

When all three were firmly shut, Roran walked back to Carn, Brigman, and the others and motioned for them to climb off their horses and gather around him. He tapped the head of his hammer while he waited, suddenly feeling unreasonably impatient.

"Well?" Brigman demanded once they were in place.

Roran looked each of them in the eyes, to make sure that he had their undivided attention, then he said, "Right, this is what we're going to do—" And he began to talk, quickly and intensely, for a full half hour, explaining everything that had occurred to him in that one, revelatory instant. As he spoke, Mandel began to grin, and though they remained more serious, Baldor, Delwin, and Hamund also appeared excited by the audacious nature of the scheme he outlined.

Their response gratified Roran. He had done much to earn their trust, and he was pleased to know that he could still count on their support. His only fear was that he might let them down; of all the fates he could imagine, only losing Katrina seemed worse.

Carn, on the other hand, appeared somewhat doubtful. This Roran had expected, but the magician's doubt was slight compared with Brigman's incredulity.

"You're mad!" he exclaimed once Roran had finished. "It'll never succeed."

“You take that back!” said Mandel, and jumped forward, his fists clenched. “Why, Roran’s won more battles than you’ve ever fought in, and he did it without all the warriors you’ve had to order around!”

Brigman snarled, his bare upper lip curling like a snake. “You little whelp! I’ll teach you a lesson in respect you’ll never forget.”

Roran pushed Mandel back before the younger man could attack Brigman. “Oi!” growled Roran. “Behave yourself.” With a surly look, Mandel ceased resisting, but he continued to glower at Brigman, who sneered at him in return.

“It’s an outlandish plan, to be sure,” said Delwin, “but then, your outlandish plans have served us well in the past.” The other men from Carvahall made sounds of agreement.

Carn nodded and said, “Maybe it will work and maybe it won’t. I don’t know. In any event, it’s certain to catch our enemies by surprise, and I have to admit, I’m rather curious to see what will happen. Nothing like this has ever been tried before.”

Roran smiled slightly. Addressing Brigman, he said, “To continue as before, now *that* would be mad. We have only two and a half days to seize Aroughs. Ordinary methods won’t suffice, so we must hazard the *extra*ordinary.”

“That may be,” muttered Brigman, “but this is a ridiculous venture that will kill many a good man, and for no reason other than to demonstrate your supposed cleverness.”

His smile widening, Roran moved toward Brigman until only a few inches separated them. “You don’t have to agree with me, Brigman; you only have to do what you’re told. Now, will you follow my orders or not?”

The air between them grew warm from their breath and from the heat radiating off their skin. Brigman gritted his teeth and twisted his spear even more vigorously than before, but then his gaze wavered and he backed away. “Blast you,” he said. “I’ll be your dog for the while, Stronghammer, but there’ll be a reckoning on this soon enough, just you watch, and then you’ll have to answer for your decisions.”

As long as we capture Aroughs, thought Roran, *I don’t care*. “Mount up!” he shouted. “We have work to do, and little time to do it in! Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

DRAS-LEONA

The sun was climbing into the sky, as was Saphira, when from his place on her back, Eragon spotted Helgrind on the edge of the northern horizon. He felt a surge of loathing as he beheld the distant spike of rock, which rose from the surrounding landscape like a single jagged tooth. So many of his most unpleasant memories were associated with Helgrind, he wished he could destroy it and see its bare gray spires fall crashing to the ground. Saphira was more indifferent to the dark tower of stone, but he could tell that she too disliked being near it.

By the time evening arrived, Helgrind lay behind them, while Dras-Leona lay before them, next to Leona Lake, where dozens of ships and boats bobbed at anchor. The low, broad city was as densely built and inhospitable as Eragon remembered, with its narrow, crooked streets, the filthy hovels packed close together against the yellow mud wall that ringed the center of the city, and behind the wall, the towering shape of Dras-Leona's immense cathedral, black and barbed, where the priests of Helgrind conducted their gruesome rituals.

A stream of refugees trailed along the road to the north—people fleeing the soon-to-be-besieged city for Teirm or Urû'baen, where they might find at least temporary safety from the Varden's inexorable advance.

Dras-Leona seemed as foul and evil to Eragon as when he had first visited it, and it aroused in him a lust for destruction such as he had not felt at either Feinster or Belatona. Here he wanted to lay waste with fire and sword; to lash out with all of the terrible, unnatural energies that were at his disposal; and to indulge in every savage urge and leave behind him nothing but a pit of smoking, blood-soaked ashes. For the poor and the crippled and the enslaved who lived within the confines of Dras-Leona, he had some sympathy. But he was wholly convinced of the city's corruption and believed that the best thing would be to raze it and rebuild it without the taint of perversity the religion of Helgrind had infected it with.

As he fantasized about tearing down the cathedral with Saphira's help, it occurred to him to wonder if the religion of the priests who practiced self-mutilation had a name. His study of the ancient language had taught him to appreciate the importance of names—names were power, names were *understanding*—and until he knew the name of the religion, he would not be able to fully apprehend its true

nature.

In the waning light, the Varden settled on a series of cultivated fields just southeast of Dras-Leona, where the land rose up to a slight plateau, which would provide them with a modicum of protection should the enemy charge their position. The men were weary from marching, but Nasuada put them to work fortifying the camp, as well as assembling the mighty engines of war they had brought with them all the long way from Surda.

Eragon threw himself into the work with a will. First, he joined a team of men who were flattening the fields of wheat and barley, using planks with long loops of rope attached. It would have been faster to scythe the grain, either with steel or magic, but the stubble that remained would be dangerous and uncomfortable to walk over, much less to sleep upon. As it was, the compacted stalks formed a soft, springy surface as fine as any mattress, and one far preferable to the bare ground they were accustomed to.

Eragon labored alongside the other men for almost an hour, at which point they had cleared enough space for the tents of the Varden.

Then he helped in the construction of a siege tower. His greater-than-normal strength allowed him to shift beams that otherwise would have taken several warriors to move; thus, he was able to speed the process. A few of the dwarves who were still with the Varden oversaw the raising of the tower, for the engines were of their design.

Saphira helped as well. With her teeth and claws, she gouged deep trenches in the ground and piled the removed earth into embankments around the camp, accomplishing more in a few minutes than a hundred men could have in a whole day. And, with the fire from her maw and mighty sweeps of her tail, she leveled trees, fences, walls, houses, and everything else around the Varden that might give their foes cover. In all, she presented a picture of fearsome devastation sufficient to inspire trepidation in even the bravest of souls.

It was late at night when the Varden finally finished their preparations and Nasuada ordered the men, dwarves, and Urgals to bed.

Retiring to his tent, Eragon meditated until his mind was clear, as had become his habit. Instead of practicing his penmanship afterward, he spent the next few hours reviewing the spells he thought he might need the following day, as well as inventing new ones to address the specific challenges Dras-Leona presented.

When he felt ready for the battle to come, he abandoned himself to his waking dreams, which were more varied and energetic than usual, for despite his meditation, the prospect of the approaching action stirred his blood and would not allow him to relax. As always, the

waiting and the uncertainty were the most difficult parts for him to bear, and he wished he were already in the midst of the fray, where he would have no time to worry about what might happen.

Saphira was equally restless. From her, he caught snatches of dreams that involved biting and tearing, and he could tell that she was looking forward to the fierce pleasure of battle. Her mood influenced his to a certain degree, but not enough to make him entirely forget his apprehension.

All too soon, morning arrived, and the Varden assembled before the exposed outskirts of Dras-Leona. The army was an imposing sight, but Eragon's admiration was tempered by his observation of the warriors' notched swords, dented helms, and battered shields, as well as the poorly repaired rents in their padded tunics and mail hauberks. If they succeeded in capturing Dras-Leona, they would be able to replace some of their equipment—as they had at Belatona, and before that, Feinster—but there was no replacing the men who bore them.

The longer this drags on, he said to Saphira, *the easier it will be for Galbatorix to defeat us when we arrive at Urû'baen*.

Then we must not delay, she replied.

Eragon sat astride her, next to Nasuada, who was garbed in full armor and mounted upon her fiery black charger, Battle-storm. Arrayed around them were his twelve elven guards, as well as an equal number of Nasuada's guards, the Nighthawks, increased from her normal allotment of six for the duration of the battle. The elves were on foot—for they refused to ride any steeds but those they had raised and trained themselves—while all of the Nighthawks were mounted, including the Urgals. Ten yards to the right were King Orrin and his hand-picked retinue of warriors, each of whom had a colorful plume attached to the crest of his helm. Narheim, the commander of the dwarves, and Garzhvog were both with their respective troops.

After exchanging nods, Nasuada and King Orrin spurred their mounts forward and trotted away from the main body of the Varden, toward the city. With his left hand, Eragon clutched the neck spike in front of him as Saphira followed.

Nasuada and King Orrin drew to a halt before they passed among the ramshackle buildings. At their signal, two heralds—one carrying the Varden's standard, the other Surda's—rode forth up the narrow street that ran through the maze of hovels to Dras-Leona's southern gate.

Eragon frowned as he watched the heralds advance. The city seemed unnaturally empty and quiet. No one was visible in the whole of Dras-Leona, not even upon the battlements of the thick yellow wall, where hundreds of Galbatorix's soldiers ought to be stationed.

The air smells wrong, said Saphira, and she growled ever so slightly,

drawing Nasuada's attention.

At the base of the wall, the Varden's herald called forth in a voice that carried all the way back to Eragon and Saphira: "Hail! In the name of Lady Nasuada of the Varden and King Orrin of Surda, as well as all free peoples of Alagaësia, we bid you open your gates so we may deliver a message of import unto your lord and master, Marcus Tábor. By it, he may hope to profit greatly, as may every man, woman, and child within Dras-Leona."

From behind the wall, a man who could not be seen replied: "These gates shall not open. State your message where you stand."

"Speak you for Lord Tábor?"

"I do."

"Then we charge you to remind him that discussions of statesmanship are more properly pursued in the privacy of one's own chambers rather than in the open, where any might hear."

"I take no orders from you, lackey! Deliver your message—and quickly, too!—ere I lose patience and fill you with arrows."

Eragon was impressed; the herald did not appear flustered or cowed by the threat but continued without hesitation. "As you wish. Our liegelords offer peace and friendship to Lord Tábor and all the people of Dras-Leona. We have no argument with you, only with Galbatorix, and we would not fight you if we had the choice. Have we not a common cause? Many of us once lived in the Empire, and we left only because Galbatorix's cruel reign drove us from our lands. We are your kin, in blood and in spirit. Join forces with us, and we may yet free ourselves of the usurper who now sits in Urû'baen.

"Should you accept our offer, our liegelords do guarantee the safety of Lord Tábor and his family, as well as whoever else may now be in the service of the Empire, although none will be allowed to maintain their position if they have given oaths that cannot be broken. And if your oaths will not let you aid us, then at least do not hinder us. Raise your gates and lay down your swords, and we promise you will come to no harm. But try to bar us, and we shall sweep you aside like so much chaff, for none can withstand the might of our army, nor that of Eragon Shadeslayer and the dragon Saphira."

At the sound of her name, Saphira raised her head and loosed a terrifying roar.

Above the gate, Eragon saw a tall, cloaked figure climb onto the battlements and stand between two merlons, staring over the heralds toward Saphira. Eragon squinted, but he could not make out the man's face. Four other black-robed people joined the man, and those Eragon knew for priests of Helgrind by their truncated forms: one was missing a forearm, two were missing a leg each, and the last of their company was missing an arm *and* both legs, and was carried by his or her

companions on a small padded litter.

The cloaked man threw back his head and uttered a peal of laughter that crashed and boomed with thunderous force. Below him, the heralds struggled to control their mounts as the horses reared and tried to bolt.

Eragon's stomach sank, and he gripped the hilt of Brisingr, ready to draw it at a moment's notice.

"None can withstand your might?" said the man, his voice echoing off the buildings. "You have an overly high opinion of yourselves, I think." And with a gigantic bellow, the glittering red mass of Thorn leaped from the streets below onto the roof of a house, piercing the wooden shingles with his talons. The dragon spread his huge, claw-tipped wings, opened his crimson maw, and raked the sky with a sheet of rippling flame.

In a mocking voice, Murtagh—for it *was* Murtagh, Eragon realized—added, "Dash yourselves against the walls all you want; you will never take Dras-Leona, not so long as Thorn and I are here to defend it. Send your finest warriors and magicians to fight us, and they will die, each and every one. That I promise. There isn't a man among you who can best us. Not even you … *Brother*. Run back to your hiding places before it is too late, and pray that Galbatorix does not venture forth to deal with you himself. Otherwise, death and sorrow will be your only reward."

A Toss of the Bones

"Sir, sir! The gate's opening!"

Roran looked up from the map he was studying as one of the camp sentinels burst into the tent, red-faced and panting.

"Which gate?" Roran asked, a deadly calm settling over him. "Be precise." He put aside the rod he had been using to measure distances.

"The one closest to us, sir … on the road, not the canal."

Pulling his hammer out from under his belt, Roran left the tent and ran through the camp to its southern edge. There he trained his gaze on Aroughs. To his dismay, he saw several hundred horsemen pouring out of the city, their brightly colored pennants snapping in the wind as they assembled in a broad formation before the black maw of the open gateway.

They'll cut us to pieces, Roran thought, despairing. Only a hundred fifty or so of his men remained in the camp, and many were wounded and unable to fight. All the rest were at the mills he had visited the previous day, or at the slate mine farther down the coast, or along the banks of the westernmost canal, searching for the barges that were needed if his plan was to succeed. None of the warriors could be recalled in time to fend off the horsemen.

When he sent the men on their missions, Roran had been aware that he was leaving the camp vulnerable to a counterattack. However, he had hoped that the city folk would be too cowed by the recent assaults on their walls to attempt anything so daring—and that the warriors he had kept with him would be sufficient to convince any distant observers that the main body of his force was still stationed among the tents.

The first of those assumptions, it seemed, had most definitely proven to be a mistake. Whether the defenders of Aroughs were aware of his ruse, he was not entirely sure, but he thought it likely, given the rather limited number of horsemen gathering in front of the city. If the soldiers or their commanders had anticipated facing the full strength of Roran's company, he would have expected them to field twice as many troops. In either event, he still had to figure out a way to stave off their attack and save his men from being slaughtered.

Baldor, Carn, and Brigman ran up, weapons in hand. As Carn hastily donned a mail shirt, Baldor said, "What do we do?"

"There's nothing we *can* do," said Brigman. "You've doomed this whole expedition with your foolishness, Stronghammer. We have to

flee—now—before those cursed riders are upon us."

Roran spat on the ground. "Retreat? We'll not retreat. The men can't escape on foot, and even if they could, I won't abandon our wounded."

"Don't you understand? We've lost here. If we stay, we'll be killed—or worse, taken prisoner!"

"Leave it, Brigman! I'm not about to turn tail and run!"

"Why not? So you don't have to admit you failed? Because you hope to salvage something of your honor in one final, pointless battle? Is that it? Can't you see that you'll only be causing the Varden even greater harm?"

By the base of the city, the horsemen raised their swords and spears over their heads and—with a chorus of whoops and shouts that were audible even over the distance—dug their spurs into their steeds and began to thunder across the sloping plain toward the Varden's encampment.

Brigman resumed his tirade: "I won't let you squander our lives merely to assuage your pride. Stay if you must, but—"

"Quiet!" Roran bellowed. "Keep your muzzle shut, or I'll shut it for you! Baldor, watch him. If he does anything you don't like, let him feel the point of your sword." Brigman swelled with anger, but he held his tongue as Baldor raised his sword and aimed it at Brigman's breast.

Roran guessed that he had maybe five minutes to decide upon a course of action. Five minutes in which so much hung in the balance.

He tried to imagine how they could kill or maim enough of the horsemen to drive them away, but almost immediately he discounted the possibility. There was nowhere to herd the onrushing cavalry where his men might have the advantage. The land was too flat, too empty, for any such maneuvers.

We can't win if we fight, so—What if we scare them? But how? Fire? Fire might prove as deadly to friend as to foe. Besides, the damp grass would only smolder. *Smoke? No, that's of no help*.

He glanced over at Carn. "Can you conjure up an image of Saphira and have her roar and breathe fire, as if she were really here?"

The spellcaster's thin cheeks drained of color. He shook his head, his expression panicky. "Maybe. I don't know, I've never tried before. I'd be creating an image of her from memory. It might not even look like a living creature." He nodded toward the line of galloping horsemen. "They'd know something was wrong."

Roran dug his nails into his palm. Four minutes remained, if that.

"It might be worth a try," he muttered. "We just need to distract them, confuse them.…" He glanced at the sky, hoping to see a curtain of rain sweeping toward the camp, but alas, a pair of attenuated

clouds drifting high above was the only formation visible. *Confusion, uncertainty, doubt … What is it people fear? The unknown, the things they don't understand, that's what.*

In an instant, Roran thought of a half-dozen schemes to undermine the confidence of their foes, each more outlandish than the last, until he struck upon an idea that was so simple and so daring, it seemed perfect. Besides, unlike the others, it appealed to his ego, for it required the participation of only one other person: Carn.

"Order the men to hide in their tents!" he shouted, already beginning to move. "And tell them to keep quiet; I don't want to hear so much as a peep from them unless we're attacked!"

Going to the nearest tent, which was empty, Roran jammed his hammer back under his belt and grabbed a dirty woolen blanket from one of the piles of bedding on the ground. Then he ran to a cookfire and scooped up a wide, stumplike section of log the warriors had been using as a stool.

With the log under one arm and the blanket thrown over the opposite shoulder, Roran sprinted out of the camp toward a slight mound perhaps a hundred feet in front of the tents. "Someone get me a set of knucklebones and a horn of mead!" he called. "And fetch me the table my maps are on. Now, blast it, now!"

Behind him, he heard a tumult of footsteps and jangling equipment as the men rushed to conceal themselves inside their tents. An eerie silence fell over the camp a few seconds later, save for the noise created by the men collecting the items he had requested.

Roran did not waste time looking back. At the crest of the mound, he set the log upright on its thicker end and twisted it back and forth several times to ensure that it would not wobble beneath him. When he was satisfied it was stable, he sat on it and looked out over the sloping field toward the charging horsemen.

Three minutes or less remained until they would arrive. Through the wood beneath him, he could feel the drumming of the horses' hooves—the sensation growing stronger every second.

"Where are the knucklebones and mead?!" he shouted without taking his eyes off the cavalry.

He smoothed his beard with a quick pass of his hand and tugged on the hem of his tunic. Fear made him wish that he were wearing his mail hauberk, but the colder, more cunning part of his mind reasoned that it would cause his enemies even greater apprehension to see him sitting there with no armor, as if he were totally at his ease. The same part of his mind also convinced him to leave his hammer tucked in his belt, so it would appear he felt safe in the presence of the soldiers.

"Sorry," Carn said breathlessly as he ran up to Roran, along with a man who was carrying the small folding table from Roran's tent. They

placed the table before him and spread the blanket over it, whereupon Carn handed Roran a horn half-full of mead, as well as a leather cup containing the usual five knucklebones.

"Go on, get out of here," he said. Carn turned to leave, but Roran caught him by the arm. "Can you make the air shimmer on either side of me, as it does above a fire on a cold winter's day?"

Carn's eyes narrowed. "Possibly, but what good—"

"Just do it if you can. Now go, hide yourself!"

As the lanky magician sprinted back toward the camp, Roran shook the knucklebones in the cup, then poured them out onto the table and began to play by himself, tossing the bones into the air—first one, then two, then three, and so forth—and catching them on the back of his hand. His father, Garrow, had often amused himself in a like manner while smoking his pipe and sitting in a rickety old chair on the porch of their house during the long summer evenings of Palancar Valley. Sometimes Roran had played with him, and when he did, he usually lost, but mostly Garrow had preferred to compete against himself.

Though his heart was thumping hard and fast and his palms were slick with sweat, Roran strove to maintain a calm demeanor. If his gambit was to have the slightest chance of success, he had to comport himself with an air of unbreakable confidence, regardless of his actual emotions.

He kept his gaze focused on the knucklebones and refused to look up even as the horsemen drew closer and closer. The sound of the galloping animals swelled until he became convinced that they were going to ride right over him.

What a strange way to die, he thought, and smiled grimly. Then he thought of Katrina and of their unborn child, and he took comfort in the knowledge that, should he die, his bloodline would continue. It was not immortality such as Eragon possessed, but it was an immortality of a sort, and it would have to suffice.

At the last moment, when the cavalry was only a few yards away from the table, someone shouted, "Whoa! Whoa there! Rein in your horses. I say, rein in your horses!" And, with a clatter of buckles and creaking leather, the champing line of animals reluctantly slowed to a halt.

And still, Roran kept his eyes angled downward.

He sipped the pungent mead, then tossed the bones again and caught two of them on the back of his hand, where they lay rocking on the ridges of his tendons.

The aroma of freshly overturned soil wafted over him, warm and comforting, along with the distinctly less pleasant smell of lathered horseflesh.

“Ho there, my fine fellow!” said the same man who had ordered the soldiers to halt. “Ho there, I say! Who are you to sit here this splendid morning, drinking and enjoying a merry game of chance, as if you hadn’t a care in the world? Do we not merit the courtesy of being met with drawn swords? Who are you, I say?”

Slowly, as if he had just noticed the presence of the soldiers and considered it to be of little importance, Roran raised his gaze from the table to regard a small bearded man with a flamboyantly plumed helm who sat before him on an enormous black war-horse, which was heaving like a pair of bellows.

“I’m nobody’s *fine fellow*, and certainly not yours,” Roran said, making no effort to conceal his dislike at being addressed in such a familiar manner. “Who are you, I might ask, to interrupt my game so rudely?”

The long, striped feathers mounted atop the man’s helm bobbed and fluttered as he looked Roran over, as if Roran were an unfamiliar creature he had encountered while hunting. “Tharos the Quick is my name, Captain of the Guard. Rude as you are, I must tell you, it would grieve me mightily to kill a man as bold as yourself without knowing his name.” As if to emphasize his words, Tharos lowered the spear he held until it was pointing at Roran.

Three rows of riders were clustered close behind Tharos. Among their numbers, Roran spied a slim, hook-nosed man with the emaciated face and arms—which were bare to the shoulders—that Roran had come to associate with the spellcasters of the Varden. Very suddenly, he found himself hoping that Carn had succeeded in making the air shimmer. However, he dared not turn his head to look.

“Stronghammer is my name,” he said. With a single deft movement, he gathered up the knucklebones, tossed them skyward, and caught three on his hand. “Roran Stronghammer, and Eragon Shadeslayer is my cousin. You might have heard mention of him, if not of me.”

A rustle of unease spread among the line of horsemen, and Roran thought he saw Tharos’s eyes widen for an instant. “An impressive claim, that, but how can we be sure of its veracity? Any man might say he is another if it served his purpose.”

Roran drew his hammer and slammed it down on the table with a muffled *thump*. Then, ignoring the soldiers, he resumed his game. He uttered a noise of disgust as two of the bones fell from the back of his hand, costing him the round.

“Ah,” said Tharos, and coughed, clearing his throat. “You have a most illustrious reputation, Stronghammer, although some argue that it has been exaggerated beyond all reason. Is it true, for example, that you single-handedly felled nigh on three hundred men in the village of Deldarad in Surda?”

“I never learned what the place was called, but if Deldarad it was, then yes, I slew many a soldier there. It was only a hundred ninety-three, however, and I was well guarded by my own men while I fought.”

“Only a hundred ninety-three?” Tharos said in a wondering tone. “You are too modest, Stronghammer. Such a feat might earn a man a place in many a song and story.”

Roran shrugged and lifted the horn to his mouth, feigning the action of swallowing, for he could not afford to have his mind clouded by the potent dwarf brew. “I fight to win, not to lose.… Let me offer you a drink, as one warrior to another,” he said, and extended the horn toward Tharos.

The short warrior hesitated, and his eyes darted toward the spellcaster behind him for a second. Then he wet his lips and said, “Perhaps I will at that.” Dismounting his charger, Tharos handed his spear to one of the other soldiers, pulled off his gauntlets, and walked over to the table, where he cautiously accepted the horn from Roran.

Tharos sniffed at the mead, then downed a hearty quaff. The feathers on his helm quivered as he grimaced.

“It’s not to your liking?” Roran asked, amused.

“I confess, these mountain drinks are too harsh for my tongue,” Tharos said, returning the horn to Roran. “I much prefer the wines of our fields; they are warm and mellow and less likely to strip a man of his senses.”

“ ’Tis sweet as mother’s milk to me,” Roran lied. “I drink it morning, noon, and night.”

Donning his gloves once again, Tharos returned to the side of his horse, hauled himself into the saddle, and took back his spear from the soldier who had been holding it for him. He directed another glance toward the hook-nosed spellcaster behind him, whose complexion, Roran noticed, had acquired a deathly cast in the brief span since Tharos had set foot on the ground. Tharos must have noticed the change in his magician as well, for his own expression became strained.

“My thanks for your hospitality, Roran Stronghammer,” he said, raising his voice so that his entire troop could hear. “Mayhap I will soon have the honor of entertaining you within the walls of Aroughs. If so, I promise to serve you the finest wines from my family’s estate, and perhaps with them I will be able to wean you off such barbaric milk as you have there. I think you will find our wine has much to recommend it. We let it age in oaken casks for months or sometimes even years. It would be a pity if all that work were wasted and the casks were knocked open and the wine were allowed to run out into the streets and paint them red with the blood of our grapes.”

“That would indeed be a shame,” Roran replied, “but sometimes you cannot avoid spilling a bit of wine when cleaning your table.” Holding the horn out to one side, he tipped it over and poured what little mead remained onto the grass below.

Tharos was utterly still for a moment—even the feathers on his helm were motionless—then, with an angry snarl, he yanked his horse around and shouted at his men, “Form up! Form up, I say.… Yah!” And with that final yell, he spurred his horse away from Roran, and the rest of the soldiers followed, urging their steeds to a gallop as they retraced their steps to Aroughs.

Roran maintained his pretense of arrogance and indifference until the soldiers were well away, then he slowly released his breath and rested his elbows on his knees. His hands were trembling slightly.

It worked, he thought, amazed.

He heard men running toward him from the camp, and he looked over his shoulder to see Baldor and Carn approaching, accompanied by at least fifty of the warriors who had been hiding within the tents.

“You did it!” exclaimed Baldor as they drew near. “You did it! I can’t believe it!” He laughed and slapped Roran on the shoulder hard enough to knock him against the table.

The other men crowded around him, also laughing, as well as praising him with extravagant phrases, boasting that under his leadership they would capture Aroughs without so much as a single casualty, and belittling the courage and character of the city’s inhabitants. Someone shoved a warm, half-full wineskin into his hand, which he stared at with unexpected loathing, then passed to the man directly to his left.

“Did you cast any spells?” he asked Carn, his words barely audible over the hubbub of the celebrations.

“What?” Carn leaned closer, and Roran repeated his question, whereupon the magician smiled and nodded vigorously. “Aye. I managed to make the air shimmer as you wanted.”

“And did you attack their enchanter? When they left, he looked as if he was about to faint.”

Carn’s smile broadened. “It was his own doing. He kept trying to break the illusion he thought I had created—to pierce the veil of shimmering air so he could see what lay behind—but there was nothing to break, nothing to pierce, so he expended all his strength in vain.”

Then Roran chuckled, and his chuckle grew into a long, full-bodied laugh that rose above the excited clamor and rolled out over the fields in the direction of Aroughs.

For several minutes, he allowed himself to bask in the admiration of his men, until he heard a loud warning cry from one of the sentries

stationed at the edge of the camp.

"Move aside! Let me see!" said Roran, and sprang to his feet. The warriors complied, and he beheld a lone man off to the west—whom he recognized as one of the party he had sent to search the banks of the canals—riding hard over the fields, heading toward the camp. "Have him come here," instructed Roran, and a lanky, red-haired swordsman ran off to intercept the rider.

While they waited for the man to arrive, Roran picked up the knucklebones and dropped them, one by one, into the leather cup. The bones made a satisfying clatter as they landed.

As soon as the warrior was within hailing distance, Roran called out, "Ho there! Is all well? Were you attacked?"

To Roran's annoyance, the man remained silent until he was only a few yards away, whereupon he jumped off his mount and presented himself before Roran, standing as stiff and straight as a sun-starved pine, and, in a loud voice, exclaimed, "Captain, sir!" Upon closer inspection, Roran realized that the man was actually more of a boy—that, in fact, he was the same scraggly youth who had grabbed his reins when he had first ridden into the camp. The realization did nothing to sate Roran's frustrated curiosity, though.

"Well, what is it? I haven't got all day."

"Sir! Hamund sent me to tell you that we found all the barges we need and that he's building the sleds to transport them across to the other canal."

Roran nodded. "Good. Does he need any more help to get them there in time?"

"Sir, no sir!"

"And is that all?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"You don't have to keep calling me *sir*. Once is enough. Understood?"

"Sir, yes—Uh, yes s—Uh, I mean, yes, of course."

Roran suppressed a smile. "You've done well. Get yourself something to eat and then ride out to the mine and report back to me. I want to know what they've accomplished so far."

"Yes si—Sorry, sir—That is, I didn't … I'll be going at once, Captain." Two spots of crimson appeared on the youth's cheeks as he stammered. He ducked his head in a quick bow, then hurried back to his steed and trotted off toward the tents.

The visit left Roran in a more serious mood, for it reminded him that, as fortunate as they were to have won a reprieve from the soldiers' blades, there was much that still needed doing, and any of the tasks that lay before them might cost them the siege if handled badly.

To the warriors at large, he said, “Back to the camp with the lot of you! I want two rows of trenches dug around the tents by nightfall; those yellow-bellied soldiers might change their minds and decide to attack anyway, and I want to be prepared.” A few of the men groaned at the mention of digging trenches, but the rest appeared to accept the order with good humor.

In a low voice, Carn said, “You don’t want to tire them out too much before tomorrow.”

“I know,” Roran replied, also in a soft tone. “But the camp needs fortifying, and it’ll help keep them from brooding. Besides, no matter how worn out they may be tomorrow, battle will give them new strength. It always does.”

The day passed quickly for Roran when he was concentrating on some immediate problem or occupied with intense physical exertion, and slowly whenever his mind was free to ponder their situation. His men worked valiantly—by saving them from the soldiers, he had won their loyalty and devotion in a way that words never could—but it seemed ever more obvious to him that, despite their efforts, they would not be able to finish the preparations in the brief span of hours that remained.

All through the late morning, afternoon, and early evening, a sense of sick hopelessness grew within Roran, and he cursed himself for deciding upon such a complicated and ambitious plan.

I should have known from the start that we didn’t have the time for this, he thought. But it was too late to try some other scheme. The only option left was to strive their utmost and hope that, somehow, it would be enough to wrest victory from the mistakes of his incompetence.

When dusk arrived, a faint spark of optimism leavened his pessimism, for all of a sudden, the preparations began to come together with unexpected speed. And a few hours later, when it was fully dark and the stars shone bright overhead, he found himself standing by the mills along with almost seven hundred of his men, having completed all of the arrangements needed if they were to capture Aroughs before the end of the following day.

Roran uttered a short laugh of relief, pride, and incredulousness as he gazed upon the object of their toils.

Then he congratulated the warriors around him and bade them return to their tents. “Rest now, while you can. We attack at dawn!”

And the men cheered, despite their evident exhaustion.

My Friend, My Enemy

That night, Roran's sleep was shallow and troubled. It was impossible for him to entirely relax, knowing the importance of the upcoming battle and that he might very well be wounded during the fighting, as he often had been before. Those two thoughts caused a line of vibrating tension to form between his head and the base of his spine, a line that pulled him out of his dark, weird dreams at regular intervals.

As a result, he woke easily when a soft, dull *thud* sounded outside his tent.

He opened his eyes and stared at the panel of fabric above his head. The interior of the tent was barely visible, and only because of the faint line of orange torchlight that seeped through the gap between the flaps at the entrance. The air felt cold and dead against his skin, as if he were buried in a cave deep underground. Whatever the time, it was late, very late. Even the animals of the night would have returned to their lairs and gone to sleep. No one ought to be up, save the sentinels, and the sentinels were stationed nowhere near his tent.

Roran kept his breathing as slow and shallow as he could while he listened for any other noises. The loudest thing he heard was the beating of his own heart, which grew stronger and faster as the line of tension within him thrummed like a plucked lute string.

A minute passed.

Then another.

Then, just when he began to think there was no cause for alarm and the hammering in his veins began to slow, a shadow fell across the front of the tent, blocking the light from the torches beyond.

Roran's pulse tripled, his heart pounding as hard as if he were running up the side of a mountain. Whoever was there could not have come to rouse him for the assault on Aroughs, nor to bring him some piece of intelligence, for they would not have hesitated to call his name and barge inside.

A black-gloved hand—only a shade darker than the surrounding murk—slid between the entrance flaps and groped for the tie that held them closed.

Roran opened his mouth to raise the alarm, then changed his mind. It would be foolish to waste the advantage of surprise. Besides, if the intruder knew he had been spotted, he might panic, and panic could make him even more dangerous.

With his right hand, Roran carefully pulled his dagger from under

the rolled-up cloak he used as a pillow and hid the weapon by his knee, beneath a fold in the blanket. At the same time, he grasped the edge of the blankets with his other hand.

A rim of golden light outlined the shape of the intruder as he slipped into the tent. Roran saw that the man was wearing a padded leather jerkin, but no plate or mail armor. Then the flap fell shut, and darkness enveloped them again.

The faceless figure crept toward where Roran lay.

Roran felt as if he was going to pass out from lack of air as he continued to restrict his breathing so that it would appear he was still asleep.

When the intruder was halfway to the cot, Roran tore his blankets off, threw them over the man, and, with a wild yell, leaped toward him, drawing back the dagger to stab him in the gut.

"Wait!" cried the man. Surprised, Roran stayed his hand, and the two of them crashed to the ground together. "Friend! I'm a friend!"

A half second later, Roran gasped as he felt two hard blows to his left kidney. The pain nearly incapacitated him, but he forced himself to roll away from the man, trying to put some distance between them.

Roran pushed himself to his feet, then he again charged at his attacker, who was still struggling to free himself from the blanket.

"Wait, I'm your friend!" cried the man, but Roran was not about to trust him a second time. It was well he did not, for as he slashed at the intruder, the man trapped Roran's right arm and dagger with a twirl of the blankets, then slashed at Roran with a knife he had produced from his jerkin. There was a faint tugging sensation across Roran's chest, but it was so slight, he paid it no mind.

Roran bellowed and yanked on the blanket as hard as he could, pulling the man off his feet and throwing him against one side of the tent, which collapsed on top of them, trapping them under the heavy wool. Roran shook the twisted blanket off his arm, then crawled toward the man, feeling his way through the darkness.

The hard sole of a boot struck Roran's left hand, and the tips of his fingers went numb.

Lunging forward, Roran caught the man by an ankle as he was trying to turn to face him head-on. The man kicked like a rabbit and broke Roran's grip, but Roran grabbed his ankle again and squeezed it through the thin leather, digging his fingers into the tendon at the back of the heel until the man roared in pain.

Before he could recover, Roran clawed his way up the man's body and pinned his knife hand to the ground. Roran tried to drive his dagger into the man's side, but he was too slow; his opponent found his wrist and seized it with a grip of iron.

"Who are you?" Roran growled.

“I’m your friend,” the man said, his breath warm in Roran’s face. It smelled like wine and mulled cider. Then he kneed Roran in the ribs three times in quick succession.

Roran bashed his forehead against the assassin’s nose, breaking it with a loud *snap*. The man snarled and thrashed underneath him, but Roran refused to let him go.

“You’re … no friend of mine,” said Roran, grunting as he bore down on his right arm and slowly pushed the dagger toward the man’s side. As they strained against one another, Roran was vaguely aware of people shouting outside the fallen tent.

At last the man’s arm buckled, and with sudden ease, the dagger plunged through his jerkin and into the softness of living flesh. The man convulsed. Fast as he could, Roran stabbed him several more times, then buried the dagger in his chest.

Through the hilt of the dagger, Roran felt the birdlike flutters of the man’s heart as it cut itself to pieces on the razor-sharp blade. Twice more the man shuddered and jerked, then ceased resisting and simply lay there, panting.

Roran continued to hold him as the life drained out of him, their embrace as intimate as any lovers’. Though the man had tried to kill him, and though Roran knew nothing about him besides that fact, he could not help but feel a sense of terrible closeness to him. Here was another human being—another living, thinking creature—whose life was ending because of what he had done.

“Who are you?” he whispered. “Who sent you?”

“I … I almost killed you,” said the man, sounding perversely satisfied. Then he uttered a long, hollow sigh, his body went limp, and he was no more.

Roran let his head fall forward against the man’s chest and gasped for air, shaking from head to toe as the shock of the attack racked his limbs.

People began to pull at the fabric resting on top of him. “Get it off me!” Roran shouted, and lashed out with his left arm, unable to bear any longer the oppressive weight of the wool, and the darkness, and the cramped space, and the stifling air.

A rent appeared in the panel above him as someone cut through the wool. Warm, flickering torchlight poured through the opening.

Frantic to escape his confinement, Roran lurched to his feet, grabbed at the edges of the slit, and dragged himself out of the collapsed tent. He staggered into the light, wearing nothing but his breeches, and looked round in confusion.

Baldor was standing there, as were Carn, Delwin, Mandel, and ten other warriors, all of whom held swords and axes at the ready. None of the men were fully dressed, save for two, whom Roran recognized

as sentinels posted on the night watch.

"Gods," someone exclaimed, and Roran turned to see one of the warriors peeling back the side of the ruined tent to expose the corpse of the assassin.

The dead man was of an unimposing size, with long, shaggy hair gathered in a ponytail and a leather patch mounted over his left eye. His nose was crooked and squashed flat—broken by Roran—and a mask of blood covered the lower part of his shaved face. More blood caked his chest and side and the ground beneath him. It appeared almost too much to have come from a single person.

"Roran," said Baldor. Roran continued to stare at the assassin, unable to tear his gaze away. "Roran," Baldor said again, but louder. "Roran, listen to me. Are you hurt? What happened? … Roran!"

The concern in Baldor's voice finally caught Roran's attention. "What?" he asked.

"Roran, are you hurt?!"

Why would he think that? Puzzled, Roran looked down at himself. The hair on his torso was matted with gore from top to bottom, while streaks of blood covered his arms and stained the upper part of his breeches.

"I'm fine," he said, though he had difficulty forming the words. "Has anyone else been attacked?"

In response, Delwin and Hamund moved apart, revealing a slumped body. It was the youth who had been running messages for him earlier.

"Ah!" groaned Roran, and sorrow filled him. "What was he doing wandering about?"

One of the warriors stepped forward. "I shared a tent with him, Captain. He always had to step out to relieve himself at night, 'cause he drank so much tea before turning in. His mother told him it would keep him from getting sick.… He was a good sort, Captain. He didn't deserve to be cut down from behind by some sneaking coward."

"No, he didn't," Roran murmured. *If he hadn't been there, I would be dead now*. He motioned toward the assassin. "Are there any more of these killers on the loose?"

The men stirred, glancing at each other; then Baldor said, "I don't think so."

"Have you checked?"

"No."

"Well then check! But try not to wake up everyone else; they need their sleep. And see to it that guards are stationed at the tents of all the commanders from now on." … *Should have thought of that before*.

Roran stayed where he was, feeling dull and stupid as Baldor issued a series of quick orders, and everyone but Carn, Delwin, and Hamund

dispersed. Four of the warriors picked up the crumpled remains of the boy and carried him away to bury, while the rest set out to search the camp.

Going over to the assassin, Hamund nudged the man's knife with the tip of his boot. "You must have scared those soldiers more than we thought this morning."

"Must have."

Roran shivered. He was cold all over, especially his hands and feet, which were like ice. Carn noticed and fetched him a blanket. "Here," said Carn, and wrapped it around Roran's shoulders. "Come sit by one of the watchfires. I'll have some water heated so you can clean yourself. All right?"

Roran nodded, not trusting his tongue to work.

Carn started to lead him away, but before they had gone more than a few feet, the magician abruptly halted, forcing Roran to stop as well. "Delwin, Hamund," said Carn, "bring me a cot, something to sit on, a jug of mead, and several bandages as fast as you can. *Now*, if you please."

Startled, the two men sprang into action.

"Why?" asked Roran, confused. "What's wrong?"

His expression grim, Carn pointed at Roran's chest. "If you're not wounded, then what's *that*, pray tell?"

Roran looked where Carn was pointing and saw, hidden amid the hair and the gore on his breast, a long, deep cut that started in the middle of his right chest muscle, ran across his sternum, and ended just below his left nipple. At its widest, the gash hung open over a quarter of an inch, and it resembled nothing so much as a lipless mouth stretched wide in a huge, ghastly grin. The most disturbing feature of the cut, however, was the complete lack of blood; not so much as a single drop oozed out of the incision. Roran could clearly see the thin layer of yellow fat underneath his skin and, below it, the dark red muscle of his chest, which was the same color as a slice of raw venison.

Accustomed as he was to the horrific damage that swords, spears, and other weapons could wreak on flesh and bone, Roran still found the sight unnerving. He had suffered numerous injuries in the course of fighting the Empire—most notably when one of the Ra'zac had bitten his right shoulder during their capture of Katrina in Carvahall—but never before had he received such a large or uncanny wound.

"Does it hurt?" Carn asked.

Roran shook his head without looking up. "No." His throat tightened, and his heart—which was still racing from the fight—redoubled in speed, pounding so fast that one beat could not be distinguished from the next. *Was the knife poisoned?* he wondered.

“Roran, you have to relax,” said Carn. “I think I can heal you, but you’re only going to make this more difficult if you pass out.” Taking him by the shoulder, he guided Roran back to the cot that Hamund had just dragged out of a tent, and Roran obediently sat.

“How am I supposed to relax?” he asked with a short, brittle laugh.

“Breathe deeply and imagine you’re sinking into the ground each time you exhale. Trust me; it’ll work.”

Roran did as he was told, but the moment he released his third breath, his knotted muscles began to unclench and blood sprayed from the cut, splashing Carn on the face. The magician recoiled and uttered an oath. Fresh blood spilled down Roran’s stomach, hot against his bare skin.

“Now it hurts,” he said, gritting his teeth.

“Oi!” shouted Carn, and waved at Delwin, who was running toward them, his arms full of bandages and other items. As the villager deposited the mound of objects on one end of the cot, Carn grabbed a wad of lint and pressed it against Roran’s wound, stopping the bleeding for the moment. “Lie down,” he ordered.

Roran complied, and Hamund brought over a stool for Carn, who seated himself, keeping pressure on the lint the whole while. Extending his free hand, Carn snapped his fingers and said, “Open the mead and give it to me.”

Once Delwin passed him the jug, Carn looked directly at Roran and said, “I have to clean out the cut before I can seal it with magic. Do you understand?”

Roran nodded. “Give me something to bite.”

He heard the sound of buckles and straps being undone, then either Delwin or Hamund placed a thick sword belt between his teeth, and he clamped down on it with all his strength. “Do it!” he said as best he could past the obstruction in his mouth.

Before Roran had time to react, Carn plucked the lint off his chest and, in the same motion, poured mead across his wound, washing the hair, gore, and other accumulated filth out of the incision. As the mead struck, Roran uttered a strangled groan and arched his back, scrabbling at the sides of the cot.

“There, all done,” said Carn, and put aside the jug.

Roran stared up at the stars, every muscle in his body quivering, and tried to ignore the pain as Carn placed his hands over the wound and began to murmur phrases in the ancient language.

After a few seconds, although it seemed more like minutes to Roran, he felt an almost unbearable itch deep within his chest as Carn repaired the damage the assassin’s knife had caused. The itch crawled upward, toward the surface of his skin, and where it passed, the pain vanished. Still, the sensation was so unpleasant, it made him want to

scratch at himself until he tore his flesh.

When it was over, Carn sighed and slumped over, holding his head in his hands.

Forcing his rebellious limbs to do as he wished, Roran swung his legs over the edge of the cot and sat upright. He ran a hand over his chest. Aside from the hair, it was perfectly smooth. Whole. Unblemished. Exactly as it had been before the one-eyed man had snuck into his tent.

Magic.

Off to the side, Delwin and Hamund stood staring. They appeared a bit wide-eyed, though he doubted anyone else would have noticed.

"Take yourselves to bed," he said, and waved. "We'll be leaving in a few hours, and I need you to be alert."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" Delwin asked.

"Yes, yes," he lied. "Thank you for your help, but go now. How am I supposed to rest with the two of you hovering over me like mother hens?"

After they had departed, Roran rubbed his face and then sat looking at his trembling, bloodstained hands. He felt wrung out. Empty. As if he had done an entire week's worth of work in just a few minutes.

"Will you still be able to fight?" he asked Carn.

The magician shrugged. "Not so well as before.… It was a price that had to be paid, though. We can't go into battle without you to lead us."

Roran did not bother to argue. "You should get some rest. Dawn isn't far off."

"What of you?"

"I'm going to wash, find a tunic, and then check with Baldor and see if he's ferreted out any more of Galbatorix's killers."

"Aren't you going to lie down?"

"No." Without meaning to, he scratched at his chest. He stopped himself when he realized what he was doing. "I couldn't sleep before, and now …"

"I understand." Carn slowly rose from the stool. "I'll be in my tent if you need me."

Roran watched him stumble heavy-footed into the darkness. When he was no longer visible, Roran closed his eyes and thought of Katrina, in an attempt to calm himself. Summoning what little remained of his strength, he went over to his collapsed tent and dug through it until he located his clothes, weapons, armor, and a waterskin. The whole while, he studiously avoided looking at the body of the assassin, though he sometimes caught a glimpse as he moved about the pool of tangled cloth.

Finally, Roran knelt and, with eyes averted, yanked his dagger out

of the corpse. The blade came free with the slithery sound of metal scraping against bone. He gave the dagger a hard shake, to remove any loose blood, and heard the splatter of several droplets striking the ground.

In the cold silence of the night, Roran slowly prepared himself for battle. Then he sought out Baldor—who assured him that no one else had gotten past the sentinels—and walked the perimeter of the camp, reviewing every aspect of their upcoming assault on Aroughs. Afterward, he found half a cold chicken left uneaten from dinner and sat gnawing on it and gazing at the stars.

Yet, no matter what he did, his mind returned again and again to the sight of the young man lying dead outside his tent. *Who is it who decides that one man should live and another should die? My life wasn't worth any more than his, but he's the one who's buried, while I get to enjoy at least a few more hours above the ground. Is it chance, random and cruel, or is there some purpose or pattern to all this, even if it lies beyond our ken?*

A Flour Made of Flame

"How do you like having a sister?" Roran asked Baldor as they rode side by side toward the nearest set of mills in the gray half-light that precedes dawn.

"There's not much to like, is there? I mean, there's not much *of* her yet, if you take my meaning. She's as small as a kitten." Baldor tugged on his reins as his horse tried to veer toward a patch of particularly lush grass next to the trail. "It's strange to have another sibling—brother *or* sister—after so long."

Roran nodded. Twisting in the saddle, he glanced back over his shoulder, checking to make sure that the column of six hundred and fifty men who were following them on foot were keeping pace. At the mills, Roran dismounted and tethered his horse to a hitching post before the lowest of the three buildings. One warrior stayed behind to escort the animals back to camp.

Roran walked over to the canal and descended the wooden steps set within the muddy bank, which brought him to the edge of the water. Then he stepped out onto the rearmost of the four barges that were floating together in a line.

The barges were more like crude rafts than the flat-bottomed boats the villagers had ridden down the coast from Narda to Teirm, for which Roran was grateful, because it meant that they did not have pointed prows. This had made it relatively easy to fasten the four barges end to end with boards, nails, and ropes, thus creating a single rigid structure almost five hundred feet long.

The slabs of cut slate that the men had, at Roran's direction, hauled in wagons from the mine lay piled at the front of the lead barge, as well as along the sides of both the first and second barges. On top of the slate, they had heaped sacks of flour—which they had found stored within the mills—until they had built a wall level with their waists. Where the slate ended on the second barge, the wall continued on, composed entirely of the sacks: two deep and five high.

The immense weight of the slate and the densely packed flour, combined with that of the barges themselves, served to transform the entire floating structure into a massive, waterborne battering ram, which Roran hoped would be capable of plowing through the gate at the far end of the canal as if it were made of so many rotted sticks. Even if the gate was enchanted—though Carn did not believe it was—Roran didn't think any one magician, save Galbatorix, would be strong

enough to negate the forward momentum of the barges once they began to move downstream.

Also, the mounds of stone and flour would provide a measure of protection from spears, arrows, and other projectiles.

Roran carefully made his way across the shifting decks to the head of the barges. He wedged his spear and his shield against a pile of slate, then turned to watch as the warriors filed into the corridor between the walls.

Every man who boarded pushed the heavily laden barges deeper and deeper into the water, until they rode only a few inches above the surface.

Carn, Baldor, Hamund, Delwin, and Mandel joined Roran where he stood. They had all, by unspoken consent, elected to take for themselves the most dangerous position on the floating ram. If the Varden were to force their way into Aroughs, it would require a high degree of luck and skill, and none of them were willing to trust the attempt to anyone else.

Toward the rear of the barges, Roran glimpsed Brigman standing among the men he had once commanded. After Brigman's near insubordination the previous day, Roran had stripped him of all remaining authority and confined him to his tent. However, Brigman had begged to be allowed to join the final attack on Aroughs, and Roran had reluctantly agreed; Brigman was handy with a blade, and every sword would make a difference in the upcoming fight.

Roran still wondered if he had made the right decision. He was fairly confident that the men were now loyal to him, not to Brigman, but Brigman had been their captain for many months, and such bonds were not easily forgotten. Even if Brigman did not try to cause trouble in the ranks, he had proved willing and able to ignore orders, at least when they came from Roran.

If he gives me any reason to distrust him, I'll strike him down on the spot, Roran thought. But the resolution was a futile one. If Brigman did turn on him, it would most likely be in the midst of such confusion that Roran would not even notice until it was too late.

When all but six of the men were packed onto the barges, Roran cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Pry them loose!"

Two men stood upon the berm at the very top of the hill—the berm that slowed and held back the flow of water down the canal from the marshes to the north. Twenty feet below them lay the first waterwheel and the pool beneath it. At the front of that pool was the second berm, whereon stood two more men. Another twenty feet below them was the second waterwheel and the second deep, still pool. At the far end of the pool was the final berm and the final pair of men. And at the base of the final berm was the third and last waterwheel. From it, the

current then flowed smoothly over the land until it arrived at Aroughs.

Built into the berms were the three sluice gates Roran had insisted upon closing, with Baldor's help, during his first visit to the mills. Over the course of the past two days, teams of men wielding shovels and pickaxes had dived under the rising water and cut away at the berms from the backsides until the layers of packed earth were nearly ready to give way. Then they had driven long, stout beams into the dirt on either side of the sluice gates.

The men on the middle and topmost berms now grasped those beams—which protruded several feet from the embankments—and began to work them back and forth with a steady rhythm. In accordance with their plan, the duo stationed on the lowest berm waited several moments before they, too, joined in the effort.

Roran gripped a flour sack as he watched. If their timing was off by even a few seconds, disaster would ensue.

For almost a minute, nothing happened.

Then, with an ominous rumble, the topmost sluice gate was pried free. The berm bulged outward, the earth cracking and crumbling, and a huge tongue of muddy water poured over the waterwheel below, spinning it faster than it was ever intended to turn.

As the berm collapsed, the men standing on top of it jumped to shore, landing with only inches to spare.

Spray shot up thirty feet or more as the tongue of water plunged into the smooth black pool underneath the waterwheel. The impact sent a frothing wave several feet high rushing toward the next berm.

Seeing it coming, the middlemost pair of warriors abandoned their posts, also leaping for the safety of solid ground.

It was well they did. When the wave struck, needle-thin jets erupted around the frame of the next sluice gate, which then flew out of its setting as if a dragon had kicked it, and the churning contents of the pool swept away what remained of the berm.

The raging torrent crashed against the second waterwheel with even more force than it had the previous one. The timbers groaned and creaked under the onslaught, and for the first time, it occurred to Roran that one or more of the wheels might break loose. If that happened, it would pose a serious danger to his men, as well as to the barges, and could very well end the attack on Aroughs before it had even begun.

"Cut us loose!" he shouted.

One of the men chopped through the rope that tethered them to the bank, while others bent to pick up ten-foot-long poles, which they stuck into the canal and pushed on with all their might.

The heavily laden barges inched forward, gaining speed far slower

than Roran would have liked.

Even as the avalanche of water bore down upon them, the two men standing on the lowest berm continued to pull on the beams embedded within the weakened rampart. Less than a second before the avalanche washed over them, the berm shuddered and sagged, and the men threw themselves off of it.

The water punched a hole in the earthen dam as easily as if it were made of sodden bread and slammed into the final waterwheel. Wood shattered—the sound as loud and sharp as breaking ice—and the wheel canted outward several degrees, but to Roran's relief, it held. Then, with a thunderous roar, the pillar of water dashed itself against the base of the terraced hill with an explosion of mist.

A gust of cold wind slapped Roran in the face, more than two hundred yards downstream.

"Faster!" he shouted to the men poling the barge, as a turbulent mass of water emerged from within the folds of mist and hurtled down the canal.

The flood overtook them with incredible speed. When it collided with the back of the four conjoined barges, the entire craft jolted forward, throwing Roran and the warriors toward the stern and knocking a number of them off their feet. Some sacks of flour dropped into the canal or rolled inward, against the men.

As the surging water lifted the rearmost barge several feet above the rest, the nearly five-hundred-foot-long vessel began to slue sideways. If the trend continued, Roran knew they would soon become wedged between the banks of the canal, and that, moments later, the force of the current would tear the barges apart.

"Keep us straight!" he bellowed, pushing himself off the sacks of flour he had fallen on. "Don't let us turn!"

At the sound of his voice, the warriors scrambled to push the lumbering vessel away from the sloping banks and toward the center of the canal. Springing atop the piles of slate at the prow, Roran shouted directions, and together they successfully steered the barges down the curving channel.

"We did it!" Baldor exclaimed, a stupid grin on his face.

"Don't crow yet," Roran warned. "We still have a ways to go."

The eastern sky had turned straw yellow by the time they were level with their camp, a mile from Aroughs. At the speed they were moving, they would reach the city before the sun peeked over the horizon, and the gray shadows that covered the land would help shroud them from the lookouts stationed on the walls and towers.

Although the leading edge of the water had already outstripped them, the barges were still gathering speed, as the city lay below the mills and there was not a single hill or hummock between to slow

their progress.

"Listen," said Roran, cupping his hands around his mouth and raising his voice so that all the men could hear. "We may fall into the water when we hit the outer gate, so be prepared to swim. Until we can get onto dry land, we'll make easy targets. Once we're ashore, we have but one goal: to make our way up to the inner wall before they think to close the gates there, because if they do, we'll never capture Aroughs. If we can get past that second wall, it should be a simple matter to find Lord Halstead and force his surrender. Failing that, we'll secure the fortifications at the center of the city, then move outward, street by street, until all of Aroughs is under our control.

"Remember, we'll be outnumbered by more than two to one, so stay close to your shield mate and be on your guard at all times. Don't wander off by yourself, and don't let yourself be separated from the rest of the group. The soldiers know the streets better than we do, and they'll ambush you when you least expect it. If you do end up alone, head for the center, because that's where we'll be.

"Today we strike a mighty blow for the Varden. Today we win honor and glory such as most men dream about. Today … today we grave our mark onto the face of history. What we accomplish in the next few hours, the bards will sing about for a hundred years to come. Think of your friends. Think of your families, of your parents, your wives, your children. Fight well, for we fight for them. We fight for freedom!"

The men roared in response.

Roran let them work themselves into a frenzy; then he lifted a hand and said, "Shields!" And, as one, the men crouched and lifted their shields, covering themselves and their companions so that it looked as if the middle of the makeshift battering ram were clad in scale armor made to fit the limb of a giant.

Satisfied, Roran hopped down from the pile of slate and looked at Carn, Baldor, and the three other men who had traveled with him from Belatona. The youngest, Mandel, appeared apprehensive, but Roran knew his nerves would hold.

"Ready?" he asked, and they each answered in the affirmative.

Then Roran laughed, and when Baldor pressed him for an explanation, he said, "If only my father could see me now!"

And Baldor laughed as well.

Roran kept a keen eye on the main swell of the water. Once it entered the city, the soldiers might notice that something was amiss and raise the alarm. He wanted them to raise the alarm, but not for that reason, and so, when it appeared the swell was about five minutes away from Aroughs, he motioned to Carn and said, "Send the signal."

The magician nodded and hunched over, his lips moving as they formed the strange shapes of the ancient language. After a few moments, he straightened and said, “It is done.”

Roran looked off to the west. There, on the field before Aroughs, stood the Varden’s catapults, ballistae, and siege towers. The siege towers remained motionless, but the other engines of war stirred into action, casting their darts and stones in high, arcing paths toward the pristine white walls of the city. And he knew that fifty of his men on the far side of the city were even then blowing trumpets, yelling war cries, firing flaming arrows, and doing everything they could to draw the attention of the defending soldiers and make it appear as if a far larger force were attempting to storm the city.

A deep calm settled over Roran.

Battle was about to be joined.

Men were about to die.

He might be one of them.

Knowing this gave him a clarity of thought, and every trace of exhaustion vanished, along with the faint tremor that had plagued him since the attempt on his life just hours before. Nothing was so invigorating as fighting—not food, not laughter, not working with his hands, not even love—and though he hated it, he could not deny the power of its attraction. He had never wanted to be a warrior, but a warrior he had become, and he was determined to best all who came before him.

Squatting, Roran peered between two sharp-edged slabs of slate at the rapidly approaching gate that barred their path. To the surface of the water and somewhat below, for the water had risen, the gate was made of solid oak planks, stained dark with age and moisture. Beneath the surface, he knew there was a grid of iron and wood, much like a portcullis, through which the water was free to pass. The upper part would be the most difficult to breach, but he guessed that long periods of immersion had weakened the grid below, and if part of it could be torn away, breaking through the oak boards above would be far easier. Thus, he had ordered two stout logs attached to the underside of the lead barge. Since these were submerged, they would strike the lower half of the gate even as the prow rammed into the upper.

It was a clever plan, but he had no idea if it would really work.

“Steady,” he whispered more to himself than anyone else as the gate drew near.

A few of the warriors near the rear of the craft continued to steer the barges with their poles, but the rest remained hidden beneath the lapped carapace of shields.

The mouth of the archway that led to the gate loomed large before them, like the entrance to a cave. As the tip of the vessel slid

underneath the shadowed archway, Roran saw the face of a soldier, as round and white as a full moon, appear over the edge of the wall, more than thirty feet above, and peer down at the barges with an expression of horrified astonishment.

The barges were moving so fast by then, Roran only had time to utter a single pungent curse before the current swept them into the cool darkness of the passageway, and the vaulted ceiling cut off his view of the soldier.

The barges struck the gate.

The force of the impact threw Roran forward against the wall of slate he squatted behind. His head bounced off the stone, and though he wore a helm and arming cap, his ears rang. The deck shuddered and reared, and even through the noise in his ears, he heard wood cracking and breaking, and the shriek of twisting metal.

One of the slate slabs slipped backward and fell onto him, bruising his arms and shoulders. He grabbed the slab by the edges and, with a burst of furious strength, threw it overboard, where it shattered against the side of the passageway.

In the gloom that surrounded them, it was difficult to see what was happening; all was shifting confusion and echoing clamor. Water poured over his feet, and he realized that the barge was awash, though whether it would sink, he could not tell.

"Give me an ax!" he shouted, holding a hand out behind him. "An ax, give me an ax!"

He staggered as the barge lurched forward half a foot, nearly knocking him over. The gate had caved inward somewhat, but it was still holding firm. In time, the continued pressure of the water might push the barge through the gate, but he could not wait for nature to take its course.

As someone pressed the smooth haft of an ax into his outstretched hand, six glowing rectangles appeared in the ceiling as covers were drawn back from murder holes. The rectangles flickered, and crossbow bolts hissed down upon the barges, adding loud *thumps* to the tumult wherever they struck wood.

Somewhere a man screamed.

"Carn!" shouted Roran. "Do something!"

Leaving the magician to his devices, Roran started to crawl up the heaving deck and over the piles of slate toward the prow of the barge. And the barge lurched forward several more inches. Another deafening groan emanated from the center of the gate, and light shone through cracks in the oaken planks.

A quarrel skipped off the slate next to Roran's right hand, leaving a smear of iron on the stone.

He redoubled his speed.

Just as he reached the very front of the barge, a piercing, grating, tearing sound forced him to clap his hands over his ears and pull back.

A heavy wave washed over him, blinding him for a moment. Blinking to clear his vision, he saw that part of the gate had collapsed into the canal; there was now enough space for the barge to gain access to the city. Above the prow of the vessel, however, jagged spars of wood stuck out from the remnants of the gate at the same height as a man's chest, neck, or head.

Without hesitation, Roran rolled backward and dropped behind the breastwork of slate. "Heads down!" he roared, covering himself with his shield.

The barges glided forward, out of the hail of deadly crossbow bolts and into an enormous stone room lit by torches mounted on the walls.

At the far end of the room, the water in the canal flowed through another lowered gate, this one a portcullis from top to bottom. Through the latticework of wood and metal, Roran could see buildings within the city proper.

Extending from both sides of the room were stone quays for loading and unloading cargo. Pulleys, ropes, and empty nets hung from the ceiling, and a crane was mounted upon a high stone platform in the middle of each artificial shore. At the front of the room and at the back, stairs and walkways protruding from the mold-covered walls would allow a person to cross over the water without getting wet. The rear walkway also granted access to the guardrooms above the tunnel the barges had entered through, as well as, Roran assumed, to the upper part of the city's defenses, such as the parapet where he had seen the soldier.

Frustration welled up inside of Roran as he beheld the lowered gate. He had hoped to be able to sail straight into the main body of the city and avoid getting trapped on the water by the guards.

Well, it can't be helped now, he thought.

Behind them, crimson-clad soldiers poured out of the guardrooms onto the walkway, where they knelt and began to crank on their crossbows, readying them for another volley.

"Over!" Roran shouted, waving his arm toward the docks on the left. The warriors grabbed their poles once more and pushed the interlocked barges toward the edge of the canal. The dozens and dozens of bolts that protruded from their shields gave the company the appearance of a hedgehog.

As the barge neared the docks, twenty of the defending soldiers drew their swords and ran down the stairs off the walkway to intercept the Varden before they could land.

"Hurry!" he shouted.

A bolt buried itself in his shield, the diamond-shaped tip boring

through the inch-and-a-half-thick wood to protrude over his forearm. He stumbled and caught himself, knowing that he had only moments before more archers fired on him.

Then Roran jumped for the dock, arms spread wide for balance. He landed heavily, one knee striking the floor, and only just had time to pull his hammer from his belt before the soldiers were upon him.

It was with a sense of relief and savage joy that Roran met them. He was sick of plotting and planning and worrying about what might be. Here at last were honest foes—not creeping assassins—that he could fight and kill.

The encounter was short, fierce, and bloody. Roran slew or incapacitated three of the soldiers within the first few seconds. Then Baldor, Delwin, Hamund, Mandel, and others joined him to force the soldiers away from the water.

Roran was no swordsman, so he made no attempt to fence with his opponents. Instead, he let them hit his shield all they wanted, while he used his hammer to break their bones in return. Occasionally, he had to parry a cut or a stab, but he tried to avoid exchanging more than a few blows with any one person, because he knew his lack of experience would soon prove fatal. The most useful trick of fighting, he had discovered, was not some fancy twirl of the sword or some complicated feint that took years to master, but rather seizing the initiative and doing whatever his enemy least expected.

Breaking free of the brawl, Roran sprinted toward the stairs that led to the walkway where the archers knelt, firing at the men scrambling off the barges.

Roran bounded up the stairs three at a time and, swinging his hammer, caught the first archer full in the face. The next soldier in line had already fired his crossbow, so he dropped it and reached for the hilt of his short sword, retreating backward as he did.

The soldier only managed to pull his blade partway out of its sheath before Roran struck him in the chest, breaking his ribs.

One of the things Roran liked about fighting with a hammer was that he did not have to pay much attention to what kind of armor his opponents were wearing. A hammer, like any blunt weapon, inflicted injuries by the strength of its impact, not by the cutting or piercing of flesh. The simplicity of the approach appealed to him.

The third soldier on the walkway managed to shoot a bolt at him before he took another step. This time the shaft of the quarrel made it halfway through his shield and almost poked him in the chest. Keeping the deadly point well away from his body, Roran charged the man and swung at his shoulder. The soldier used his crossbow to block the attack, so Roran immediately followed with a backhand blow of his shield, which knocked the soldier screaming and flailing

over the railing of the walkway.

The maneuver left Roran wholly exposed, however, and as he returned his attention to the five soldiers who remained on the walkway, he saw three of them aiming straight at his heart.

The soldiers fired.

Just before the bolts tore through him, they veered to the right and skittered across the blackened walls, like giant angry wasps.

Roran knew it was Carn who had saved him, and he resolved to find some way to thank the magician once they were no longer in mortal danger.

He charged the remaining soldiers and dispatched them with a furious volley of strikes, as if they were so many bent nails he was hammering down. Then he broke off the crossbow bolt that was sticking through his shield and turned to see how the battle below was progressing.

The last soldier on the docks crumpled to the blood-streaked floor at that very moment, and his head rolled away from his body and dropped into the canal, where it sank beneath a plume of bubbles.

Roughly two-thirds of the Varden had disembarked and were gathering in orderly ranks along the edge of the water.

Roran opened his mouth, intending to order them to move back from the canal—so that the men still on the barges had more room to get off—when the doors set into the left wall burst open and a horde of soldiers poured into the room.

Blast it! Where are they coming from? And how many are there?

Just as Roran started toward the stairs to help his men fend off the newcomers, Carn—who still stood at the head of the listing barges—raised his arms, pointed at the onrushing soldiers, and shouted a series of harsh, twisted words in the ancient language.

At his eldritch command, two sacks of flour and a single slab of slate flew off the barges and into the ranks of closely packed soldiers, cutting down over a dozen. The sacks burst open after the third or fourth impact, and clouds of ivory flour billowed out over the soldiers, blinding and choking them.

A second later, there was a flare of light next to the wall behind the soldiers, and a huge roiling fireball, orange and sooty, raced through the clouds of flour, devouring the fine powder with rapacious greed and producing a sound like a hundred flags flapping in a high wind.

Roran ducked behind his shield and felt searing heat against his legs and the bare skin of his cheeks as the fireball burned itself out only yards away from the walkway, glowing motes becoming ash that drifted downward: a black, charnel rain fitting only for a funeral.

Once the sullen glare had faded, he cautiously raised his head. A tendril of hot, foul-smelling smoke tickled his nostrils and stung his

eyes, and with a start, he realized that his beard was on fire. He cursed and dropped his hammer and batted at the tiny grasping flames until he had extinguished them.

"Oi!" he shouted down at Carn. "You singed my beard! Be more careful, or I'll have your head on a pike!"

Most of the soldiers lay curled on the ground, cupping their burned faces. Others were thrashing about with their clothes on fire or were flailing blindly in circles with their weapons, in an attempt to fend off any attacks by the Varden. Roran's own men appeared to have escaped with only minor burns—most had been standing outside the radius of the fireball—although the unexpected conflagration had left them disoriented and unsteady.

"Stop gaping like fools and get after those groping rascals before they regain their senses!" he ordered, banging his hammer against the railing to ensure that he had their attention.

The Varden heavily outnumbered the soldiers, and by the time Roran reached the bottom of the stairs, they had already put to death fully three-quarters of the defending force.

Leaving the disposal of the few remaining soldiers to his more-than-able warriors, Roran made his way toward the large double doors to the left of the canal—doors wide enough for two wagons to drive through abreast. As he did, he came upon Carn, who was sitting at the base of the crane's platform, eating out of a leather pouch he always carried. The pouch, Roran knew, contained a mixture of lard, honey, powdered beef liver, lamb's heart, and berries. The one time Carn had given him a piece, he had gagged—but even a few bites could keep a man on his feet for a whole day's worth of hard work.

To Roran's concern, the magician looked utterly exhausted. "Can you continue?" Roran asked, pausing by him.

Carn nodded. "I just need a moment.… The bolts in the tunnel, and then the sacks of flour and the piece of slate …" He pushed another morsel of food in his mouth. "It was a bit much all at once."

Reassured, Roran started to move away, but Carn caught him by the arm. "I didn't do it," he said, and his eyes crinkled with amusement. "Singe your beard, that is. The torches must have started the fire."

Roran grunted, and continued on to the doors. "Form up!" he shouted, and slapped his shield with the flat of his hammer. "Baldor, Delwin, you take the lead with me. The rest of you, line up behind us. Shields out, swords drawn, arrows nocked. Halstead probably doesn't know yet that we're in the city, so don't let anyone escape who could warn him.… Ready, then? Right, with me!"

Together he and Baldor—whose cheeks and nose were red from the explosion—unbarred the doors and threw them open, revealing the interior of Aroughs.

Dust and Ashes

Dozens of large plaster-sided buildings stood clustered around the portal in the city's outer wall, where the canal entered Aroughs. All of the buildings—cold and forbidding with the empty stare of their black windows—appeared to be warehouses or storage facilities, which, coupled with the early-morning hour, meant it was unlikely that anyone had noticed the Varden's clash with the guards.

Roran had no intention of staying around to find out for sure.

Hazy rays of newborn light streaked horizontally across the city, gilding the tops of the towers, the battlements, the cupolas, and the slanted roofs. The streets and alleyways were cloaked in shadows the color of tarnished silver, and the water in its stone-lined channel was dark and dismal and laced with streaks of blood. High above gleamed a lone wandering star, a furtive spark in the brightening blue mantle, where the sun's growing radiance had obscured all of the other nighttime jewels.

Forward the Varden trotted, their leather boots scuffing against the cobblestone street.

Off in the distance, a cock crowed.

Roran led them through the warren of buildings toward the inner wall of the city, but not always choosing the most obvious or direct route, so as to reduce their chances of encountering someone in the streets. The lanes they followed were narrow and murky, and sometimes he had difficulty seeing where he was placing his feet.

Filth clotted the gutters of the streets. The stench filled him with loathing and made him wish for the open fields he was used to.

How can anyone bear to live in such conditions? he wondered. *Even pigs won't wallow in their own dirt.*

Away from the curtain wall, the buildings changed to houses and shops: tall, crossbeamed, with whitewashed walls and wrought-iron fixtures upon the doors. Behind the shuttered windows, Roran sometimes heard the sound of voices, or the clatter of dishes, or the scrape of a chair being pulled across a wooden floor.

We're running out of time, he thought. Another few minutes and the streets would be teeming with the denizens of Aroughs.

As if to fulfill his prediction, two men stepped out of an alleyway in front of the column of warriors. Both of the city dwellers carried yokes on their shoulders with buckets of fresh milk hanging off the ends.

The men stopped with surprise as they saw the Varden, the milk

sloshing out of the buckets. Their eyes widened, and their mouths fell open in preparation of some exclamation.

Roran halted, as did the troop behind him. “If you scream, we’ll kill you,” he said in a soft, friendly voice.

The men shivered and inched away.

Roran stepped forward. “If you run, we’ll kill you.” Without taking his eyes off the two frightened men, he uttered Carn’s name and, when the magician arrived at his side, he said, “Put them to sleep for me, if you would.”

The magician quickly recited a phrase in the ancient language, ending with a word that sounded to Roran something like *slytha*. The two men collapsed bonelessly to the ground, their buckets tipping over as they struck the cobblestones. Milk sheeted down the lane, forming a delicate web of white veins as it settled into the grooves between the stones of the street.

“Pull them off to the side,” Roran said, “where they can’t be seen.”

As soon as his warriors had dragged the two unconscious men out of the way, he ordered the Varden forward once more, resuming their hurried march toward the inner wall.

Before they had gone more than a hundred feet, however, they turned a corner and ran headlong into a group of four soldiers.

This time Roran showed no mercy. He sprinted across the space that separated them and, while the soldiers were still trying to gather their wits, he buried the flat blade of his hammer into the base of the lead soldier’s neck. Likewise, Baldor cut down one of the other soldiers, swinging his sword with a strength few men could match, a strength born of years spent working at his father’s forge.

The last two soldiers squawked with alarm, turned, and ran.

An arrow shot past Roran’s shoulder from somewhere behind him and took one soldier in the back, knocking him to the ground. A moment later, Carn barked, “Jierda!” The neck of the final soldier broke with an audible *snap*, and he tumbled forward to lie motionless in the center of the street.

The soldier with the arrow in him began to scream: “The Varden are here! The Varden are here! Sound the alarm, the—”

Drawing his dagger, Roran ran over to the man and cut his throat. He wiped the blade clean on the man’s tunic, then stood and said, “Move out, now!”

As one, the Varden charged up the streets toward the inner wall of Aroughs.

When they were only a hundred feet away, Roran stopped in an alley behind a house and raised a hand, signaling his men to wait. Then he crept along the side of the house and peered around the corner at the portcullis set within the tall granite wall.

The gate was closed.

To the left of the gate, however, a small sally port stood wide open. Even as he watched, a soldier ran out through it and headed off toward the western edge of the city.

Roran cursed to himself as he stared at the sally port. He was not about to give up, not when they had made it this far, but their position was growing ever more precarious, and he had no doubt that they had only a few more minutes before curfew lifted and their presence became widely known.

He withdrew behind the side of the house and bowed his head as he thought furiously.

"Mandel," he said, and snapped his fingers. "Delwin, Carn, and you three." He pointed at a trio of fierce-looking warriors—older men who, by their very age, he knew must have a knack for winning battles. "Come with me. Baldor, you're in charge of the rest. If we don't make it back, get yourselves to safety. That's an order."

Baldor nodded, his expression grim.

With the six warriors he had selected, Roran circled the main thoroughfare that led to the gate until they reached the rubbish-strewn base of the outward-slanting wall, perhaps fifty feet from the portcullis and the open sally port.

A soldier was stationed on each of the two gate towers, but at the moment, neither was visible, and unless they stuck their heads over the edges of the battlements, they would not be able to see Roran and his companions approaching.

In a whisper, Roran said, "Once we're through the door, you, you, and you"—he motioned at Carn, Delwin, and one of the other warriors—"make for the guardhouse on the other side fast as you can. We'll take the near one. Do what you have to, but *get that gate open*. There may be only one wheel to turn, or we may have to work together to raise it, so don't think you can go and die on me. Ready? … *Now!*"

Running as quietly as he could, Roran dashed along the wall and, with a quick turn, darted into the sally port.

Before him was a twenty-foot-long chamber that opened to a large square with a tiered fountain in the center. Men in fine clothes were hurrying back and forth across the square, many of them clutching scrolls.

Ignoring them, Roran turned to a closed door, which he unlatched by hand, restraining the urge to kick it open. Through the door was a dingy guardroom with a spiral staircase built into one wall.

He raced up the stairs and, after a single revolution, found himself in a low-ceilinged room, where five soldiers were smoking and playing dice at a table set next to a huge windlass wrapped with chains as thick as his arm.

“Greetings!” said Roran in a deep, commanding voice. “I have a most important message for you.”

The soldiers hesitated, then sprang to their feet, pushing back the benches they were sitting on. The wooden legs screeched as they dragged over the floor.

They were too late. Brief though it was, their indecision was all Roran needed to cross the distance between them before the soldiers could draw their weapons.

Roran bellowed as he waded into their midst, lashing out left and right with his hammer and driving the five men back into a corner. Then Mandel and the two other warriors were at his side, swords flashing. Together they made short work of the guards.

When he stood over the twitching body of the last soldier, Roran spat on the ground and said, “Don’t trust strangers.”

The fighting had polluted the room with a collection of horrific odors, which seemed to press against Roran like a thick, heavy blanket made of the most unpleasant substance he could imagine. He was barely able to breathe without being sick, so he covered his nose and mouth with the sleeve of his tunic, trying to filter out some of the smells.

The four of them went to the windlass, being careful not to slip on the pools of blood, and studied it for a moment as they figured out its workings.

Roran spun around, raising his hammer as he heard a clink of metal and then the loud creak of a wooden trapdoor being pulled open, followed by a clatter of footsteps as a soldier descended the winding staircase from the gate tower above.

“Taurin, what in the blazes is going—” The soldier’s voice died in his throat and he stopped partway down the stairs as he caught sight of Roran and his companions, as well as the mangled bodies in the corner.

A warrior to Roran’s right threw a spear at the soldier, but the soldier ducked and the spear struck the wall above him. The soldier cursed and scrambled back up the stairs on all fours, vanishing behind a curve of the wall.

A moment later, the trapdoor slammed shut with an echoing *boom*, and then they heard the soldier wind a horn and shout frantic warnings to the people in the square.

Roran scowled and returned to the windlass. “Leave him,” he said, shoving his hammer under his belt. He leaned against the spoked wheel used to raise and lower the portcullis and pushed as hard as he could, straining every muscle. The other men added their strength to his, and slowly, ever so slowly, the wheel began to turn, the ratchet on the side of the windlass clicking loudly as the huge wooden catch slid

over the teeth below.

The effort needed to turn the wheel became substantially easier a few seconds later, a fact that Roran attributed to the team he had sent to infiltrate the other guardhouse.

They did not bother to raise the portcullis all the way; after a half minute of grunting and sweating, the fierce war cries of the Varden reached their ears as the men waiting outside charged through the gate and into the square.

Roran released the wheel, then pulled out his hammer again and made for the stairs with the others in tow.

Outside the guardhouse, he spotted Carn and Delwin just as they emerged from the structure on the other side of the gate. Neither appeared injured, but Roran noticed that the older warrior who had accompanied them was now absent.

While they waited for Roran's group to rejoin them, Baldor and the rest of the Varden organized themselves into a solid block of men at the edge of the square. They stood five ranks deep, shoulder to shoulder with their shields overlapping.

As he trotted over to them, Roran saw a large contingent of soldiers emerge from among the buildings at the far side of the square. There they assumed a defensive formation, angling their spears and pikes outward, so they resembled a long, low pincushion stuck full of needles. He estimated that about one hundred fifty soldiers were present—a number that his warriors could certainly overcome, but at a cost of both time and men.

His mood grew even more grim as the same hook-nosed magician whom he had seen on the previous day stepped out in front of the rows of soldiers and spread his arms above his head, a nimbus of black lightning crackling around each of his hands. Roran had learned enough about magic from Eragon to know that the lightning was probably more for show than anything else, but show or not, he had no doubt that the enemy spellcaster was enormously dangerous.

Carn arrived at the head of the warriors seconds after Roran. Together they and Baldor gazed at the magician and the ridge of soldiers assembled in opposition.

"Can you kill him?" Roran asked quietly, so the men behind him could not hear.

"I'll have to try, now won't I?" replied Carn. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Perspiration beaded his face.

"If you want, we can rush him. He can't kill us all before we wear down his wards and put a blade through his heart."

"You don't know that.… No, this is my responsibility, and I have to deal with it."

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

Carn uttered a nervous laugh. “You could shoot some arrows at him. Blocking them might weaken him enough that he’ll make a mistake. But whatever you do, don’t get between us.… It won’t be safe, for you or for me.”

Roran transferred his hammer to his left hand, then placed his right on Carn’s shoulder. “You’ll be fine. Remember, he’s not that clever. You tricked him before, and you can trick him again.”

“I know.”

“Good luck,” said Roran.

Carn nodded once, then walked toward the fountain in the center of the square. The light from the sun had reached the plume of dancing water, which glittered like handfuls of diamonds tossed into the air.

The hook-nosed magician also walked toward the fountain, matching his steps to Carn’s until they stood only twenty feet apart, whereupon they both stopped.

From where Roran was standing, Carn and his opponent appeared to be talking to each other, but they were too far away for him to make out what they said. Then both of the spellcasters went rigid, as if someone had jabbed them with poniards.

That was what Roran had been waiting for: a sign that they were dueling with their minds, too busy to pay attention to their surroundings.

“Archers!” he barked. “Go there and there,” and he pointed at either side of the square. “Put as many arrows into that traitorous dog as you can, but don’t you dare hit Carn or I’ll have you fed alive to Saphira.”

The soldiers shifted uneasily as the two groups of archers advanced partway across the square, but none of Galbatorix’s crimson-clad troops broke formation or moved to engage the Varden.

They must have a great deal of confidence in that pet viper of theirs, Roran thought, concerned.

Dozens of brown, goose-feather-fletched arrows arched spinning and whistling toward the enemy magician, and for a moment, Roran hoped that they might be able to kill him. Five feet from the hook-nosed man, however, every single shaft shattered and dropped to the ground, as if they had run headlong into a wall of stone.

Roran bounced on his heels, too tense to stand still. He hated having to wait, doing nothing, while his friend was in danger. Moreover, every passing moment gave Lord Halstead more of an opportunity to figure out what was happening and devise an effective response. If Roran’s men were to avoid being crushed by the Empire’s superior forces, they had to keep their enemies off balance, unsure of where to turn or what to do.

“On your toes!” he said, turning to the warriors. “Let’s see if we can do some good while Carn is fighting to save our necks. We’re going to

flank those soldiers. Half of you come with me; the rest follow Delwin here. They can't block off every single street, so Delwin, you and your men work your way past the soldiers, then loop back around and attack them from behind. We'll keep them busy on this front, so they won't put up much resistance. If any of the soldiers try to run, let them. It would take too long to kill them all anyway. Got it? … Go, go, go!"

The men quickly separated into two groups. Leading his, Roran ran up the right-hand edge of the square, while Delwin did the same on the left.

When both bands of men were almost level with the fountain, Roran saw the enemy magician look toward him. It was the merest flicker of a glance, sidelong and fleeting, but the distraction, whether intended or not, seemed to have an immediate effect on his duel with Carn. As the hook-nosed man returned his gaze to Carn, the snarl upon his face deepened into a painful rictus, and veins began to bulge on his knotted brow and on his corded neck, and his whole head flushed a dark, angry red, as if it were so swollen with blood that it might burst asunder.

"No!" howled the man, and then he shouted something in the ancient language that Roran could not understand.

A fraction of a second later, Carn shouted something as well and, for a moment, their two voices overlapped with such a dire mixture of terror, desolation, hate, and fury that Roran knew deep in his bones that the duel had somehow gone horribly wrong.

Carn vanished amid a blaze of blue light. Then a white, dome-like shell flashed outward from where he had been standing and expanded across the square in less time than it took Roran to blink.

The world went black. An unbearable heat pressed against Roran, and everything turned and twisted around him as he tumbled through a formless space.

His hammer was wrenched out of his hand, and pain erupted in the side of his right knee. Then a hard object smashed into his mouth, and he felt a tooth pop loose, filling his mouth with blood.

When he finally came to rest, he remained where he was, lying on his belly, too stunned to move. His senses gradually returned, and he saw the smooth, gray-green surface of a paving stone underneath his nose, and he smelled the lead mortar that surrounded the stone, and all throughout his body he became aware of aches and bruises clamoring for his attention. The only sound he could hear was that of his pounding heart.

Some of the blood in his mouth and throat went into his lungs as he started to breathe again. Desperate for air, he coughed and sat upright, spitting out gobs of black phlegm. He saw the tooth, one of

his incisors, fly out and bounce against the paving stone, startling white against the splotches of spewed blood. He caught it and examined it; the end of the incisor was chipped, but the root appeared intact, so he licked the tooth clean then pushed it back into the hole in his gums, wincing as he poked the sore flesh.

Levering himself off the ground, he got to his feet. He had been thrown against the doorstep of one of the houses that bordered the square. His men were scattered about him, arms and legs askew, helmets lost, swords torn away.

Again Roran was grateful that he carried a hammer, for several of the Varden had managed to stab themselves or their shield mates during the tumult.

Hammer? Where is *my hammer?* he belatedly thought. He cast about the ground until he spotted the handle of his weapon protruding from beneath the legs of a nearby warrior. He pulled it free, then turned to look at the square.

Soldiers and Varden alike had been tossed sprawling. Nothing remained of the fountain except for a low pile of rubble from which water spurted at erratic intervals. Next to it, where Carn had been, lay a blackened, withered corpse, its smoking limbs clenched tight, like those of a dead spider, the whole thing so charred and pitted and burned away that it was barely recognizable as anything that had once been alive or human. Inexplicably, the hook-nosed magician still stood in the same place, though the explosion had robbed him of his outer clothes, leaving him wearing nothing but his breeches.

Uncontrollable anger gripped Roran, and without a thought for his own preservation, he staggered toward the center of the square, determined to kill the magician once and for all.

The bare-chested conjurer held his ground even as Roran drew near. Raising his hammer, Roran broke out into a shambling run and shouted a war cry that he could hear but dimly.

And yet the magician made no move to defend himself.

In fact, Roran realized that the spellcaster had not stirred so much as an inch since the explosion. It was as if he were a statue of a man and not the thing itself.

The spellcaster's seeming indifference to Roran's approach tempted Roran to ignore the man's unusual behavior—or lack of behavior, as it was—and simply bash him over the head before he recovered from whatever strange stupor ailed him. However, Roran's wariness cooled his lust for vengeance and caused him to slow to a stop not five feet from the magician.

He was glad he did.

While the magician had appeared normal from a distance, up close, Roran saw that his skin was loose and wrinkled like that of a man

thrice his age, and that it had acquired a coarse, leathery texture. The color of his skin had darkened as well, and was continuing to darken, moment by moment, as if his entire body had been bitten by frost.

The man's chest was heaving and his eyeballs were rolling in their sockets, showing white, but other than that, he seemed incapable of movement.

As Roran watched, the man's arms, neck, and chest shriveled, and his bones appeared in sharp relief—from the bowlike curve of his collarbones to the hollow saddle of his hips, where his stomach hung like an empty waterskin. His lips puckered and drew back farther than they were intended to over his yellow teeth, baring them in a grisly snarl, while his eyeballs deflated as if they were engorged ticks being squished empty of blood, and the surrounding flesh sank inward.

The man's breathing—a panicked, high-pitched sawing—faltered then, but still did not entirely cease.

Horrified, Roran stepped backward. He felt something slick beneath his boots and looked down to see that he was standing in a spreading puddle of water. At first he thought it was from the broken fountain, but then he realized that the water was flowing outward from the feet of the paralyzed magician.

Roran cursed, revulsion filling him, and jumped to a dry patch of ground. Seeing the water, he understood what it was Carn had done, and his already profound sense of horror increased. Carn, it seemed, had cast a spell that was drawing every single drop of moisture from the magician's body.

Over the span of only another few seconds, the spell reduced the man to no more than a knobby skeleton wrapped in a shell of hard black skin, mummifying him the same as if he had been left in the Hadarac Desert, exposed to a hundred years of wind and sun and shifting sands. Although he was most certainly dead by then, he did not fall, as Carn's magic held him upright: a ghastly, grinning specter that was the equal of the most terrible things Roran had ever seen in his nightmares or on the battlefield—both being much the same.

Then the surface of the man's desiccated body blurred as it dissolved into a fine gray dust, which sifted downward in gauzy curtains and lay floating atop the water below, like ashes from a forest fire. Muscle and bone soon followed, then the stony organs, and then the last parts of the hook-nosed magician crumbled away, leaving behind only a small, conical mound of powder rising out of the pool of water that had once sustained its life.

Roran looked over at Carn's corpse, then looked away just as quickly, unable to bear the sight. *At least you had your revenge on him*. Then he put aside thoughts of his slain friend, for they were too painful to dwell on, and instead concentrated upon the most

immediate problem at hand: the soldiers at the southern end of the square, who were slowly picking themselves up off the ground.

Roran saw the Varden doing much the same. “Oi!” he shouted. “With me! We’ll never have a better chance than now.” He pointed at some of his men who were obviously wounded. “Help them up and put them in the center of the formation. No one gets left behind. No one!” His lips and mouth throbbed as he spoke, and his head ached as if he had been up all night drinking.

The Varden rallied at the sound of his voice and hurried to join him. As the men gathered into a broad column behind him, Roran took his place in the foremost rank of warriors, between Baldor and Delwin, both of whom bore bloody scrapes from the explosion.

“Carn is dead?” Baldor asked.

Roran nodded and lifted his shield, as did the other men, so that they formed a solid, outward-facing wall.

“Then we better hope Halstead doesn’t have another magician hidden away somewhere,” Delwin muttered.

When the Varden were all in place, Roran shouted, “Forward march!” and the warriors tramped across the remainder of the courtyard.

Whether because their leadership was less effective than the Varden’s or because the blast had dealt them a more severe blow, the Empire soldiers had failed to recover as quickly and so were still disorganized when the Varden drove into their midst.

Roran grunted and staggered back a step as a spear embedded itself in his shield, numbing his arm and dragging it down through sheer weight. Reaching around, he swept his hammer across the face of the shield. It bounced off the haft of the spear, which refused to budge.

A soldier in front of him, perhaps the very one who had thrown the spear, seized the opportunity to run at him and swing his sword at Roran’s neck. Roran started to lift his shield, along with the spear lodged in it, but it was too heavy and cumbersome for him to protect himself with. So he used his hammer instead, lashing out at the descending sword.

On edge, however, the blade was almost impossible for him to see, and he timed his parry badly and missed the sword with his hammer. He would have died then, except that his knuckles clipped the flat of the blade, deflecting it several inches to the side.

A line of fire cut through Roran’s right shoulder. Jagged bolts of lightning shot down his side, and his vision flashed bright yellow. His right knee buckled and he fell forward.

Stone underneath him. Feet and legs around him, hemming him in so he could not roll away to safety. His whole body sluggish and unresponsive, as if he were trapped in honey.

Too slow, too slow, he thought as he struggled to free his arm from the shield and get his feet back under him. If he stayed on the ground, he would be either stabbed or trampled. *Too slow!*

Then he saw the soldier collapse in front of him, clutching at his belly, and a second later, someone pulled Roran up by the collar of his hauberk and held him upright while he regained his footing. It was Baldor.

Twisting his neck, Roran looked at where the soldier had struck him. Five links in his mail shirt had split open, but other than that, the armor had held. Despite the blood oozing out of the rent, and the pain that racked his neck and arm, he did not think the wound was life-threatening, nor was he about to stop and find out. His right arm still worked—at least enough to continue fighting—and that was all he cared about at the moment.

Someone passed him a replacement shield. He grimly shouldered it and pressed onward with his men, forcing the soldiers to retreat along the wide street that led from the square.

The soldiers soon broke and ran in the face of the Varden's overwhelming strength, fleeing down the myriad side streets and alleys that branched off the thoroughfare.

Roran paused then and sent fifty of his men back to close the portcullis and sally port and to guard them against any foes who might seek to follow the Varden into the heart of Aroughs. Most of the soldiers in the city would be stationed close to the outer wall to repel besiegers, and Roran had no desire to face them in open battle. To do so would be suicidal, given the size of Halstead's forces.

The Varden met little resistance thereafter as they progressed through the inner city to the large, well-appointed palace where Lord Halstead ruled.

A spacious courtyard with an artificial pond—wherein swam geese and white swans—lay before the palace, which towered several stories above the rest of Aroughs. The palace was a beautiful, ornate structure of open arches, colonnades, and wide balconies intended for dancing and parties. Unlike the castle in the heart of Belatona, it had obviously been built with pleasure in mind, not defense.

They must have assumed no one could get past their walls, thought Roran.

Several dozen guards and soldiers in the courtyard charged haphazardly at the Varden when they caught sight of them, shouting war cries the whole while.

"Stay in formation!" Roran ordered as the men rushed toward them.

For a minute or two, the sound of clashing arms filled the courtyard. The geese and the swans honked with alarm at the commotion and beat the water with their wings, but none of them

dared leave the confines of their pond.

It did not take long for the Varden to rout the soldiers and guards. Then they stormed the entryway of the palace, which was so richly decorated with paintings on the walls and ceilings—as well as gilt moldings, carved furniture, and a patterned floor—that Roran found it difficult to take in all at once. The wealth required to build and maintain such an edifice was more than he could comprehend. The entire farm where he had grown up had not been equal the worth of a single chair in that grand hall.

Through an open doorway, he saw three serving women running down another long corridor as fast as their skirts would allow.

"Don't let them get away!" he exclaimed.

Five swordsmen broke off from the main body of the Varden and dashed after the women, catching them before they reached the end of the passageway. The women uttered piercing screams and struggled ferociously, clawing at their captors, as the men dragged them back to where Roran was waiting.

"Enough!" shouted Roran when they were in front of him, and the women ceased fighting, although they continued to whimper and moan. The oldest of the three, a stout matron who had her silver hair pulled back in an untidy bun and who carried a ring of keys at her waist, appeared the most reasonable, so Roran asked her, "Where is Lord Halstead?"

The woman stiffened and lifted her chin. "Do with me what you will, sir, but I'll not betray my master."

Roran moved toward her until they were only a foot apart. "Listen to me, and listen well," he growled. "Aroughs has fallen, and you and everyone else in this city are at my mercy. Nothing you can do will change that. Tell me where Halstead is, and we'll let you and your companions go. You can't save him from his doom, but you can save yourselves." His torn lips were so swollen, he was barely able to make himself understood, and with every word, flecks of blood flew from his mouth.

"My own fate doesn't matter, sir," said the woman, her expression as determined as any warrior's.

Roran cursed and slapped his hammer against his shield, producing a harsh crash that echoed loudly in the cavernous hall. The women flinched at the sound. "Have you taken leave of your senses? Is Halstead worth your life? Is the Empire? Is Galbatorix?"

"I don't know about Galbatorix or the Empire, sir, but Halstead has always been kind enough to us serving folk, and I'll not see him strung up by the likes of you. Filthy, ungrateful *muck*, that's what you are."

"Is that so?" He stared at her fiercely. "How long do you think you can hold your tongue if I decide to let my men wring the truth out of

you?"

"You'll never make me talk," she declared, and he believed her.

"What about them?" He nodded toward the other women, the youngest of whom could not have been more than seventeen. "Are you willing to let them be cut into pieces just to save your master?"

The woman sniffed disdainfully, then said, "Lord Halstead is in the east wing of the palace. Take the corridor over there, go through the Yellow Room and Lady Galiana's flower garden, and you'll find him sure as rain."

Roran listened with suspicion. Her capitulation seemed too quick and too easy given her earlier resistance. Also, while she spoke, he noticed that the other two women reacted with surprise and some other emotion he could not identify. *Confusion?* he wondered. In any event, they did not react the way he would have expected if the silver-haired woman had just delivered their lord into the arms of their enemies. They were too quiet, too subdued, as if they were hiding something.

Of the two, the girl was the less skilled at masking her feelings, so Roran turned on her with all the savagery he could muster. "You there, she's lying, isn't she? Where is Halstead? *Tell me!*"

The girl opened her mouth and shook her head, speechless. She tried to back away from him, but one of the warriors held her in place.

Roran stomped over to her, jammed his shield flat against her chest, knocking the air out of her, and leaned his weight against it, pinning her between him and the man behind her. Lifting his hammer, Roran touched it to the side of her cheek. "You're rather pretty, but you'll have a hard time finding anyone but old men to court you if I knock out your front teeth. I lost a tooth myself today, but I managed to put it back in. See?" And he spread his lips in what he was sure was a gruesome approximation of a smile. "I'll keep your teeth, though, so you won't be able to do the same. They'll make a fine trophy, eh?" And he made a threatening motion with the hammer.

The girl cringed and cried, "No! Please, sir, I don't know. Please! He was in his quarters, meeting with his captains, but then he and Lady Galiana were going to go to the tunnel to the docks, and—"

"Thara, you fool!" exclaimed the matron.

"There's a ship waiting for them, there is, and I don't know where he is now, but please don't hit me, I don't know anything else, sir, and —"

"His quarters," barked Roran. "Where are they?"

Sobbing, the girl told him.

"Let them go," he said when she finished, and the three women darted out of the entryway, the hard heels of their shoes clattering

against the polished floor.

Roran led the Varden through the enormous building in accordance with the girl's instructions. Scores of half-dressed men and women crossed their paths, but none paused to fight. The palace rang with shouts and screams to the point where he wanted to plug his ears with his fingers.

Partway to their destination, they came upon an atrium with a statue of a huge black dragon in the middle. Roran wondered if it was supposed to be Galbatorix's dragon, Shruikan. As they trooped past the statue, Roran heard a *twang*, and then something struck him in the back.

He fell against a stone bench next to the path and clutched at it.

Pain.

Agonizing, thought-destroying pain, the likes of which he had never experienced before. Pain so intense, he would have cut off his own hand to make it stop. It felt as if a red-hot poker were being pressed into his back.

He could not move.…

He could not breathe.…

Even the smallest shift in position caused him unbearable torment.

Shadows fell across him, and he heard Baldor and Delwin shouting, then Brigman, of all people, was saying something as well, although Roran could not make sense of it.

The pain suddenly increased tenfold, and he bellowed, which only made it worse. With a supreme effort of will, he forced himself to remain absolutely still. Tears ran from the corners of his clenched eyes.

Then Brigman was talking to him. "Roran, you have an arrow in your back. We tried to catch the archer, but he escaped."

"Hurts …," Roran gasped.

"That's because the arrow hit one of your ribs. It would have gone right through you, otherwise. You're lucky it wasn't an inch higher or lower and that it missed your spine and your shoulder blade."

"Pull it out," he said between gritted teeth.

"We can't; the arrow has a barbed head. And we can't push it through to the other side. It has to be cut out. I have some experience with this, Roran. If you trust me to wield the knife, I can do it here and now. Or, if you prefer, we can wait until we find you a healer. There must be one or two somewhere in the palace."

Though he hated to put himself in Brigman's power, Roran could bear the pain no longer, so he said, "Do it here.… Baldor …"

"Yes, Roran?"

"Take fifty men and find Halstead. Whatever happens, he can't escape. Delwin … stay with me."

A brief discussion ensued between Baldor, Delwin, and Brigman, of which Roran heard but a few scattered words. Then a large portion of the Varden departed the atrium, which was noticeably quieter afterward.

At Brigman's insistence, a team of warriors fetched chairs from a nearby room, broke them into pieces, and built a fire on the gravel-lined path next to the statue. Into the fire was placed the tip of a dagger, which Roran knew Brigman would use to cauterize the wound in his back after removing the arrow, lest he bleed to death.

As he lay on the bench, stiff and trembling, Roran focused on controlling his breathing, taking slow, shallow breaths to minimize the pain. Difficult as it was, he purged his mind of all other thoughts. What had been and what might be did not matter, only the steady inflow and outflow of air through his nostrils.

He almost passed out when four men lifted him from the bench and lowered him facedown to the ground. Someone stuffed a leather glove into his mouth, aggravating the ache from his torn lips, while at the same time, rough hands grasped each of his legs and arms, stretching them out to their fullest extent and pinning them in place.

Roran glanced backward to see Brigman kneeling over him, holding a curved hunting knife in one hand. The knife began to descend, and Roran closed his eyes again and bit down hard on the glove.

He breathed in.

He breathed out.

And then time and memory ceased for him.

INTERREGNUM

Roran sat hunched over the edge of the table, toying with a jewel-encrusted goblet that he stared at without interest.

Night had fallen, and the only light in the lavish bedchamber came from the two candles on the desk and the small fire glowing on the hearth by the empty four-poster bed. All was quiet, save for an occasional crackle of burning wood.

A faint salty breeze wafted through the windows, parting the thin white curtains. He turned his face to catch the draft, welcoming the touch of cool air against his fevered skin.

Through the windows, he could see Aroughs laid out before him. Watchfires dotted the streets at intersections here and there, but otherwise the city was dark and motionless—unusually so, for everyone who could was hiding in their homes.

When the breeze ceased, he took another sip from the goblet, pouring the wine directly down his throat to avoid having to swallow. A drop fell onto the split in his lower lip, and he tensed and sucked in his breath while he waited for the spike of pain to vanish.

He set the goblet on the desk, next to the plate of bread and lamb and the half-empty bottle of wine, then glanced at the mirror propped upright between the two candles. It still reflected nothing but his own haggard face, bruised, bloodied, and missing a goodly portion of his beard on the right-hand side.

He looked away. She would contact him when she did. In the meantime he would wait. It was all he could do; he hurt too much to sleep.

He picked up the goblet again and rolled it between his fingers.

Time passed.

* * *

Late that night, the mirror shimmered like a rippling pool of quicksilver, causing Roran to blink and gaze at it through bleary, half-closed eyes.

The teardrop shape of Nasuada's face took form before him, her expression as serious as ever. "Roran," she said by way of greeting, her voice clear and strong.

"Lady Nasuada." He straightened off the table as far as he dared, which was only a few inches.

“Have you been captured?”

“No.”

“Then I take it that Carn is either dead or wounded.”

“He died while fighting another magician.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.… He seemed a decent man, and we can ill afford to lose any of our spellcasters.” She paused for a moment. “And what of Aroughs?”

“The city is ours.”

Nasuada’s eyebrows rose. “Truly? I am most impressed. Tell me, how went the battle? Did everything go according to plan?”

Opening his jaw as little as he could, so as to minimize the discomfort of talking, Roran mumbled his way through an account of the past several days, from his arrival at Aroughs to the one-eyed man who had attacked him in his tent to the breaking of the dams at the mills to how the Varden had fought their way through Aroughs to the palace of Lord Halstead, including Carn’s duel with the enemy magician.

Then Roran related how he had been shot in the back, and how Brigman had cut the arrow out of him. “I’m lucky he was there; he did a good job of it. If not for him, I would have been next to useless until we found a healer.” He cringed inwardly as, for a second, the memory of his wounds being cauterized jumped to the forefront of his mind, and he again felt the touch of hot metal against his flesh.

“I hope you did find a healer to look at you.”

“Aye, later, but he was no spellcaster.”

Nasuada leaned back in her chair and studied him for a while. “I’m astonished you still have the strength to talk to me. The people of Carvahall are indeed made of stern stuff.”

“Afterward, we secured the palace, as well as the rest of Aroughs, although there are still a few places where our grip is weak. It was fairly easy to convince the soldiers to surrender once they realized we had slipped behind their lines and captured the center of the city.”

“And what of Lord Halstead? Did you capture him as well?”

“He was attempting to escape the palace when some of my men chanced upon him. Halstead had only a small number of guards with him, not enough to fight off our warriors, so he and his retainers fled into a wine cellar and barricaded themselves inside.…” Roran rubbed his thumb over a ruby set in the goblet before him. “They wouldn’t surrender, and I didn’t dare storm the room; it would have been too costly. So … I ordered the men to fetch pots of oil from the kitchens, light them on fire, and throw them against the door.”

“Were you trying to smoke them out?” Nasuada asked.

He nodded slowly. “A few of the soldiers ran out once the door burned down, but Halstead waited too long. We found him on the

floor, suffocated."

"That is unfortunate."

"Also … his daughter, Lady Galiana." In his mind, he could still see her: tiny, delicate, garbed in a beautiful lavender dress covered with frills and ribbons.

Nasuada frowned. "Who succeeds Halstead as the earl of Fenmark?"

"Tharos the Quick."

"The same who led the charge against you yesterday?"

"The same."

It had been midafternoon when his men had brought Tharos before him. The small, bearded man had appeared dazed, though uninjured, and he had been missing his helm with its flamboyant plumes. To him, Roran—who was lying belly-down on a padded couch to save his back—had said, "I believe you owe me a bottle of wine."

"How have you done this?!" Tharos had demanded in response, the sound of despair ringing in his voice. "The city was impregnable. None but a dragon could have broken our walls. And yet look what you wrought. You are something other than human, something other than …" And he had fallen silent, unable to speak any longer.

"How did he react to the deaths of his father and sister?" Nasuada asked.

Roran leaned his head against his hand. His brow was slick with sweat, so he wiped it dry with his sleeve. He shivered. Despite the perspiration, he felt cold all over, especially in his hands and feet. "He didn't seem to much care about his father. His sister, though …" Roran winced as he remembered the torrent of abuse Tharos had directed at him after learning that Galiana was dead.

"If ever I get the chance, I'll kill you for this," Tharos had said. "I swear it."

"You had best move quickly, then," Roran had retorted. "Another has already claimed my life, and if anyone is going to kill me, my guess is that it'll be her."

"… Roran? … Roran!"

With a faint sense of surprise, he realized that Nasuada was calling his name. He looked at her again, framed in the mirror like a portrait, and struggled to find his tongue. At last he said, "Tharos isn't really the earl of Fenmark. He's the youngest of Halstead's seven sons, but all of his brothers have fled or are hiding. So, for the time being, Tharos is the only one left to claim the title. He makes a good envoy between us and the elders of the city. Without Carn, though, there's no way for me to tell who is sworn to Galbatorix and who isn't. Most of the lords and ladies are, I assume, and the soldiers, of course, but it's impossible to know who else."

Nasuada pursed her lips. "I see.… Dauth is the closest city to you.

I'll ask Lady Alarice—whom I believe you've met—to send someone to Aroughs who is skilled in the art of reading minds. Most nobles keep one such person in their retinue, so it should be easy enough for Alarice to fulfill our request. However, when we marched for the Burning Plains, King Orrin brought with him every spellcaster of note from Surda, which means that whoever Alarice sends will most likely have no other skill with magic besides the ability to hear others' thoughts. And without the proper spells, it will be difficult to prevent those who are loyal to Galbatorix from opposing us at every turn."

While she spoke, Roran allowed his gaze to drift across the desk until it came to rest on the dark bottle of wine. *I wonder if Tharos poisoned it?* The thought failed to alarm him.

Then Nasuada was speaking to him again: "… hope that you have kept tight rein over your men and not let them run wild in Aroughs, burning, plundering, and taking liberties with its people?"

Roran was so tired, he found it difficult to marshal a coherent response, but at last he managed to say, "There are too few of us for the men to make mischief. They know as well as I do that the soldiers could retake the city if we gave them even the slightest opportunity."

"A mixed blessing, I suppose.… How many casualties did you suffer during the attack?"

"Forty-two."

For a while, silence lay between them. Then Nasuada said, "Did Carn have any family?"

Roran shrugged, a slight inward motion of his left shoulder. "I don't know. He was from somewhere in the north, I think, but neither of us really talked about our lives before … before all of this.… It never seemed that important."

A sudden itch in Roran's throat forced him to cough again and again, and he curled over the table until his forehead touched the wood, grimacing as waves of pain assailed him from his back, his shoulder, and his mangled mouth. His convulsions were so violent, the wine in the goblet slopped over the rim and spilled onto his hand and wrist.

As he slowly recovered, Nasuada said, "Roran, you have to summon a healer to examine you. You're unwell, and you ought to be in bed."

"No." He wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth, then looked up at her. "They've done all they can, and I'm no child to be fussed over."

Nasuada hesitated, then dipped her head. "As you wish."

"Now what happens?" he asked. "Am I finished here?"

"It was my intention to have you return as soon as we captured Aroughs—however that was accomplished—but you're in no condition to ride all the way to Dras-Leona. You'll have to wait until—"

“I won’t wait,” Roran growled. He grabbed the mirror and pulled it toward him until it was only a few inches from his face. “Don’t you coddle me, Nasuada. I can ride, and I can ride fast. The only reason I came here is because Aroughs was a threat to the Varden. That threat is gone now—I removed it—and I’m not about to stay here, injuries or no injuries, while my wife and unborn child sit camped less than a mile away from Murtagh and his dragon!”

Nasuada’s voice hardened for a moment. “You went to Aroughs because *I* sent you.” Then, in a more relaxed tone, she said, “However, your point is well taken. You may return at once, if you are able. There’s no reason for you to ride night and day, as you did during the journey there, but neither should you dawdle. Be sensible about it. I don’t want to have to explain to Katrina that you killed yourself traveling.… Whom do you think I should select as your replacement when you leave Aroughs?”

“Captain Brigman.”

“Brigman? Why? Didn’t you have some difficulties with him?”

“He helped keep the men in line after I was shot. My head wasn’t very clear at the time—”

“I imagine not.”

“—and he saw to it that they didn’t panic or lose their nerve. Also, he led them on my behalf while I was stuck in this miserable music box of a castle. He was the only one who had the experience for it. Without him, we wouldn’t have been able to extend our control over the whole of Aroughs. The men like him, and he’s skilled at planning and organizing. He’ll do well at governing the city.”

“Brigman it is, then.” Nasuada looked away from the mirror and murmured something to a person he could not see. Turning back to him, she said, “I must admit, I never thought you would actually capture Aroughs. It seemed impossible that anyone could breach the city’s defenses in so little time, with so few men, and without the aid of either a dragon or Rider.”

“Then why send me here?”

“Because I had to try *something* before letting Eragon and Saphira fly so far away, and because you have made a habit of confounding expectations and prevailing where others would have faltered or given up. If the impossible *were* to happen, it seemed most likely that it would occur under your watch, as indeed it did.”

Roran snorted softly. *And how long can I keep tempting fate before I end up dead like Carn?*

“Sneer if you want, but you cannot deny your own success. You have won a great victory for us today, Stronghammer. Or rather, Captain Stronghammer, I ought to say. You have more than earned the right to that title. I am immensely grateful for what you have

done. By capturing Aroughs, you have freed us from the prospect of fighting a war on two fronts, which would have almost certainly meant our destruction. All of the Varden are in your debt, and I promise you, the sacrifices you and your men have made will not be forgotten."

Roran tried to say something, failed, tried again, and failed a second time before he finally managed to say: "I … I will be sure to let the men know how you feel. It will mean a lot to them."

"Please do. And now I must bid you farewell. It is late, you are sick, and I have kept you far too long as it is."

"Wait …" He reached toward her and struck the tips of his fingers against the mirror. "Wait. You haven't told me: How goes the siege of Dras-Leona?"

She stared at him, her expression flat. "Badly. And it shows no signs of improving. We could use you here, Stronghammer. If we don't find a way to bring this situation to an end, and soon, everything we have fought for will be lost."

"You're fine," said Eragon, exasperated. "Stop worrying. There's nothing you can do about it anyway."

Saphira growled and continued to study her image in the lake. She turned her head from side to side, then exhaled heavily, releasing a cloud of smoke that drifted out over the water like a small, lost thundercloud.

Are you sure? she asked, and looked toward him. *What if it doesn't grow back?*

"Dragons grow new scales all the time. You know that."

Yes, but I've never lost one before!

He did not bother to hide his smile; he knew she would sense his amusement. "You shouldn't be so upset. It wasn't very big." Reaching out, he traced the diamond-shaped hole on the left side of her snout, where the object of her consternation had so recently been ensconced. The gap in her sparkling armor was no larger than the end of his thumb and about an inch deep. At the bottom of it, her leathery blue hide was visible.

Curious, he touched her skin with the tip of his index finger. It felt warm and smooth, like the belly of a calf.

Saphira snorted and pulled her head away from him. *Stop that; it tickles*.

He chuckled and kicked at the water by the base of the rock he was sitting on, enjoying the sensation against the bottom of his bare feet.

It may not have been very big, she said, *but everyone will notice that it's missing. How could they not? One might as well overlook a bare patch of earth on the crest of a snow-covered mountain*. And her eyes rolled forward as she tried to peer down her long snout at the small, dark hole above her nostril.

Eragon laughed and splashed a handful of water at her. Then, to soothe her injured pride, he said, "No one will notice, Saphira. Trust me. Besides, even if they do, they'll take it for a battle wound and consider you all the more fearsome because of it."

You think so? She returned to examining herself in the lake. The water and her scales reflected off each other in a dazzling array of rainbow-hued flecks. *What if a soldier stabs me there? The blade would go right through me. Perhaps I should ask the dwarves to make a metal plate to cover the area until the scale regrows*.

"That would look exceedingly ridiculous."

It would?

"Mm-hmm." He nodded, on the verge of laughing again.

She sniffed. *There's no need to make fun of me. How would you like it if the fur on your head started falling out, or you lost one of those silly little nubs you call teeth? I would end up having to comfort you, no doubt.*

"No doubt," he agreed easily. "But then, teeth don't grow back." He pushed himself off the rock and made his way up the shore to where he had left his boots, stepping carefully to avoid hurting his feet on the stones and branches that littered the water's edge. Saphira followed him, the soft earth squishing between her talons.

You could cast a spell to protect just that spot, she said as he pulled on his boots.

"I could. Do you want me to?"

I do.

He worked out the enchantment in his head while he laced up his boots, then placed the palm of his right hand over the pit in her snout and murmured the necessary words in the ancient language. A faint azure glow emanated from underneath his hand as he bound the ward to her body.

"There," he said when he finished. "Now you have nothing to worry about."

Except that I'm still missing a scale.

He gave her a push on the jaw. "Come on, you. Let's go back to camp."

Together they left the lake and climbed the steep, crumbling bank behind them, Eragon using the exposed tree roots as handholds.

At the top of the rise, they had an unobstructed view of the Varden's camp a half mile to the east, as well as, somewhat north of the camp, the sprawling mess of Dras-Leona. The only signs of life within the city were the tendrils of smoke that rose from the chimneys of many a house. As always, Thorn lay draped across the battlements above the southern gate, basking in the bright afternoon light. The red dragon looked asleep, but Eragon knew from experience that he was keeping a close eye on the Varden, and the moment anyone began to approach the city, he would rouse himself and issue a warning to Murtagh and the others inside.

Eragon hopped onto Saphira's back, and she carried him to the camp at a leisurely pace.

When they arrived, he slid to the ground and took the lead as they moved between the tents. The camp was quiet, and everything about it felt slow and sleepy, from the low, drawling tones of the warriors' conversations to the pennants that hung motionless in the thick air. The only creatures who appeared immune to the general lethargy were the lean, half-feral dogs that ranged through the camp,

constantly sniffing as they searched for discarded scraps of food. A number of the dogs bore scratches on their muzzles and flanks, the result of making the foolish, if understandable, mistake of thinking they could chase and torment a green-eyed werecat as they would any other cat. When it had happened, their yelps of pain had attracted the attention of the entire camp, and the men had laughed to see the dogs running away from the werecat with their tails between their legs.

Conscious of the many looks he and Saphira attracted, Eragon kept his chin high and his shoulders square and adopted a vigorous stride in an attempt to convey an impression of purpose and energy. The men needed to see that he was still full of confidence, and that he had not allowed the tedium of their present predicament to weigh him down.

If only Murtagh and Thorn would leave, thought Eragon. *They wouldn't have to be gone for more than a day for us to capture the city*.

So far, the siege of Dras-Leona had proven to be singularly uneventful. Nasuada refused to attack the city, for as she had said to Eragon, "You barely managed to best Murtagh the last time you met—do you forget how he stabbed you in the hip?—and he promised that he would be stronger still when you next crossed paths. Murtagh may be many things, but I am not inclined to believe he is a liar."

"Strength isn't everything when it comes to a fight between magicians," Eragon had pointed out.

"No, but it's not unimportant either. Also, he now has the support of the priests of Helgrind, more than a few of whom I suspect are magicians. I won't risk letting you face them and Murtagh head-on in battle, not even with Blödhgarm's spellcasters by your side. Until we can contrive to lure Murtagh and Thorn away, or trap them, or otherwise gain an advantage over them, we stay here, and we don't move against Dras-Leona."

Eragon had protested, arguing that it was impractical to stall their invasion, and that if he could not defeat Murtagh, what hope did she think he would have against Galbatorix? But Nasuada had remained unconvinced.

They—along with Arya, Blödhgarm, and all the spellcasters of Du Vrangr Gata—had planned and plotted and searched for ways to gain the advantage Nasuada had spoken of. But every strategy they considered was flawed because it required more time and resources than were at the Varden's disposal, or else because it ultimately failed to resolve the question of how to kill, capture, or drive off Murtagh and Thorn.

Nasuada had even gone to Elva and asked her if she would use her ability—which allowed her to sense other people's pain, as well as any pain they were about to suffer in the immediate future—to overcome

Murtagh or to surreptitiously gain entrance to the city. The silver-browed girl had laughed at Nasuada and sent her away with gibes and insults, saying, “I owe no bond of allegiance to you or anyone else, Nasuada. Find some other child to win your battles for you; I’ll not do it.”

And so, the Varden waited.

As day inexorably followed day, Eragon had watched the men grow sullen and discontent, and Nasuada had become increasingly worried. An army, Eragon had learned, was a ravenous, insatiable beast that would soon die and separate into its constituent elements unless massive amounts of food were shoveled into its many thousands of stomachs upon a regular basis. When marching into new territory, obtaining supplies for an army was a simple matter of confiscating food and other essentials from the people they conquered, and stripping resources from the surrounding countryside. Like a plague of locusts, the Varden left a barren swath of land in their wake, a swath devoid of most everything needed to support life.

Once they stopped moving, they soon exhausted the stores of food close at hand and were forced to subsist entirely on provisions brought to them from Surda and the several cities they had captured. Generous as the inhabitants of Surda were, and rich as the vanquished cities were, the regular deliveries of goods were not enough to sustain the Varden for much longer.

Though Eragon knew the warriors were devoted to their cause, he had no doubt that, when faced with the prospect of a slow, agonizing death by starvation that would accomplish nothing besides giving Galbatorix the satisfaction of gloating over their defeat, most men would elect to flee to some distant corner of Alagaësia, where they could live out the rest of their lives in safety from the Empire.

That moment had not yet arrived, but it was fast approaching.

Fear of that fate, Eragon was sure, was what had been keeping Nasuada up at night, so that she appeared increasingly haggard each morning, the bags under her eyes like small, sad smiles.

The difficulties they had faced at Dras-Leona made Eragon grateful that Roran had avoided becoming similarly bogged down at Aroughs and heightened his admiration and appreciation for what his cousin had accomplished at the southern city. *He’s a braver man than I.* Nasuada would disapprove, but Eragon was determined that once Roran returned—which, if all went well, would be in just a few days—Eragon would once again provide him with a full set of wards. Eragon had already lost too many members of his family to the Empire and Galbatorix, and he was not about to let the same doom befall Roran.

He paused to let a trio of arguing dwarves cross the path in front of him. The dwarves wore no helms or insignia, but he knew they were

not of Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, for their plaited beards were trimmed with beads—a fashion he had never seen among the Ingeitum. Whatever the dwarves were quarreling about was a mystery to him—he could not understand more than a few words of their guttural language—but the topic was obviously of all-consuming importance, judging by their loud voices, unrestrained gestures, exaggerated expressions, and their failure to notice either him or Saphira standing in the path.

Eragon smiled as they passed; he found their preoccupation somewhat comical, despite their evident seriousness. Much to the relief of everyone in the Varden, the dwarves' army, led by their new king, Orik, had arrived at Dras-Leona two days before. That, and Roran's victory at Aroughs, had since become the main topics of conversation throughout the camp. The dwarves nearly doubled the size of the Varden's allied forces and would substantially increase the chances of the Varden reaching Urû'baen and Galbatorix if a favorable solution to the impasse with Murtagh and Thorn could be found.

As he and Saphira walked through the camp, Eragon caught sight of Katrina sitting outside her tent, knitting clothes for her child-to-be. She greeted him with a raised hand and by calling, "Cousin!"

He replied in kind, as had become their habit since her marriage.

After both he and Saphira enjoyed a leisurely lunch—which involved a fair amount of tearing and crunching on Saphira's part—they retired to the patch of soft, sunlit grass next to Eragon's tent. By order of Nasuada, the patch was always left open for Saphira's use, a dictate that the Varden observed with religious zeal.

There Saphira curled up to doze in the midday warmth, while Eragon fetched *Domia abr Wyrda* from his saddlebags, then climbed under the overhang of her left wing to nestle in the partially shaded hollow between the inner curve of her neck and her muscular foreleg. The light that shone through the folds of her wing, as well as that cast off in winking highlights from her scales, painted his skin a weird, purplish hue and covered the pages of the book with a smattering of glowing shapes that made it difficult to read the thin, angular runes. But he did not mind; the pleasure of sitting with Saphira more than made up for the inconvenience.

They sat together for an hour or two, until Saphira had digested her meal and Eragon was tired of deciphering the convoluted sentences of Heslant the Monk. Then, bored, they wandered through the camp, inspecting the defenses and occasionally exchanging words with the sentinels stationed along the perimeter.

Near the eastern edge of the camp, where the bulk of the dwarves were situated, they came across a dwarf who was squatting next to a bucket of water, his sleeves rolled up past his elbows, molding a fist-sized ball of dirt with his hands. By his feet was a puddle of mud and

a stick that had been used to stir it.

The sight was so incongruous, several moments elapsed before Eragon realized that the dwarf was Orik.

"Derûndânn, Eragon … Saphira," said Orik without looking up.

"Derûndânn," said Eragon, repeating the traditional dwarvish greeting, and squatted on the other side of the puddle. He watched as Orik continued to refine the contours of the ball, smoothing and shaping it with the outer curve of his right thumb. Every so often, Orik reached down, grabbed a handful of dry dirt, and sprinkled it over the yellowish orb of earth, then gently brushed off the excess.

"I never thought to see the king of the dwarves crouched on the ground, playing in the mud like a child," Eragon said.

Orik huffed, blowing out his mustache. "And I never thought to have a dragon and a Rider staring at me while I made an Erôthknurl."

"And what is an Erôthknurl?"

"A thardsvergûndnzmal."

"A *thardsver*—?" Eragon gave up halfway through the word, unable to remember the whole of it, much less pronounce it. "And that is …?"

"Something that appears to be other than what it actually is." Orik raised the ball of dirt. "Like this. This is a stone fashioned from earth. Or, rather, so it shall seem when I am done."

"A stone from earth.… Is it magic?"

"No, it is mine own skill. Nothing more."

When Orik failed to explain further, Eragon asked, "How is it done?"

"If you are patient, you will see." Then, after a while, Orik relented and said, "First, you must find some dirt."

"A hard task, that."

From under his bushy eyebrows, Orik gave him a look. "Some types of dirt are better than others. Sand, for example, will not work. The dirt must have particles of varying size, so that it will stick together properly. Also, it should have some clay in it, as this does. But most important, if I do this"—and he patted his hand against a bare strip of ground among the clumps of trampled grass—"there must be lots of dust in the dirt. See?" He held up his hand, showing Eragon the layer of fine powder that clung to his palm.

"Why is that important?"

"Ah," said Orik, and tapped the side of his nose, leaving behind a whitish smear. He resumed rubbing the sphere with his hands, turning it so that it would remain symmetrical. "Once you have good dirt, you wet it and you mix it like water and flour until you have a nice, thick mud." He nodded at the pool by his feet. "From the mud, you form a ball, like so, eh? Then you squeeze it and wring out every drop you can. Then you make the ball perfectly round. When it begins to feel

sticky, you do as I am doing: you pour dirt over it, to draw out more moisture from the interior. This you continue until the ball is dry enough to hold its shape, but not so dry that it cracks.

"Mine Erôthknurl is almost to that point. When it gets there, I shall bear it to mine tent and leave it in the sun for a goodly while. The light and the warmth will draw out even more moisture from the center; then I shall again pour dirt over it and again clean it off. After three or four times, the outside of mine Erôthknurl should be as hard as the hide of a Nagra."

"All that just to have a ball of dry mud?" said Eragon, puzzled. Saphira shared his sentiment.

Orik scooped up another handful of dirt. "No, because that's not the end of it. Next is when the dust becomes of use. I take it, and I smear the outside of the Erôthknurl with it, which forms a thin, smooth shell. Then I will let the ball rest and wait for more moisture to seep to the surface, then dust, then wait, then dust, then wait, and so on."

"And how long will that take?"

"Until the dust no longer adheres to the Erôthknurl. The shell it forms is what gives an Erôthknurl its beauty. Over the course of a day, it will acquire a brilliant sheen, as if it were made of polished marble. With no buffing, no grinding, no magic—with only your heart, head, and hands—you will have made a stone out of common earth … a fragile stone, it is true, but a stone nevertheless."

Despite Orik's insistence, Eragon still found it hard to believe that the mud at his feet could be transformed into anything like what Orik had described without the use of magic.

Why are you making one, though, Orik dwarf king? Saphira asked. *You must have many responsibilities now that you are ruler of your people*.

Orik grunted. "I have nothing I must needs do at the moment. My men are ready for battle, but there is no battle for us to fight, and it would be bad for them if I were to fuss over them like a mother hen. Nor do I want to sit alone in my tent, watching mine beard grow.… Thus the Erôthknurl."

He fell silent then, but it seemed to Eragon that something was bothering Orik, so Eragon held his tongue and waited to see if Orik would say anything else. After a minute, Orik cleared his throat and said, "Used to be, I could drink and play dice with the others of mine clan, and it mattered not that I was Hrothgar's adopted heir. We could still talk and laugh together without it feeling uncomfortable. I asked for no favors, nor did I show any. But now it is different. My friends cannot forget that I am their king, and I cannot ignore how their behavior has changed toward me."

"That is only to be expected," Eragon pointed out. He empathized with Orik's plight, for he had experienced much the same thing since

becoming a Rider.

"Perhaps. But knowing it makes it no easier to bear." Orik made an exasperated sound. "Ach, life is a strange, cruel journey sometimes.… I admired Hrothgar as a king, but it often seemed to me that he was short with those he dealt with when he had no reason to be. Now I understand better why he was the way he was." Orik cupped the ball of dirt with both hands and gazed at it, his brow knotted in a scowl. "When you met with Grimstborith Gannel in Tarnag, did he explain to you the significance of the Erôthknurln?"

"He never mentioned it."

"I suppose there were other matters that needed talking about.… Still, as one of the Ingeitum, and as an adopted knurla, you should know the import and symbology of the Erôthknurln. It is not just a way to focus the mind, pass the time, and create an interesting keepsake. No. The act of making a stone out of earth is a sacred one. By it, we reaffirm our faith in Helzvog's power and offer tribute to him. One should approach the task with reverence and purpose. Crafting an Erôthknurl is a form of worship, and the gods do not look kindly on those who perform the rites in a frivolous manner.… From stone, flesh; from flesh, earth; and from earth, stone again. The wheel turns and we see but a glimpse of the entirety."

Only then did Eragon appreciate the depth of Orik's disquiet. "You ought to have Hvedra with you," he said. "She would keep you company and prevent you from becoming so grim. I've never seen you as happy as when you were with her at Bregan Hold."

The lines around Orik's downcast eyes deepened as he smiled. "Aye. … But she is the grimstcarvlorss of the Ingeitum, and she cannot abandon her duties just to comfort me. Besides, I could not rest easy if she were within a hundred leagues of Murtagh and Thorn or, worse, Galbatorix and his accursed black dragon."

In an attempt to cheer Orik up, Eragon said, "You remind me of the answer to a riddle: a dwarf king sitting on the ground, making a stone out of dirt. I'm not sure how the riddle itself would go, but perhaps, something along the lines of:

Strong and stout,

Thirteen stars upon his brow,

Living stone sat shaping dead earth into dead stone.

"It doesn't rhyme, but then, you can't expect me to compose proper verse on the spur of the moment. I would imagine that a riddle like that would be quite a head-scratcher for most people."

"Humph," said Orik. "Not for a dwarf. Even our children could solve it quick as you please."

A dragon too, said Saphira.

"I suppose you're right," said Eragon.

Then he asked Orik about everything that had happened among the dwarves after he and Saphira had left Tronjheim for their second trip to the forest of the elves. Eragon had not had an opportunity to talk with Orik for any great length of time since the dwarves had arrived at Dras-Leona, and he was eager to hear how his friend had gotten along since assuming the throne.

Orik did not seem to mind explaining the intricacies of the dwarves' politics. Indeed, as he spoke, his expression brightened and he became increasingly animated. He spent nearly an hour recounting the bickering and maneuvering that had gone on between the dwarf clans prior to assembling their army and marching to join the Varden. The clans were a fractious lot, as Eragon well knew, and even as king, Orik had difficulty commanding their obedience.

"It's like trying to herd a flock of geese," said Orik. "They're always trying to go off on their own, they make an obnoxious noise, and they'll bite your hand first chance they get."

During the course of Orik's narration, Eragon thought to ask about Vermûnd. He had often wondered what had become of the dwarf chief who had plotted to assassinate him. He liked to know where his enemies were, especially one as dangerous as Vermûnd.

"He returned to his home village of Feldarast," Orik said. "There, by all accounts, he sits and drinks and rages about what is and what might have been. But none now listen to him. The knurlan of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin are proud and stubborn. In most cases, they would remain loyal to Vermûnd regardless of what the other clans might do or say, but attempting to kill a guest is an unforgivable offense. And not all of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin hate you like Vermûnd does. I cannot believe that they will agree to remain cut off from the rest of their kind just to protect a grimstborith who has lost every scrap of his honor. It may take years, but eventually they will turn against him. Already I have heard that many of the clan shun Vermûnd, even as they themselves are shunned."

"What do you think will happen to him?"

"He will accept the inevitable and step down, or else one day someone will slip poison into his mead, or perhaps a dagger between his ribs. Either way, he is no longer a threat to you as the leader of Az Sweldn rak Anhûin."

They continued to talk until Orik had finished the first few stages of shaping his Erôthknurl and was ready to take the ball of dirt and set it to rest upon a piece of cloth by his tent to dry. As Orik rose to his feet and gathered up his bucket and stick, he said, "I appreciate you being so kind as to listen to me, Eragon. And you as well, Saphira. Strange

as it may seem, you are the only ones besides Hvedra to whom I can talk freely. Everyone else …" He shrugged. "Bah."

Eragon got to his feet as well. "You're our friend, Orik, whether you are king of the dwarves or not. We're always happy to talk with you. And you know, you don't have to worry about us telling others what you've said."

"Aye, I know that, Eragon." Orik squinted up at him. "You participate in the goings-on of the world, and yet you haven't gotten caught up in all the petty scheming around you."

"It doesn't interest me. Besides, there are more important things to deal with at the moment."

"That's good. A Rider should stand apart from everyone else. Otherwise, how can you judge things for yourself? I never used to appreciate the Riders' independence, but now I do, if only for selfish reasons."

"I don't stand entirely apart," said Eragon. "I'm sworn both to you and to Nasuada."

Orik inclined his head. "True enough. But you are not fully part of the Varden—or the Ingeitum either, for that matter. Whatever the case may be, I'm glad I can trust you."

A smile crept across Eragon's face. "As am I."

"After all, we're foster brothers, aren't we? And brothers ought to watch each other's backs."

That they should, thought Eragon, though he did not say it out loud. "Foster brothers," he agreed, and clapped Orik on the shoulder.

THE WAY OF KNOWING

Later that afternoon, when it seemed increasingly unlikely that the Empire would launch an attack from Dras-Leona in the few remaining hours of sunlight, Eragon and Saphira went to the sparring field at the rear of the Varden camp.

There Eragon met with Arya, as he had done every day since arriving at the city. He asked after her, and she answered briefly—she had been stuck in a tiresome conference with Nasuada and King Orrin since before dawn. Then Eragon drew his sword and Arya hers, and they took up positions opposite each other. For a change, they had agreed beforehand to use shields; it was closer to the reality of actual combat, and it introduced a welcome element of variety into their duels.

They circled each other with short, smooth steps, moving like dancers over the uneven ground, feeling their way with their feet and never looking down, never looking away from one another.

This was Eragon's favorite part of their fights. There was something profoundly intimate about staring into Arya's eyes, without blinking, without wavering, and having her stare back at him with the same degree of focus and intensity. It could be disconcerting, but he enjoyed the sense of connection it created between them.

Arya initiated the first attack, and within the span of a second, Eragon found himself standing hunched over at an awkward angle, her blade pressed against the left side of his neck, tugging painfully at his skin. Eragon remained frozen until Arya saw fit to release the pressure and allow him to stand upright.

"That was sloppy," she said.

"How is it you keep besting me?" he growled, far from pleased.

"Because," she replied, and feinted toward his right shoulder, causing him to raise his shield and leap backward in alarm, "I've had over a hundred years of practice. It would be odd if I *weren't* better than you, now wouldn't it? You should be proud that you've managed to mark me at all. Few can."

Brisingr whistled through the air as Eragon struck at her lead thigh. A loud *clang* resounded as she stopped the blow with her shield. She countered with a clever twisting stab that caught him on his sword wrist and sent icy needles shooting up his arm and shoulder to the base of his skull.

Wincing, he disengaged, seeking a temporary reprieve. One of the

challenges of fighting elves was that because of their speed and strength, they could lunge forward and engage an enemy at distances far greater than any human could. Therefore, to be safe from Arya, he had to move nearly a hundred feet away from her.

Before he could put much distance between them, Arya sprang after him, taking two flying steps, her hair streaming behind her. Eragon swung at her while she was still airborne, but she turned so that his sword passed along the length of her body, without touching it. Then she slipped the edge of her shield underneath his and yanked it away, leaving his chest completely exposed. Fast as could be, she brought her sword up and again pressed it against his neck, this time underneath his chin.

She held him in that position, her large, wide-set eyes only inches away from his. There was a ferocity and intentness to her expression that he was uncertain how to interpret, but it gave him pause.

A shadow seemed to flit across Arya's face then, and she lowered her sword and stepped away.

Eragon rubbed his throat. "If you know so much about swordsmanship," he said, "then why can't you teach me to be better?"

Her emerald eyes burned with even greater force. "I'm trying," she said, "but the problem is not here." She tapped her sword against his right arm. "The problem is here." She tapped his helm, metal clinking against metal. "And I don't know how else to teach you what you need to learn except by showing you your mistakes over and over again until you stop making them." She rapped his helm once more. "Even if it means I have to beat you black-and-blue in order to do it."

That she continued to defeat him with such regularity hurt his pride far more than he was willing to admit, even to Saphira, and it made him doubt whether he would ever be able to triumph over Galbatorix, Murtagh, or any other truly formidable opponent, should he be so unfortunate as to face them in single combat without the help of Saphira or his magic.

Wheeling away from Arya, Eragon stomped over to a spot some ten yards distant.

"Well?" he said through clenched teeth. "Get on with it, then." And he settled into a low crouch as he readied himself for another onslaught.

Arya narrowed her eyes to slits, which gave her angled face an evil look. "Very well."

They rushed at each other, both shouting war cries, and the field echoed with the sounds of their furious clash. Match after match they fought, until they were tired, sweaty, and coated with dust, and Eragon was striped with many painful welts. And still they continued to dash themselves against one another with a grim-faced

determination that had hitherto been absent from their duels. Neither of them asked to end their brutal, bruising contest, and neither of them offered to.

Saphira watched from the side of the field, where she lay sprawled across the springy mat of grass. For the most part, she kept her thoughts to herself, so as to avoid distracting Eragon, but every now and then she made a short observation about his technique or Arya's, observations that Eragon invariably found helpful. Also, he suspected that she had intervened on more than one occasion to save him from a particularly dangerous blow, for at times his arms and legs seemed to move slightly faster than they should have, or even slightly before he intended to move them himself, and when that happened, he felt a tickle in the back of his mind that he knew meant Saphira was meddling with some part of his consciousness.

At last he asked her to stop. *I have to be able to do this myself, Saphira*, he said. *You can't help me every time I need it.*

I can try.

I know. I feel the same way about you. But this is my mountain to climb, not yours.

The edge of her lip twitched. *Why climb when you can fly? You'll never get anywhere on those short little legs of yours.*

That's not true and you know it. Besides, if I were flying, it would be on borrowed wings, and I would gain nothing by it other than the cheap thrill of an unearned victory.

Victory is victory and dead is dead, however it is achieved.

Saphira …, he said warningly.

Little one.

Still, to his relief, she left him to his own devices after that, though she continued to watch him with unceasing vigilance.

Along with Saphira, the elves assigned to guard her and Eragon had gathered along the edge of the field. Their presence made Eragon uncomfortable—he disliked having anyone other than Saphira or Arya witness his failures—but he knew the elves would never agree to withdraw to the tents. In any event, they did serve one useful purpose aside from protecting him and Saphira: keeping the other warriors on the field from wandering over to gawk at a Rider and an elf going at it hammer and tongs. Not that Blödhgarm's spellcasters did anything specific to discourage onlookers, but their very aspect was intimidating enough to ward off casual spectators.

The longer he fought with Arya, the more frustrated Eragon became. He won two of their matches—barely, frantically, with desperate ploys that succeeded more by luck than skill, and that he never would have attempted in a real duel unless he no longer cared for his own safety—but except for those isolated victories, Arya

continued to beat him with depressing ease.

Eventually, Eragon's anger and frustration boiled over, and all sense of proportion deserted him. Inspired by the methods that had granted him his few successes, Eragon lifted his right arm and prepared to *throw* Brisingr at Arya, even as he might a battle-ax.

Just at that moment, another mind touched Eragon's, a mind that Eragon instantly knew belonged to neither Arya nor Saphira, nor any of the other elves, for it was unmistakably male, and it was unmistakably dragon. Eragon recoiled from the contact, racing to order his thoughts so as to ward off what he feared was an attack by Thorn. But before he could, an immense voice echoed through the shadowed byways of his consciousness, like the sound of a mountain shifting under its own weight:

Enough, said Glaedr.

Eragon stiffened and stumbled forward a half step, rising onto the balls of his feet, as he stopped himself from throwing Brisingr. He saw or sensed Arya, Saphira, and Blödhgarm's spellcasters react as well, stirring with surprise, and he knew that they too had heard Glaedr.

The dragon's mind felt much the same as before—old and unfathomable and torn with grief. But for the first time since Oromis's death at Gil'ead, Glaedr seemed possessed of an urge to do something other than sink ever deeper into the all-enveloping morass of his private torments.

Glaedr-elda! Eragon and Saphira said at the same time.

How are you—

Are you all right—

Did you—

Others spoke as well—Arya; Blödhgarm; two more of the elves, whom Eragon could not identify—and their mass of conflicting words clattered together in an incomprehensible discord.

Enough, Glaedr repeated, sounding both weary and exasperated. *Do you wish to attract unwanted attention?*

At once everyone fell silent as they waited to hear what the golden dragon would say next. Excited, Eragon exchanged glances with Arya.

Glaedr did not speak immediately, but watched them for another few minutes, his presence weighing heavily against Eragon's consciousness, even as Eragon was sure it did with the others.

Then, in his sonorous, magisterial voice, Glaedr said, *This has gone on long enough.… Eragon, you should not spend so much time sparring. It is distracting you from more important matters. The sword in Galbatorix's hand is not what you need fear the most, nor the sword in his mouth, but rather the sword in his mind. His greatest talent lies in his ability to worm his way into the smallest parts of your being and force you to obey his will. Instead of these bouts with Arya, you should concentrate on improving*

your mastery over your thoughts; they are still woefully undisciplined.… Why, then, do you still persist with this futile endeavor?

A host of answers leaped to the forefront of Eragon's mind: that he enjoyed crossing blades with Arya, despite the aggravation it caused him; that he wanted to be the very best sword fighter he could—the very best in the world, if possible; that the exercise helped calm his nerves and shape his body; and many more reasons besides. He tried to suppress the welter of thoughts, both to preserve some measure of privacy and to avoid inundating Glaedr with unwanted information, thus confirming the dragon's opinion about his lack of discipline. He did not entirely succeed, however, and a faint air of disappointment emanated from Glaedr.

Eragon chose his strongest arguments. *If I can hold Galbatorix off with my mind—even if I can't beat him—if I can just hold him off, then this may still be decided by the sword. In any case, the king isn't the only enemy we should be worried about: there's Murtagh, for one, and who knows what other kinds of men or creatures Galbatorix has in his service? I wasn't able to defeat Durza by myself, nor Varaug, nor even Murtagh. Always I've had help. But I can't rely on Arya or Saphira or Blödhgarm to rescue me every time I get into trouble. I have to be better with a blade, and yet I can't seem to make any progress, no matter how hard I try*.

Varaug? Glaedr queried. *I have not heard that name before*.

It fell to Eragon, then, to tell Glaedr about the capture of Feinster and how he and Arya had killed the newly born Shade even as Oromis and Glaedr had met their deaths—differing kinds of deaths, but both still mortal ends—while battling in the skies over Gil'ead. Eragon also summarized the Varden's activities thereafter, for he realized that Glaedr had kept himself so isolated, he had little knowledge of them. The account took Eragon several minutes to deliver, during which time he and the elves stood frozen on the field, staring past each other with unseeing eyes, their attention turned inward as they concentrated on the rapid exchange of thoughts, images, and feelings.

Another long silence followed as Glaedr digested what he had learned. When he again deigned to speak, it was with a tinge of amusement: *You are overly ambitious if your goal is to be able to kill Shades with impunity. Even the oldest and wisest of the Riders would have hesitated to attack a Shade alone. You have already survived encounters with two of them, which is two more than most. Be grateful you have been so lucky and leave it at that. Trying to outmatch a Shade is like trying to fly higher than the sun*.

Yes, replied Eragon, *but our foes are as strong as Shades or even stronger, and Galbatorix may create more of them just to slow our progress. He uses them carelessly, without heed for the destruction they could cause throughout the land*.

Ebrithil, said Arya, *he is right. Our enemies are deadly in the extreme … as you well know*—this she added in a gentle tone—*and Eragon is not at the level he needs to be. To prepare for what lies before us, he has to attain mastery. I have done my best to teach him, but mastery ultimately must come from within, not without*.

Her defense of him warmed Eragon's heart.

As before, Glaedr was slow to respond. *Nor has Eragon mastered his thoughts, as he must also do. Neither of these abilities, mental or physical, is of much use alone, but of the two, the mental is more important. One can win a battle against both a spellcaster and a swordsman with the mind alone. Your mind and your body ought to be in balance, but if you must choose which of them to train, you should choose your mind. Arya … Blödhgarm … Yaela … you know this is true. Why have none of you taken it upon yourselves to continue Eragon's instruction in this area?*

Arya cast her eyes at the ground, somewhat like a chastised child, while the fur on Blödhgarm's shoulders rippled and stood on end, and he pulled back his lips to reveal the tips of his sharp white fangs.

It was Blödhgarm who finally dared reply. Speaking wholly in the ancient language, the first to do so, he said, *Arya is here as the ambassador of our people. I and my band are here to protect the lives of Saphira Brightscales and Eragon Shadeslayer, and it has been a difficult and time-consuming task. We have all tried to help Eragon, but it is not our place to train a Rider, nor would we presume to attempt it when one of his rightful masters was still alive and present … even if that master was neglecting his duty*.

Dark clouds of anger gathered within Glaedr, like massive thunderheads building on the horizon. Eragon distanced himself from Glaedr's consciousness, wary of the dragon's wrath. Glaedr was no longer capable of physically harming anyone, but he was still incredibly dangerous, and should he lose control and lash out with his mind, none of them would be able to withstand his might.

Blödhgarm's rudeness and insensitivity initially shocked Eragon—he had never heard an elf speak to a dragon like that before—but after a moment's reflection, Eragon realized that Blödhgarm must have done it to draw Glaedr out and prevent him from retreating into his shell of misery. Eragon admired the elf's courage, but he wondered whether insulting Glaedr was really the best approach. It certainly wasn't the *safest* plan.

The billowing thunderheads swelled in size, illuminated by brief, lightning-like flashes, as Glaedr's mind jumped from one thought to another. *You have overstepped your bounds, elf*, he growled, also in the ancient language. *My actions are not for you to question. You cannot even begin to comprehend what I have lost. If it were not for Eragon and Saphira and my duty to them, I would have gone mad long ago. So do not*

accuse me of negligence, Blödhgarm, son of Ildrid, unless you wish to test yourself against the last of the high Old Ones.

Baring his teeth even more, Blödhgarm hissed. In spite of that, Eragon detected a hint of satisfaction in the elf's visage. To Eragon's dismay, Blödhgarm pressed on, saying, *Then do not blame us for failing to fulfill what are* your *responsibilities, not ours, Old One. Our whole race mourns your loss, but you cannot expect us to make allowances for your self-pity when we are at war with the most deadly enemy in our history—the same enemy who exterminated nearly every one of your kind, and who also killed your Rider*.

Glaedr's fury was volcanic. Black and terrible, it battered against Eragon with such force, he felt as if the fabric of his being might split asunder, like a sail caught in the wind. On the other side of the field, he saw men drop their weapons and clutch at their heads, grimacing with pain.

My self-pity? said Glaedr, forcing out each word, and each word sounding like a pronouncement of doom. In the recesses of the dragon's mind, Eragon sensed something unpleasant taking shape that, if allowed to reach fruition, might be the cause of much sorrow and regret.

Then Saphira spoke, and her mental voice cut through Glaedr's churning emotions like a knife through water. *Master*, she said, *I have been worried about you. It is good to know that you are well and strong again. None of us are your equal, and we have need of your help. Without you, we cannot hope to defeat the Empire*.

Glaedr rumbled ominously, but he did not ignore, interrupt, or insult her. Indeed, her praise seemed to please him, even if only a little. After all, as Eragon reflected, if there was one thing dragons were susceptible to, it was flattery, as Saphira was well aware.

Without pausing to allow Glaedr to respond, Saphira said, *Since you no longer have use of your wings, let me offer my own as a replacement. The air is calm, the sky is clear, and it would be a joy to fly high above the ground, higher than even the eagles dare soar. After so long trapped within your heart of hearts, you must yearn to leave all this behind and feel the currents of air rising beneath you once more*.

The black storm within Glaedr abated somewhat, although it remained vast and threatening, teetering on the edge of renewed violence. *That … would be pleasant*.

Then we shall fly together soon. But, Master?

Yes, youngling?

There is something I wish to ask of you first.

Then ask it.

Will you help Eragon with his swordsmanship? Can *you help him? He isn't as skilled as he needs to be, and I don't want to lose my Rider*.

Saphira remained dignified throughout, but there was a note of pleading in her voice that caused Eragon's throat to tighten.

The thunderheads collapsed inward on themselves, leaving behind a bare gray landscape that seemed inexpressibly sad to Eragon. Glaedr paused. Strange, half-seen shapes moved slowly along the edge of the landscape—hulking monoliths that Eragon had no desire to meet up close.

Very well, Glaedr said at long last. *I will do what I can for your Rider, but after we are done on this field, he must let me teach him as I see fit*.

Agreed, said Saphira. Eragon saw Arya and the other elves relax, as if they had been holding their breath.

Eragon withdrew from the others for a moment as Trianna and several other magicians who served in the Varden contacted him, each demanding to know what they had just felt tearing at their minds and what had so upset the men and animals in the camp. Trianna overrode the others, saying, *Are we under attack, Shadeslayer? Is it Thorn? Is it Shruikan?!* Her panic was so strong, it made Eragon want to throw down his sword and shield and run for safety.

No, everything is fine, he said as evenly as he could. Glaedr's existence was still a secret to most of the Varden, including Trianna and the magicians who answered to her. Eragon wanted to keep it that way, lest word of the golden dragon should reach the Empire's spies. Lying while in communication with another person's mind was difficult in the extreme—since it was nearly impossible to avoid thinking about whatever it was you wanted to keep hidden—so Eragon kept the conversation as short as he could. *The elves and I were practicing magic. I'll explain it later, but there's no need to be worried*.

He could tell that his reassurances did not entirely convince them, but they dared not press him for a more detailed explanation and bade him farewell before walling off their minds from his inner eye.

Arya must have noticed a change in his bearing, for she walked over to him and, in a low murmur, asked, "Is everything all right?"

"Fine," Eragon replied in a similar undertone. He nodded toward the men who were picking up their weapons. "I had to answer a few questions."

"Ah. You didn't tell them who—"

"Of course not."

Take up your positions as before, Glaedr rumbled, and Eragon and Arya separated and paced off twenty feet in either direction.

Knowing that it might be a mistake but unable to restrain himself, Eragon said, *Master, can you really teach me what I need to know before we reach Urû'baen? So little time is left to us, I—*

I can teach you right now, if you will listen to me, said Glaedr. *But you will have to listen harder than ever before*.

I am listening, Master. Still, Eragon could not help wondering how much the dragon really knew about sword fighting. Glaedr would have learned a great deal from Oromis, even as Saphira had learned from Eragon, but despite those shared experiences, Glaedr had never held a sword himself—how could he have? Glaedr instructing Eragon on fencing would be like Eragon instructing a dragon on how to navigate the thermals rising off the side of a mountain; Eragon could do it, but he would not be able to explain it as well as Saphira, for his knowledge was secondhand, and no amount of abstract contemplation could overcome that disadvantage.

Eragon kept his doubts to himself, but something of them must have seeped past his barriers to Glaedr, because the dragon made an amused sound—or rather, he imitated one within his mind, the habits of the body being hard to forget—and said, *All great fighting is the same, Eragon, even as all great warriors are the same. Past a certain point, it does not matter whether you wield a sword, a claw, a tooth, or a tail. It is true, you must be capable with your weapon, but anyone with the time and the inclination can acquire technical proficiency. To achieve greatness, though, that requires artistry. That requires imagination and thoughtfulness, and it is those qualities that the best warriors share, even if, on the surface, they appear completely different*.

Glaedr fell silent for a moment, then said, *Now, what was it I told you before?*

Eragon did not have to even stop to consider. *That I had to learn to see what I was looking at. And I've tried, Master. I have*.

But still you do not see. Look at Arya. Why has she been able to beat you again and again? Because she understands you, Eragon. She knows who you are and how you think, and that is what allows her to defeat you so consistently. Why is it Murtagh was able to trounce you on the Burning Plains, even though he was nowhere near as fast or strong as you?

Because I was tired and—

And how is it he succeeded in wounding you in the hip when last you met, and yet you were only able to give him a scratch on the cheek? I will tell you, Eragon. It was not because you were tired and he was not. No, it was because he understands you, Eragon, but you do not understand him. Murtagh knows more than you, and thus he has power over you, as does Arya.

And still Glaedr spoke: *Look at her, Eragon. Look at her well. She sees you for who you are, but do you see her in return? Do you see her clearly enough to defeat her in battle?*

Eragon locked eyes with Arya and found within them a combination of determination and defensiveness, as if she was challenging him to attempt to pry open her secrets, but she was also afraid of what would happen if he did. Doubt welled up inside Eragon. Did he really know

her as well as he thought? Or had he deceived himself into mistaking the outer for the inner?

You have allowed yourself to become angrier than you should, said Glaedr softly. *Anger has its place, but it will not help you here. The way of the warrior is the way of knowing. If that knowledge requires you to use anger, then you use anger, but you cannot wrest forth knowledge by losing your temper. Pain and frustration will be your only reward if you try*.

Instead, you must strive to be calm, even if a hundred ravening enemies are snapping at your heels. Empty your mind and allow it to become like a tranquil pool that reflects everything around it and yet remains untouched by its surroundings. Understanding will come to you in that emptiness, when you are free of irrational fears about victory and defeat, life and death.

You cannot predict every eventuality, and you cannot guarantee success every time you face an enemy, but by seeing all and discounting nothing, you may adapt without hesitation to any change. The warrior who can adapt the easiest to the unexpected is the warrior who will live the longest.

So, look at Arya, see what you are looking at, and then take the action you deem most appropriate. And once you are in motion, do not allow your thoughts to distract you. Think without thinking, so that you act as if out of instinct and not reason. Go now, and try.

Eragon took a minute to collect himself and consider everything he knew about Arya: her likes and dislikes, her habits and mannerisms, the important events of her life, what she feared and what she hoped for, and most importantly, her underlying temperament—that which dictated her approach to life … and to fighting. All that he considered, and from it he attempted to divine the essence of her personality. It was a daunting task, especially since he made an effort to view her not as he usually did—as a beautiful woman he admired and longed for—but as the person she actually was, whole and complete and separate from his own needs and wants.

He drew what conclusions he could within such a brief span of time, although he worried that his observations were childish and overly simplistic. Then he set aside his uncertainty, stepped forward, and raised his sword and shield.

He knew that Arya would be expecting him to try something different, so he opened their duel as he had twice before: shuffling in a diagonal toward her right shoulder, as if to circumvent her shield and attack her flank where it was unguarded. The ruse would not fool her, but it would keep her guessing as to what he was actually up to, and the longer he could maintain that uncertainty, the better.

A small, rough rock turned under the ball of his right foot. He shifted his weight to the side so as to keep his balance.

The motion caused a nearly indiscernible hitch in his otherwise

smooth stride, but Arya spotted the irregularity and leaped at him, a clarion yell ringing from her lips.

Their swords glanced off one another, once, twice, and then Eragon turned and—possessed of a sudden and deep-seated conviction that Arya was going to strike next at his head—he stabbed at her chest, fast as he could, aiming for a spot near her breastbone that she would have to leave open if she swung at his helm.

His intuition was right, but his reckoning was off.

He stabbed so quickly, Arya did not have an opportunity to move her arm out of the way, and the hilt of her sword deflected Brisingr's dark blue tip and sent it sailing harmlessly past her cheek.

An instant later, the world tilted around Eragon and bursts of red and orange sparks appeared scattered across his field of vision. He staggered and dropped to one knee, supporting himself with both hands on the ground. A dull roaring filled his ears.

The sound gradually subsided, at which point Glaedr said, *Do not try to move quickly, Eragon. Do not try to move slowly. Only move at the correct moment and your blow will appear neither fast nor slow but effortless. Timing is everything in battle. You must pay close attention to the patterns and rhythms of your opponents' bodies: where they are strong, where they are weak, where stiff and where flexible. Match those rhythms when it serves your purpose and confuse them when it does not, and you will be able to shape the flow of the battle as it pleases you. This you should understand thoroughly. Fix it in your mind and think on it more later.… Now try again!*

Glaring at Arya, Eragon got back to his feet, shook his head to clear it, and, for what seemed the hundredth time, assumed an on-guard position. His welts and bruises flared with renewed pain, making him feel like an arthritic old man.

Arya tossed back her hair and smiled at him, baring her strong white teeth.

The gesture had no effect on him. He was focused on the task at hand and was not about to allow himself to fall for the same trick twice.

Even before the smile began to fade from her lips, he was sprinting forward, Brisingr held low and to the side while he led with his shield. As he hoped, the position of his sword tempted Arya into a rash, preemptive strike: a slashing blow that would have taken him in the collarbone if it had landed.

Eragon ducked underneath the blow, letting it bounce off his shield, and brought Brisingr up and around, as if to cut her across the legs and hips. She blocked him with her shield, then shoved him away, knocking the air from his lungs.

A brief lull followed as they circled each other, both searching for

an opening to exploit. The air between them was fraught with tension as he studied her and she him, their movements quick and jerky, almost birdlike, from the overabundance of energy coursing through their veins.

The strain broke like a glass rod snapping in two.

He struck at her and she parried, their blades moving with such speed, they were nearly invisible. As they exchanged blows, Eragon kept his eyes riveted on hers, but he also strove—as Glaedr had advised—to observe the rhythms and patterns of her body, while also remembering who she was and how she was likely to act and react. He wanted to win so badly, he felt as if he might burst if he didn't.

And yet, despite all his efforts, Arya caught him by surprise with a reverse pommel strike to his ribs.

Eragon stopped and swore an oath.

That was better, said Glaedr. *Much better. Your timing was almost perfect.*

But not quite.

No, not quite. You are still too angry, and your mind is still too cluttered. Keep hold of the things you need to remember, but don't let them distract you from what is happening. Find a place of calm within yourself, and let the concerns of the world wash over you without sweeping you away with them. You should feel as you did when Oromis had you listen to the thoughts of the creatures in the forest. Then you were aware of everything that was going on around you, yet you were not fixated on any one detail. Do not look at Arya's eyes alone. Your focus is too narrow, too detailed.

But Brom told me—

There are many ways of using the eyes. Brom had his, but it was not the most flexible of styles, nor the most appropriate for large battles. He spent most of his life fighting one on one, or in small groups, and his habits reflected that. Better to see widely than to see too closely and allow some feature of place or situation to catch you unawares. Do you understand?

Yes, Master.

Then once more, and this time, allow yourself to relax and broaden your perception.

Eragon again reviewed his knowledge of Arya. When he had decided on a plan, he closed his eyes, slowed his breathing, and sank deep within himself. His fears and anxieties gradually drained out of him, leaving behind a profound emptiness that dulled the pain of his injuries and gave him a sense of unusual clarity. Though he did not lose interest in winning, the prospect of defeat no longer troubled him. What would be would be, and he would not struggle unnecessarily against the decrees of fate.

"Ready?" asked Arya when he opened his eyes again.

"Ready."

They took up their starting positions, then stayed there, motionless, each of them waiting for the other to attack first. The sun was to Eragon's right, which meant that if he could maneuver Arya in the opposite direction, the light would be in her eyes. He had tried before, without success, but now he thought of a way he might be able to manage it.

He knew that Arya was confident she could beat him. He was sure she did not disregard his abilities, but however conscious she was of his skill and his desire to improve, she had won the overwhelming majority of their matches. Those experiences had shown her that he would be easy to defeat, even if, intellectually, she might know better. Her confidence, therefore, was also her weakness.

She thinks she's better than me with a sword, he said to himself. *And maybe she is, but I can use her expectations against her. They'll be her undoing, if anything is*.

He sidled forward a few feet and smiled at Arya even as she had smiled at him. Her face stayed impressively blank. A moment later, she charged him, as if she was going to tackle him and drive him to the ground.

He sprang backward, edging to the right, so as to begin guiding her in the direction he wanted.

Arya stopped short several yards away from him and remained as still as a wild animal caught in a clearing. Then she traced a half circle in front of her with her sword while she stared at him. He suspected that having Glaedr watching them made her all the more determined to give a good showing of herself.

She shocked him then by uttering a soft, catlike growl. Like her smile before, the growl was a weapon for unsettling him. And it worked, but only partly, for he had come to expect such gestures, if not that particular one.

Arya crossed the intervening distance with a single bound and began swinging at him with heavy, looping blows that he blocked with his shield. He let her attack without opposition, as if her blows were too strong for him to do anything more than defend himself. With every loud, painful jolt to his arm and shoulder, he retreated farther to the right, stumbling now and then to increase the impression of being driven back.

And still he remained calm and composed—empty.

He knew that the opportune moment was going to arrive even before it did, and once it had, he acted without thought or hesitation, without attempting to be fast or slow, seeking only to fulfill the potential of that single, perfect instant.

As Arya's sword descended toward him in a flashing arc, he pivoted

to the right, sidestepping the blade while also putting the sun squarely at his back.

The tip of her sword buried itself in the ground with a solid *thunk*.

Arya turned her head, so as to keep him in sight, and made the mistake of looking directly into the sun. She squinted, and her pupils contracted to small, dark spots.

While she was blinded, Eragon stabbed Brisingr underneath her left arm, poking her in the ribs. He could have struck her on the nape of her neck—and he would have if they had really been fighting—but he refrained, for even with a dulled sword, such a blow could kill.

Arya let out a sharp cry as Brisingr made contact, and she fell back several steps. She stood with her arm pressed against her side and her brow furrowed with pain and stared at him with an odd expression.

Excellent! Glaedr crowed. *And again!*

Eragon felt a momentary glow of satisfaction; then he released his hold on the emotion and returned to his previous state of detached watchfulness.

When Arya's face cleared and she lowered her arm, she and Eragon carefully edged around each other until neither had the sun in their eyes, at which point they began anew. Eragon quickly noticed that Arya was treating him with greater caution than before. Most times, that would have pleased him and inspired him to attack more aggressively, but he resisted the urge, for it now seemed obvious to him that she was doing it on purpose. If he swallowed her bait, he would soon find himself at her mercy, as he had so often before.

The duel lasted for only a few seconds, though it was still long enough for them to exchange a flurry of blows. Shields cracked, chunks of torn sod flew over the ground, and sword rang against sword as they flowed from one stance to another, their bodies twisting through the air like twin columns of smoke.

In the end, the result was the same as before. Eragon slipped past Arya's guard with an adroit bit of footwork and a flick of his wrist, which resulted in him slashing Arya across her chest, from shoulder to sternum.

The blow staggered Arya and she collapsed to one knee, where she remained, scowling and breathing heavily through pinched nostrils. Her cheeks grew unusually pale, save for a crimson blotch that appeared high on each side.

Again! ordered Glaedr.

Eragon and Arya complied without question. With his two victories, Eragon's weariness had diminished, though he could tell that the opposite was true for Arya.

The next match had no clear winner; Arya rallied and managed to foil all of Eragon's tricks and traps, even as he did hers. On and on

they fought, until at last they were both so tired, neither was able to continue, and they stood leaning on swords that were too heavy to lift, panting, sweat dripping from their faces.

Again, said Glaedr in a low voice.

Eragon grimaced as he yanked Brisingr out of the ground. The more exhausted he became, the harder it was to keep his mind uncluttered and to ignore the complaints of his aching body. Also, he found it increasingly difficult to maintain an even temper and avoid falling prey to the foul mood that usually beset him when he needed rest. Learning to deal with that challenge, he supposed, was part of what Glaedr was trying to teach him.

His shoulders were burning too much for him to hold his sword and shield in front of him. Instead, Eragon let them hang by his waist and hoped he could lift them fast enough when needed. Arya did the same.

They shuffled toward each other in a crude imitation of their earlier grace.

Eragon was utterly spent, and yet he refused to give up. In a way that he did not entirely understand, their sparring seemed to have become something more than just a test of arms; it had become a test of who he was: of his character, of his strength, and of his resilience. Nor was it Glaedr who was testing him, or so he felt, but rather Arya. It was as if she wanted something from him, as if she wanted him to prove … what, he knew not, but he was determined to acquit himself as well as he could. However long she was willing to keep sparring, so too was he, no matter how much it hurt.

A drop of sweat rolled into his left eye. He blinked, and Arya lunged at him, shouting.

Once more they engaged in their deadly dance, and once more they fought to a standstill. Fatigue made them clumsy, yet they moved together with a rough harmony that prevented either from gaining victory.

Eventually, they ended up standing face to face, their swords locked at the hilts, pushing at each other with what little remained of their strength.

Then, as they stood there, struggling back and forth without avail, Eragon said in a low, fierce voice, “I … see … you.”

A bright spark appeared in Arya’s eyes, then vanished just as quickly.

A Heart-to-Heart

Glaedr had them fight twice more. Each duel was shorter than the last, and each resulted in a draw, which frustrated the golden dragon more than it did Eragon or Arya.

Glaedr would have kept them sparring until it became abundantly clear who was the better warrior, but by the end of the last duel, they were both so tired that they dropped to the ground and lay side by side, heaving for air, and even Glaedr had to admit that it would be counterproductive, if not downright harmful, for them to continue.

Once they had recovered enough to stand and walk, Glaedr summoned them to Eragon's tent.

First, with energy from Saphira, they healed their more painful injuries. Then they returned their ruined shields to the Varden's weapon master, Fredric, who provided them with replacements, although only after lecturing them on how they ought to take better care of their equipment.

When they arrived at the tent, they found Nasuada waiting for them, along with her usual accompaniment of guards. "It's about time," she said in a tart voice. "If the two of you are done trying to batter each other to pieces, we need to talk." Without another word, she ducked inside.

Blödhgarm and his fellow spellcasters arranged themselves in a large circle around the tent, which Eragon could tell made Nasuada's guards uneasy.

Eragon and Arya followed Nasuada into the tent; then Saphira surprised them by pushing the front of her head past the entrance flaps and promptly filling the cramped space with the smell of smoke and burnt meat.

The sudden appearance of Saphira's scaly snout took Nasuada aback, but she quickly recovered. Addressing herself to Eragon, she said, "That was Glaedr I felt, wasn't it?"

He glanced toward the front of the tent, hoping that her guards were too far away to hear, then nodded. "It was."

"Ah, I knew it!" she exclaimed, sounding satisfied. Then her expression became uncertain. "May I speak with him? Is it … allowed, or will he only communicate with an elf or a Rider?"

Eragon hesitated and looked to Arya for guidance. "I don't know," he said. "He still hasn't entirely recovered. He may not want to—"

I will speak with you, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad, Glaedr said, his

voice echoing in their heads. *Ask of me what you will, then leave us to our work; there is much that still needs to be done in order to prepare Eragon for the challenges ahead.*

Eragon had never seen Nasuada look awestruck before, but now she did. *"Where?"* she mouthed, and spread her hands.

He pointed at a patch of dirt by his bed.

Nasuada raised her eyebrows; then she nodded, and drawing herself up, she formally greeted Glaedr. An exchange of pleasantries followed, during the course of which Nasuada inquired after Glaedr's health and asked if there was anything the Varden could provide him with. In response to the first question—which had made Eragon nervous—Glaedr politely explained that his health was just fine, thank you; and as far as the second matter went, he needed nothing from the Varden, though he appreciated her concern. *I no longer eat*, he said; *I no longer drink; and I no longer sleep as you would understand it. My only pleasure now, my only indulgence, lies in contemplating how I might bring about Galbatorix's downfall.*

"That," said Nasuada, "I can understand, for I feel much the same."

Then she asked Glaedr if he had any advice as to how the Varden could capture Dras-Leona without it costing them an unacceptable amount of men and materiel, as well as, in her words, "handing over Eragon and Saphira to the Empire, like so many trussed-up chickens."

She spent some time explaining the situation to Glaedr in greater specificity, whereupon, after due consideration, he said, *I have no easy solution for you, Nasuada. I will continue to think on it, but at the moment, I cannot see a way clear for the Varden. If Murtagh and Thorn were by themselves, I might easily overcome their minds. However, Galbatorix has given them too many Eldunarí for me to do that. Even with Eragon, Saphira, and the elves to help, victory would be no sure thing.*

Visibly disappointed, Nasuada was silent for a brief while; then she pressed her hands flat against the front of her dress and thanked Glaedr for his time. She bade them farewell and took her leave, stepping carefully around Saphira's head so as not to touch her.

Eragon relaxed somewhat as he sat on his cot, while Arya seated herself on a short, three-legged stool. He wiped his palms on the knees of his trousers—for his hands felt sticky, as did the rest of him—then offered Arya a drink from his waterskin, which she gratefully accepted. When she was finished, he gulped down several mouthfuls himself. Their sparring had left him ravenous. The water stifled the growls and rumbles coming from his stomach, but he hoped that Glaedr would not detain them for much longer. The sun had nearly set, and he wanted to get a hot meal from the Varden's cooks before they damped their fires and turned in for the night. Otherwise, he knew he would end up gnawing on stale bread, dried strips of meat,

moldy sheep cheese, and if he was lucky, a raw onion or two—hardly an appealing prospect.

Once they were both settled, Glaedr began to speak, lecturing Eragon on the principles of mental combat. These Eragon was already familiar with, but he listened closely, and when the golden dragon told him to do something, he followed Glaedr's instructions without question or complaint.

They soon progressed beyond maxims to applied practice. Glaedr started by testing Eragon's defenses with attacks of ever-increasing strength, which then led to them engaging in all-out battles where they each struggled to obtain dominance, even if for only a moment, over the other's thoughts.

While they fought, Eragon lay on his back with his eyes closed, all of his energies concentrated inward on the tempest that raged between him and Glaedr. His earlier exertions had left him weak and thick-headed—whereas the golden dragon was fresh and well rested, in addition to being immensely powerful—and that made it difficult for Eragon to do much more than foil Glaedr's attacks. Nevertheless, he managed to hold his own reasonably well, knowing that, in a real fight, the winner would have undoubtedly been Glaedr.

Fortunately, Glaedr made some allowances for Eragon's condition, although, as he said, *You must be ready to defend your innermost self at any given moment, even when you are sleeping. It may very well be that you will end up facing Galbatorix or Murtagh when you are as exhausted as you are now*.

After two more bouts, Glaedr withdrew to the role of a—very vocal—spectator, while he had Arya take his place as Eragon's antagonist. She was just as tired as Eragon, but he quickly found that, when it came to a wizard's duel, she was more than his equal. It did not surprise him. The one time before they had clashed in their minds, she had almost killed him, and that was when she was still drugged from her captivity in Gil'ead. Glaedr's thoughts were disciplined and focused, but even he could not match the ironbound control Arya exerted over her consciousness.

Her self-mastery was a trait Eragon had noticed was common among the elves. Foremost in that regard had been Oromis, who, it seemed to Eragon, had been in such perfect command of himself, never the slightest doubt or worry had bothered him. Eragon considered the elves' restraint an innate characteristic of their race, as well as a natural outcome of their rigorous upbringing, education, and use of the ancient language. Speaking and thinking in a language that prevented one from lying—and every word of which contained the potential to unlock a spell—discouraged carelessness in thought or speech and fostered an aversion to allowing one's emotions to sweep

one away. As a rule, then, elves possessed far more self-control than the members of other races.

He and Arya wrestled with their minds for a few minutes—he seeking to escape her all-encompassing grip, she seeking to pin and hold him so that she could impose her will on his thoughts. She caught him several times, but he always wiggled free after a second or two, though he knew, had she meant him harm, it would have been too late to save himself.

And the whole time their minds were touching, Eragon was aware of the wild strains of music that wafted through the dark spaces of Arya's consciousness. They lured him away from his own body and threatened to snare him in a web of strange and eerie melodies that had no counterparts among earthly songs. He would have happily succumbed to the bewitchment of the music had it not been for the distraction of Arya's attacks and the knowledge that humans did not often fare well if they became too fascinated with the workings of an elf's mind. He might escape unscathed. He was a Rider, after all. He was different. But it was a risk he was not willing to take, not so long as he valued his sanity. He had heard that delving into Blödhgarm's mind had reduced Nasuada's guard Garven to a slack-jawed dreamer.

So he resisted the temptation, hard as it was.

Then Glaedr had Saphira join the fray, sometimes in opposition to Eragon and sometimes in support of him, for as the elder dragon said, *You must be as skilled in this as Eragon, Brightscales*. The addition of Saphira substantially altered the outcome of their mental struggles. Together she and Eragon were able to fend off Arya with regularity, if not ease. Their combined might even allowed them to subdue Arya on two separate occasions. When Saphira was allied with Arya, however, the two of them so outstripped Eragon that he gave up any attempt at offense and, instead, retreated deep inside himself, curling into a tight ball like a wounded animal while he recited scraps of verse and waited for the waves of mental energy they hurled at him to subside.

Lastly, Glaedr had them pair off—he with Arya, and Eragon with Saphira—and they fought a duel like that, as if they were two sets of Riders and dragons met in combat. For the first few strenuous minutes, they were fairly matched, but in the end, Glaedr's strength, experience, and cunning combined with Arya's rigorous proficiency proved too much for Eragon and Saphira to overcome, and they had no choice but to concede defeat.

Afterward, Eragon sensed discontent emanating from Glaedr. Stung by it, he said, *We'll do better tomorrow, Master*.

Glaedr's mood darkened further. Even he seemed weary from their practice. *You did well enough, youngling. I could not have asked any more from either of you had you been placed under my wing as apprentices in*

Vroengard. However, it is impossible for you to learn what you need to learn in a matter of days or weeks. Time gushes between our teeth like water, and soon it will all be gone. It takes years to master the art of fighting with your mind: years and decades and centuries, and even then, there is still more to learn, more to discover—about yourself, about your enemies, and about the very underpinnings of the world. With an angry growl, he fell silent.

Then we will learn what we can and let fate decide the rest, said Eragon. *Besides, Galbatorix may have had a hundred years to train his mind, but it has also been over a hundred years since you last taught him. He's sure to have forgotten* something *in the interim. With you helping us, I know we can beat him*.

Glaedr snorted. *Your tongue grows ever smoother, Eragon Shadeslayer*. Nevertheless, he sounded pleased. He admonished them to eat and rest, and then he withdrew from their minds and said no more.

Eragon was sure that the golden dragon was still watching them, but Eragon could no longer feel his presence, and an unexpected sense of emptiness settled over him.

A chill crept through his limbs, and he shivered.

He, Saphira, and Arya sat in the darkening tent, none of them willing to speak. Then, rousing himself, Eragon said, "He seems better." His voice creaked from disuse, and he again reached for the waterskin.

"This is good for him," said Arya. "You are good for him. Without something to give him purpose, his grief would have killed him. That he has survived at all is … impressive. I admire him for it. Few beings —human, elf, or dragon—could continue to function rationally after such a loss."

"Brom did."

"He was equally remarkable."

If we kill Galbatorix and Shruikan, how do you think Glaedr will react? Saphira asked. *Will he keep going, or will he just … stop?*

Arya's pupils reflected a shimmer of light as she looked past Eragon toward Saphira. "Only time will tell. I hope not, but if we are triumphant in Urû'baen, it may very well be that Glaedr will find he is no longer able to continue on his own, without Oromis."

"We can't just let him give up!"

I agree.

"It is not our place to stop him if he decides to enter the void," Arya said sternly. "The choice is his to make, and his alone."

"Yes, but we can reason with him and try to help him see that life is still worth living."

She was still for a while, her face solemn; then she said, "I do not want him to die. No elf does. However, if every waking moment is a

torment to him, then won't it be better for him to seek release?"

Neither Eragon nor Saphira had an answer for her.

The three of them continued to discuss the day's events for a short while longer; then Saphira pulled her head out of the tent and went to sit on the neighboring patch of grass. *I feel like a fox with her head stuck down a rabbit hole*, she complained. *It makes my scales itch, not being able to see if someone is creeping up on me*.

Eragon expected Arya to leave as well, but to his surprise, she stayed, seemingly content to sit and talk with him about this and that. He was only too eager to comply. His earlier hunger had vanished during his bouts of mental combat with her, Saphira, and Glaedr, and in any case, he was more than willing to forgo a hot meal in exchange for the pleasure of her company.

Night closed in around them, and the camp grew ever quieter as their conversation meandered from one topic to another. Eragon felt giddy from exhaustion and excitement—almost as if he had drunk too much mead—and he noticed that Arya also seemed more at ease than normal. They talked of many things: of Glaedr and of their sparring; of the siege of Dras-Leona and what might be done about it; and of other, less important matters, such as the crane Arya had seen hunting among the rushes by the edge of the lake, and the scale Saphira had lost from her nose, and how the season was turning and the days were again growing colder. But always they returned to the one topic that was ever present in their thoughts, and that was Galbatorix and what awaited them in Urû'baen.

While they speculated, as they had so many times before, about the types of magical traps Galbatorix might have set for them and how best to avoid them, Eragon thought of Saphira's question about Glaedr, and he said, "Arya?"

"Yes?" She drew the word out, her voice rising and falling with a faint lilt.

"What do you want to do once this is all over?" *If we're still alive, that is*.

"What do *you* want to do?"

He fingered Brisingr's pommel as he considered the question. "I don't know. I haven't let myself think much past Urû'baen.… It would depend on what she wants, but I suppose Saphira and I might return to Palancar Valley. I could build a hall on one of the foothills of the mountains. We might not spend much time there, but at least we would have a home to return to when we weren't flying from one part of Alagaësia to another." He half smiled. "I'm sure there will be plenty to keep us busy, even if Galbatorix is dead.… But you still haven't answered my question: what will *you* do if we win? You must have some idea. You've had longer to think about it than I have."

Arya drew one leg up onto the stool, wrapped her arms around it, and rested her chin on her knee. In the dim half-light of the tent, her face appeared to float against a featureless black background, like an apparition conjured out of the night.

"I have spent more time among humans and dwarves than I have among the älfakyn," she said, using the elves' name in the ancient language. "I have grown used to it, and I would not want to return to live in Ellesméra. Too little happens there; centuries can slip by without notice while you sit and stare at the stars. No, I think I will continue to serve my mother as her ambassador. The reason I first left Du Weldenvarden was because I wanted to help right the balance of the world. As you said, there will still be much that needs doing if we manage to topple Galbatorix, much that needs putting right, and I would be a part of it."

"Ah." It was not exactly what he had hoped she might say, but at least it presented the possibility that they would not entirely lose contact after Urû'baen, and that he would still be able to see her now and then.

If Arya noticed his discontent, she gave no sign of it.

They talked for another few minutes, then Arya made her excuses and rose to leave.

As she stepped past him, Eragon reached toward her, as if to stop her, then quickly drew back his hand. "Wait," he said softly, unsure of what he hoped for, but hoping nevertheless. The beat of his heart increased, pounding in his ears, and his cheeks grew warm.

Arya paused with her back to him by the entrance of the tent. "Good night, Eragon," she said. Then she slipped out between the entrance flaps and vanished into the night, leaving him to sit alone in the dark.

DISCOVERY

The next three days passed quickly for Eragon, if not for the rest of the Varden, who remained mired in lethargy. The standoff with Dras-Leona continued unabated, although there was some excitement when Thorn altered his customary location from above the front gates to a section of the rampart several hundred feet to the right. After much discussion—and after consulting extensively with Saphira—Nasuada and her advisers concluded that Thorn had relocated for no other reason than comfort; the other section of rampart was somewhat flatter and longer. Aside from that, the siege lumbered on without change.

Meanwhile, Eragon spent the mornings and evenings studying with Glaedr and the afternoons sparring with Arya and several other elves. His matches with the elves were not as long or strenuous as his previous one with Arya—for it would have been foolish to push himself that hard every day—but his sessions with Glaedr were as intense as ever. The ancient dragon never flagged in his efforts to improve Eragon's skills and knowledge, and he made no allowances for mistakes or exhaustion.

Eragon was pleased to find that he was finally able to hold his own when dueling with the elves. But it was mentally taxing, for if his concentration lapsed for even a moment, he would end up with a sword jabbed in his ribs or pressed against his throat.

With his lessons from Glaedr, he made what would have been considered exemplary progress under normal circumstances, but given the situation, both he and Glaedr were frustrated with the pace of his learning.

On the second day, during his morning lesson with Glaedr, Eragon thought to say, *Master, when I first arrived at the Varden in Farthen Dûr, the Twins tested me—they tested my knowledge of the ancient language, and of magic in general.*

You told this to Oromis. Why repeat it to me now?

Because, it occurred to me … the Twins asked me to summon the true form of a silver ring. At the time, I didn't know how. Arya explained it to me later: how, with the ancient language, you can conjure up the essence of any thing or creature. Yet Oromis never spoke of it, and I was wondering … why not?

Glaedr seemed to sigh. *Summoning the true form of an object is a difficult kind of magic. In order for it to work, you must understand*

everything of importance about the object in question—even as you must in order to guess the true name of a person or animal. Furthermore, it's of little practical value. And it's dangerous. Very dangerous. The spell cannot be structured as a continuing process that you can end at any time. Either you succeed in summoning the true form of an object … or you fail and die. There was no reason for Oromis to have you try anything so risky, nor were you advanced enough in your studies to even discuss the topic.

Eragon shuddered inwardly as he realized just how angry Arya must have been with the Twins to summon the true form of the ring they held. Then he said, *I would like to try it now*.

Eragon felt the full force of Glaedr's attention focused on him. *Why?*

I need to know if I have that level of understanding, even if only for one small thing.

Again: why?

Unable to explain with words, Eragon poured his jumble of thoughts and feelings into Glaedr's consciousness. When he finished, Glaedr was silent for a while, digesting the flow of information. *Am I right to say*, began the dragon, *that you equate this with defeating Galbatorix? You believe that if you can do this and live, then you might be able to defeat the king?*

Yes, said Eragon, relieved. He had been unable to articulate his motivation as clearly as the dragon, but that was exactly it.

And are you determined to try this?

Yes, Master.

It may kill you, Glaedr reminded him.

I know.

Eragon! exclaimed Saphira, her thoughts faint in his mind. She was flying high above the camp, watching for possible danger while he studied with Glaedr. *It's far too dangerous. I won't allow it*.

I have to do this, he replied quietly.

To Saphira, but also to Eragon, Glaedr said, *If he insists, then it is best he tries where I can watch. If his knowledge fails him, I may be able to supply the needed information and save him*.

Saphira growled—an angry, ripping sound that filled Eragon's mind—and then, from outside the tent, Eragon heard a fearsome rush of air and startled cries from men and elves as she dove to the ground. She landed with such force, the tent and everything in it shook.

A few seconds later, she stuck her head into the tent and glared at Eragon. She was panting, and the wind from her nostrils ruffled his hair and made his eyes water from the odor of burnt meat. *You're as thick-headed as a Kull*, she said.

No more than you.

Her lip curled in a hint of a snarl. *Why are we waiting? If you must do this, let us be done with it!*

What will you choose to summon? asked Glaedr. *It must be something you are intimately familiar with.*

Eragon let his gaze drift over the interior of the tent, then down to the sapphire ring he wore on his right hand. *Aren* … He had rarely taken the ring off since Ajihad had given it to him from Brom. It had become a part of his body as surely as his arms or legs. During the hours he had spent looking at it, he had memorized every curve and facet, and if he closed his eyes, he could call up an image that was a perfect reproduction of the actual object. But for all that, there was much he did *not* know about the ring—its history, how the elves had made it, and, ultimately, what spells might or might not be woven into its fabric.

No … not Aren.

Then his gaze slid from the ring to the pommel of Brisingr, where the sword stood leaning against the corner of his cot. "Brisingr," he murmured.

A muffled *whump* emanated from the blade, and the sword rose a half inch out of its scabbard, as if pushed from beneath, and small tongues of flame leaped up from the mouth of the sheath, licking the underside of the hilt. The flames vanished and the sword slid back into the scabbard as Eragon quickly ended the unintentional spell.

Brisingr, he thought, utterly certain of his choice. It had been Rhunön's skill that had crafted the sword, but it was he who had wielded the tools, and he had been joined with the elf smith's mind throughout the process. If there was any one object in the world he understood through and through, it was his sword.

Are you sure? asked Glaedr.

Eragon nodded, then caught himself as he remembered the golden dragon could not see him. *Yes, Master.… A question, though: is* Brisingr *the true name of the sword, and if not, do I need its true name for the spell to work?*

Brisingr *is the name of fire, as you well know. The true name of your sword is undoubtedly something far more complicated, although it might very well include* brisingr *within its description. If you wish, you could refer to the sword by its true name, but you could just as easily call it* Sword *and achieve the same result, so long as you maintain the proper knowledge at the forefront of your mind. The name is merely a label for the knowledge, and you do not need the label in order to make use of the knowledge. It is a subtle distinction, but an important one. Do you understand?*

I do.

Then proceed as you will.

Eragon took a moment to collect himself. Then he found the nub in the back of his mind and reached through it to tap his body's store of

energy. Channeling that energy into the word he spoke, while also thinking about everything he knew of the sword, he said clearly and distinctly:

"Brisingr!"

Eragon felt his strength ebb precipitously. Alarmed, he tried to speak, tried to move, but the spell bound him in place. He could not even blink or breathe.

Unlike before, the sheathed sword did not burst into flame; it wavered, like a reflection in water. Then, in the air next to the weapon, a transparent apparition appeared: a perfect, glowing likeness of Brisingr free of its sheath. As well made as was the sword itself—and Eragon had never found so much as a single flaw—the duplicate floating before him was even more refined. It was as if he was seeing the *idea* of the sword, an idea that not even Rhunön, with all her experience working metal, could hope to capture.

As soon as the manifestation became visible, Eragon was again able to breathe and move. He maintained the spell for several seconds, so he could marvel at the beauty of the summoning, and then he let the spell slip free of his grasp and the ghostly sword slowly faded into oblivion.

In its absence, the inside of the tent seemed unexpectedly dark.

Only then did Eragon again become aware of Saphira and Glaedr pressing against his consciousness, watching with steadfast attentiveness every thought that flickered through his mind. Both of the dragons were as tense as Eragon had ever felt them. If he were to poke Saphira, he guessed she would be so startled, she would twist herself in circles.

And if I were to poke you, nothing would be left but a smear, she commented.

Eragon smiled and lowered himself onto the cot, tired.

In his mind, Eragon heard a sound like wind rushing across a lonely plain as Glaedr relaxed. *You did well, Shadeslayer*. Glaedr's praise surprised Eragon; the old dragon had given out few enough compliments since he had begun teaching Eragon. *But let us not try it again.*

Eragon shivered and rubbed his arms, trying to dispel the cold that had crept into his limbs. *Agreed, Master*. It was not an experience he was eager to replicate. Still, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction. He had proven without a doubt that there was at least one thing in Alagaësia that he could do as well as anyone possibly could.

And that gave him hope.

On the morning of the third day, Roran arrived back at the Varden, along with his companions: tired, wounded, and travel-worn. Roran's

return stirred the Varden from their torpor for a few hours—he and the others with him were given a hero's welcome—but an air of boredom soon settled over the majority of the Varden again.

Eragon was relieved to see Roran. He had known his cousin was safe, as he had scryed him several times while he was gone. Nevertheless, seeing him in person freed Eragon of an anxiety that, until that very moment, he had not realized he was carrying. Roran was the only family he had left—Murtagh did not count, as far as Eragon was concerned—and Eragon could not bear the thought of losing him.

Now, seeing Roran up close, Eragon was shocked by his appearance. He had expected Roran and the others to be exhausted, but Roran seemed far more haggard than his companions; he looked as if he had aged five years over the course of the trip. His eyes were red and dark-ringed, his brow was lined, and he moved stiffly, as if every inch of his body was covered in bruises. And then there was his beard, which had been burned half off and which now had a mottled, mangy appearance.

The five men—one less than their original number—went first to visit the healers of Du Vrangr Gata, where the spellcasters attended to their wounds. Then they presented themselves to Nasuada in her pavilion. After commending them for their bravery, Nasuada dismissed all of the men except Roran, whom she asked to deliver a detailed account of his journey to and from Aroughs, as well as the capture of the city itself. The telling took some time, but both Nasuada and Eragon—who was standing by her right hand—listened with rapt and sometimes horrified attention while Roran spoke. When he finished, Nasuada surprised both him and Eragon by announcing that she was placing Roran in charge of one of the Varden's battalions.

Eragon expected the news to please Roran. Instead, he saw the lines in his cousin's face deepen and his brows draw together in a frown. Roran made no objection or complaint, however, but bowed and said in his rough voice, "As you wish, Lady Nasuada."

Later, Eragon walked Roran to his tent, where Katrina was waiting for them. She greeted Roran with such an obvious display of emotion that Eragon averted his eyes, embarrassed.

With Saphira, the three of them dined together, but Eragon and Saphira excused themselves as soon as they could, for it was obvious that Roran had no energy for company and Katrina wished to have him for herself.

As he and Saphira wandered through the camp in the deepening dusk, Eragon heard someone behind him shout, "Eragon! Eragon! Wait a moment!"

He turned to see the thin, gangly figure of the scholar Jeod running

toward him, strands of hair flying around his lean face. In his left hand, Jeod clutched a ragged scrap of parchment.

"What is it?" Eragon asked, worried.

"This!" exclaimed Jeod, his eyes gleaming. He held up the parchment and shook it. "I've done it again, Eragon! I've found a way!" In the fading light, the scar on his scalp and temple appeared startlingly pale against his tanned skin.

"You've done *what* again? You've found *what* way? Slow down; you're not making sense!"

Jeod glanced around furtively, then he leaned close to Eragon and whispered, "All my reading and searching has paid off. I've discovered a hidden tunnel that leads straight into Dras-Leona!"

DECISIONS

"Explain it to me again," said Nasuada.

Eragon shifted his weight, impatient, but he held his tongue.

From the piles of scrolls and books in front of him, Jeod picked up a slim volume bound in red leather and began his narrative for the third time: "Some five hundred years ago, as best I can tell—"

Jörmundur interrupted him with a motion of his hand. "Leave out your qualifiers. We know this is speculation."

Jeod began again: "Some five hundred years ago, Queen Forna sent Erst Graybeard to Dras-Leona, or rather what was to *become* Dras-Leona."

"And why did she send him?" asked Nasuada while she toyed with the fringe of her sleeve.

"The dwarves were in the midst of a clan war, and Forna hoped that she could secure the support of our race by helping King Radgar with the planning and construction of the fortifications for the city, even as the dwarves engineered the defenses for Aroughs."

Nasuada rolled a strand of cloth between her fingers. "And then Dolgrath Halfstave killed Forna…."

"Aye. And Erst Graybeard had no choice but to return to the Beor Mountains as fast as he could, to defend his clan from Halfstave's predations. But"—Jeod held up a finger, then opened the red book—"before he left, it seems Erst did start on his work. King Radgar's chief adviser, Lord Yardley, wrote in his memoirs that Erst had begun to draw up plans for the sewer system underneath the center of the city, since that would affect how the fortifications would be built."

From his place at the far end of the table that filled the middle of Nasuada's pavilion, Orik nodded and said, "That's true enough. You have to work out where and how the weight is distributed and determine what's appropriate for the kind of earth you're dealing with. Otherwise, you're liable to have cave-ins."

Jeod continued: "Of course, Dras-Leona *doesn't* have underground sewers, so I assumed that nothing like Erst's plans were ever put into effect. However, a few pages later, Yardley says …" Peering down his nose at the book, Jeod read, *"… and in a most lamentable turn of events, the reavers burned many a house and made off with many a family treasure. The soldiers were slow to respond, for they had been put to work underground, laboring like common peasants."*

Jeod lowered the book. "Now, what were they excavating? I was

unable to find any further mention of subterranean activities in or around Dras-Leona, until—" Putting down the red volume, he selected another book, this one a massive, wood-paneled tome nearly a foot thick. "I happened to be perusing *The Acts of Taradas and Other Mysteries of Occult Phenomena as Recorded Throughout the Ages of Men, Dwarves, and the Most Ancient Elves* when—"

"It is a work filled with mistakes," said Arya. She stood by the left side of the table, leaning on both hands over a map of the city. "The author knew little of my people, and what he did not know, he invented."

"That may be," said Jeod, "but he knew a great deal about humans, and it is humans we are interested in." Jeod opened the book close to the middle and gently lowered the upper half to the table, so it lay flat. "During his investigations, Othman spent some time in this region. He mainly studied Helgrind and the strange happenings associated with it, but he also had this to say about Dras-Leona: *The people of the city also often complain of peculiar sounds and odors wafting up from under their streets and floors, especially at night, which they attribute to ghosts and spirits and other uncanny creatures, but if they are spirits, they are unlike any I have heard of before, as spirits elsewhere seem to avoid enclosed spaces.*"

Jeod closed the book. "Fortunately, Othman was nothing if not thorough, and he marked the locations of the sounds on a map of Dras-Leona, where, as you can see, they form a nearly straight line through the old part of the city."

"And you think this indicates the presence of a tunnel," said Nasuada. It was a statement, not a question.

"I do," said Jeod, bobbing his head.

Sitting next to Nasuada, King Orrin, who had said little, spoke. "Nothing you have shown us so far, Goodman Jeod, has yet to prove that this is actually a tunnel. If there is a space under the city, it might very well be a cellar or a catacomb or some other chamber that only leads to the building above. Even if it *is* a tunnel, we do not know if it exits anywhere outside of Dras-Leona, nor, assuming its existence, where it would lead. To the heart of the palace, perhaps? What's more, by your own account, it's likely the construction of this hypothetical tunnel was never completed in the first place."

"It seems unlikely it could be anything *but* a tunnel, given its shape, Your Majesty," said Jeod. "No cellar or catacomb would be so narrow or long. As for whether it was completed … we know it was never used for its intended purpose, but we also know that it lasted at least up until Othman's time, which means the tunnel or passageway or what-have-you must have been finished to *some* degree, otherwise the seep of water would have destroyed it long ago."

“What of the exit, then—or the entrance, if you will?” asked the king.

Jeod scrabbled among the piles of scrolls for a few moments before pulling out another map of Dras-Leona, this one showing a portion of the surrounding landscape. “That I can’t be sure about, but if it does lead out of the city, then it would exit somewhere around here—” He placed his index finger on a spot close to the eastern side of the city. Most of the buildings outside the walls that protected the heart of Dras-Leona were located on the western side of the city, next to the lake. This meant that the location Jeod was pointing at, though empty land, was closer to the center of Dras-Leona than one could get from any other direction without encountering buildings. “But it’s impossible to tell without going there to look for it in person.”

Eragon frowned. He had thought Jeod’s discovery would be more certain.

“You are to be congratulated on your research, Goodman Jeod,” said Nasuada. “You may have once again performed a great service for the Varden.” She rose from her high-backed chair and walked over to look at the map. The hem of her dress rustled as it dragged across the ground. “If we send a scout to investigate, we risk alerting the Empire to our interest in that area. Assuming the tunnel exists, it would be of little value to us then; Murtagh and Thorn would be expecting us on the other end.” She looked at Jeod. “How wide do you think this tunnel would be? How many men could fit in it?”

“I couldn’t say. It might be—”

Orik cleared his throat, then said, “The earth here is soft and claylike, with a fair bit of silt layered throughout it—horrible for tunneling. If Erst had any sense, he wouldn’t have planned to have one large channel carry away the city’s waste; he would have laid down several smaller passageways, to reduce the likelihood of a cave-in. I’d guess that none of them would be wider than a yard or so.”

“Too narrow for more than a single man to pass through at a time,” said Jeod.

“Too narrow for more than a single knurla,” added Orik.

Nasuada returned to her seat and stared at the map with unfocused eyes, as if she were gazing at something far away.

After a few moments of silence, Eragon said, “I could search for the tunnel. I know how to hide myself with magic; the sentries would never see me.”

“Perhaps,” murmured Nasuada. “But I still don’t like the idea of having you or anyone else running about. The likelihood of the Empire noticing is too high. What if Murtagh is watching? Could you fool him? Do you even know what he is capable of now?” She shook her head. “No, we must act as if the tunnel exists and make our

decisions accordingly. If events prove otherwise, it won't have cost us anything, but if the tunnel *is* there … it should allow us to capture Dras-Leona once and for all."

"What have you in mind?" asked King Orrin in a tone of caution.

"Something bold; something … *unexpected*."

Eragon snorted softly. "Perhaps you should consult Roran, then."

"I have no need of Roran's help in devising my plans, Eragon."

Nasuada fell silent again, and everyone in the pavilion, including Eragon, waited to see what she would come up with. At last she stirred and said, "This: we send a small team of warriors to open the gates from the inside."

"And how is anyone supposed to manage that?" demanded Orik. "It would be tricky enough if all they had to face were the hundreds of soldiers stationed in the area, but in case you have forgotten, there's also a giant, fire-breathing lizard lounging close by, and *he's* sure to take an interest in anyone foolish enough to pry open the gates. And that's not even taking Murtagh into account."

Before the discussion could devolve, Eragon said, "I can do it."

The words had an immediate, chilling effect on the conversation.

Eragon expected Nasuada to reject his suggestion out of hand, but she surprised him by considering it. Then she surprised him further when she said, "Very well."

All the arguments Eragon had built up fell away as he stared at Nasuada with astonishment. She had obviously followed the same chain of reasoning as he had.

The tent erupted in a confusion of overlapping voices as everyone began to speak at once. Arya won out over the din: "Nasuada, you cannot allow Eragon to endanger himself so. It would be unconscionable. Send some of Blödhgarm's spellcasters instead; I know they would agree to help, and they are as mighty warriors as any you can find, including Eragon."

Nasuada shook her head. "None of Galbatorix's men would dare kill Eragon—not Murtagh, not the king's pet magicians, not even the lowest of soldiers. We should use that to our advantage. Besides, Eragon is our strongest spellcaster, and it may require a great deal of strength to force open the gates. Of all of us, he has the best chance of success."

"What if he is captured, though? He can't hold his own against Murtagh. You know that!"

"We'll distract Murtagh and Thorn, and that will give Eragon the opportunity he needs."

Arya lifted her chin. "How? How will you distract them?"

"We'll make as though to attack Dras-Leona from the south. Saphira will fly around the city, setting buildings on fire and killing soldiers on

the walls. Thorn and Murtagh will have no choice but to give chase, especially since it will appear as if Eragon is riding Saphira the whole time. Blödhgarm and his fellow spellcasters can conjure up a facsimile of Eragon, as they did before. As long as Murtagh doesn't get too close, he'll never discover our subterfuge."

"You are determined in this?"

"I am."

Arya's face hardened. "Then I will accompany Eragon."

Relief seeped through Eragon. He had hoped she would go with him, but he had been uncertain whether to ask, for fear she would refuse.

Nasuada sighed. "You are Islanzadí's daughter. I would not like to place you in such danger. If you were to die … Remember how your mother reacted when she thought Durza had killed you. We cannot afford to lose the help of your people."

"My mother—" Arya clamped her lips shut, cutting herself off, then began anew: "I can assure you, Lady Nasuada, Queen Islanzadí shall not abandon the Varden, whatever may happen to me. Of that, you need have no concern. I *will* accompany Eragon, as will two of Blödhgarm's spellcasters."

Nasuada shook her head. "No, you can only take one. Murtagh is familiar with the number of elves who have been protecting Eragon. If he notices that two or more are missing, he may suspect a trap of some sort. In any event, Saphira will need as much help as she can get if she's to keep out of Murtagh's grasp."

"Three people are not enough to attempt such a mission," insisted Arya. "We would be unable to ensure Eragon's safety, much less open the gates."

"Then one of Du Vrangr Gata can go with you as well."

A hint of derision colored Arya's expression. "None of your spellcasters are strong or skilled enough. We'll be outnumbered a hundred to one, or worse. Both ordinary swordsmen and trained magicians will be arrayed against us. Only elves or Riders—"

"Or Shades," Orik rumbled.

"Or Shades," Arya conceded, though Eragon could tell she was irritated. "Only those could hope to prevail against such odds. And even then it is no sure thing. Let us take two of Blödhgarm's spellcasters. No one else is fit for the task, not among the Varden."

"Oh, and what am I, chopped liver?"

Everyone turned to look, surprised, as Angela stepped forward from a corner at the back of the tent. Eragon had not even suspected she was there.

"What a strange expression," said the herbalist. "Who would compare themselves to chopped liver in the first place? If you *have* to

choose an organ, why not pick a gallbladder or a thymus gland instead? Much more interesting than a liver. Or what about chopped t —" She smiled. "Well, I suppose that's not important." She stopped in front of Arya and looked up at her. "Will you object if *I* accompany you, Älfa? I'm not a member of the Varden, not strictly speaking, but I'm still willing to round out this quartet of yours."

Much to Eragon's surprise, Arya bowed her head and said, "Of course, wise one. I meant no offense. It would be an honor to have you with us."

"Good!" exclaimed Angela. "That is, assuming *you* don't mind," she said, directing her words to Nasuada.

Appearing somewhat bemused, Nasuada shook her head. "If you are willing, and neither Eragon nor Arya objects, then I can think of no reason why you shouldn't go. I can't imagine why you'd want to, though."

Angela tossed her curls. "Do you expect me to explain every decision I make? … Oh, very well, if it'll satisfy your curiosity, let's say I have a grudge against the priests of Helgrind, and I'd like the chance to do them some mischief. And besides, if Murtagh puts in an appearance, I have a trick or two up my sleeve that might give him a bit of a turn."

"We should ask Elva to go with us as well," said Eragon. "If anyone can help us avoid danger …"

Nasuada frowned. "Last we spoke, she made her position clear enough. I'll not go bowing and scraping to her in an attempt to convince her otherwise."

"I'll talk with her," said Eragon. "I'm the one she's angry with, and I'm the one who should ask her."

Nasuada plucked at the fringe of her golden dress. She rolled several strands between her fingers, then abruptly said, "Do as you wish. I dislike the thought of sending a child—even one as gifted as Elva—into battle. However, I suppose she is more than capable of protecting herself."

"As long as the pain of those around her doesn't overwhelm her," said Angela. "The last few battles have left her curled in a ball, barely able to move or breathe."

Nasuada stilled her fingers and peered at Eragon with a serious expression. "She's unpredictable. If she does choose to go along, be careful of her, Eragon."

"I will," he promised.

Then Nasuada began to discuss questions of logistics with Orrin and Orik, and Eragon withdrew somewhat from the conversation, for he had little to contribute.

In the privacy of his mind, he reached out to Saphira, who had been

listening, through him, to the goings-on. *Well?* he asked. *What do you think? You've been awfully quiet. I thought for sure you would say something when Nasuada proposed sneaking into Dras-Leona*.

I said nothing because I had nothing to say. It is a good plan.

You agree with her?!

We are no longer awkward younglings, Eragon. Our enemies may be fearsome, but so are we. It is time we remind them of that.

Does it bother you that we'll be apart?

Of course it bothers me, she growled. *Wherever you go, enemies flock to you like flies to flesh. However, you are not as helpless as you once were*. And she almost seemed to purr.

Me, helpless? he said with mock outrage.

Only a little bit. But your bite is more dangerous than before.

So is yours.

Mmm.… I go to hunt. A wing-breaking storm is building, and I'll not have a chance to eat again until after we attack.

Fly safely, he said.

As he felt her presence receding from him, Eragon returned his attention to the conversation within the tent, for he knew his life, and that of Saphira, would depend on the decisions Nasuada, Orik, and Orrin would make.

Under Hill and Stone

Eragon rolled his shoulders, trying to get his mail hauberk to rest comfortably under the tunic he wore to hide the armor.

Darkness lay all around them, heavy and oppressive. A thick layer of clouds obscured the moon and the stars. Without the red werelight Angela held in the palm of her hand, even Eragon and the elves would have been unable to see.

The air was humid, and once or twice, Eragon felt a few cold drops of rain strike his cheeks.

Elva had laughed and refused when he had asked for her help. He had argued with her long and hard, but to no avail. Saphira had even intervened, flying down to the tent where the witch-child was staying and placing her massive head just feet away from the girl, forcing her to look into one of Saphira's brilliant, unblinking eyes.

Elva had not had the temerity to laugh then, but she remained obdurate in her refusal. Her stubbornness frustrated Eragon. Still, he could not help but admire her strength of character; to say no to both a Rider and a dragon was no small thing. Then again, she had endured an incredible amount of pain in her short life, and the experience had hardened her to a degree rarely seen even in the most jaded of warriors.

Beside him, Arya fastened a long cloak around her neck. Eragon wore one as well, as did Angela and the black-haired elf Wyrden, whom Blödhgarm had chosen to accompany them. The cloaks were needed to protect them against the night chill, as well as to conceal their weapons from anyone they might encounter in the city, if they got that far.

Nasuada, Jörmundur, and Saphira had accompanied them to the edge of the camp, where they now stood. Among the tents, the men of the Varden, dwarves, and Urgals were busy preparing to march forth.

"Don't forget," said Nasuada, her breath steaming in front of her, "if you can't reach the gates by dawn, find somewhere to wait until tomorrow morning, and we'll try again then."

"We may not have the luxury of waiting," said Arya.

Nasuada rubbed her arms and nodded. She appeared unusually worried. "I know. Either way, we'll be ready to attack as soon as you contact us, no matter the time of day. Your safety is more important than capturing Dras-Leona. Remember that." Her gaze drifted toward Eragon as she spoke.

“We should be off,” said Wyrden. “The night grows old.”

Eragon pressed his forehead against Saphira for a moment. *Good hunting,* she said softly.

And you as well.

They reluctantly parted, and Eragon joined Arya and Wyrden as they followed Angela away from the camp, heading toward the eastern edge of the city. Nasuada and Jörmundur murmured well-wishes and farewells as they strode past, and then all was quiet, save the sounds of their breathing and of their boots on the ground.

Angela dimmed the light in her palm until it was barely bright enough for Eragon to see his feet. He had to strain his eyes to spot rocks and branches that lay in the way.

They walked in silence for nearly an hour, at which point the herbalist stopped and whispered, “We’re here, as best I can tell. I’m fairly good at reckoning distances, but we might be off by more than a thousand feet. It’s hard to be certain of anything in this gloom.”

Off to their left, a half-dozen pinpricks of light floated above the horizon, the only evidence that they were anywhere near Dras-Leona. The lights seemed close enough to pluck from the air.

He and the two women gathered around Wyrden as the elf knelt and pulled the glove off his right hand. Placing his palm against the bare earth, Wyrden began to croon the spell he had learned from the dwarven magician whom—ere they left on their mission—Orik had sent to instruct them in the ways of detecting underground chambers.

While the elf sang, Eragon stared into the surrounding blackness, listening and watching for enemies. The fall of raindrops on his face increased. He hoped the weather would improve before battle was joined, if battle was to be joined.

An owl hooted somewhere, and he reached for Brisingr, only to stop himself and clench his fist. *Barzûl*, he said to himself, using Orik’s favorite curse. He was more nervous than he ought to be. The knowledge that he might be about to fight Murtagh and Thorn again —singly or together—had put him on edge.

I’ll be sure to lose if I keep on like this, he thought. So he slowed his breathing and initiated the first of the mental exercises Glaedr had taught him for establishing control over his emotions.

The old dragon had not been enthusiastic about the mission when Eragon told him about it, but neither had he opposed it. After discussing various contingencies, Glaedr had said: *Beware of the shadows, Eragon. Strange things lurk in dark places*, which, Eragon thought, was hardly an encouraging statement.

He wiped the accumulated moisture off his face, keeping his other hand close to the hilt of his sword. The leather of his glove was warm and smooth against his skin.

Lowering his hand, he hooked his thumb under his sword belt, the belt of Beloth the Wise, conscious of the weight of the twelve flawless diamonds concealed within. That morning, he had gone to the livestock pens, and as the cooks killed the birds and sheep for the army's breakfast, he had transferred the animals' dying energy into the gems. He hated doing so; when he reached out with his mind to an animal—if it still had its head attached—the animal's fear and pain became his own, and as it slipped into the void, he felt as if he himself were dying. It was a horrible, panic-inducing experience. Whenever he could, he had whispered words in the ancient language to the animals in an attempt to comfort them. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not. Though the creatures would have died in any case, and though he needed the energy, he hated the practice, for it made him feel as if *he* were responsible for their deaths. It made him feel unclean.

Now he fancied that the belt was slightly heavier than before, laden as it was with the energy from so many animals. Even if the diamonds within had been worthless, Eragon would have regarded the belt as valuable beyond gold, on account of the dozens of lives that had gone into filling it.

As Wyrden ceased singing, Arya asked, "Have you found it?"

"This way," said Wyrden, standing.

Relief and trepidation swept through Eragon. *Jeod was right!*

Wyrden led them over a road and a series of small hills, then down into a shallow wash hidden within the folds of the land. "The mouth of the tunnel should be somewhere here," said the elf, and gestured at the western bank of the depression.

The herbalist increased the brightness of her werelight enough for them to search by; then Eragon, Arya, and Wyrden began to comb through the brush along the side of the bank, poking at the ground with sticks. Twice Eragon barked his shins against the stumps of fallen birch trees, causing him to suck in his breath with pain. He wished he was wearing bracers, but he had left them behind, along with his shield, because they would have attracted too much attention in the city.

For twenty minutes, they searched, ranging up and down the bank as they worked their way out from their starting point. At last Eragon heard a ring of metal, and then Arya softly called, "Here."

He and the others hurried toward her, where she stood by a small, overgrown hollow in the side of the bank. Arya drew aside the brush to reveal a stone-lined tunnel five feet tall and three feet wide. A rusting iron grate covered the gaping hole.

"Look," said Arya, and she pointed at the ground.

Eragon looked, and he saw a path leading out of the tunnel. Even by the weird red illumination of the herbalist's werelight, Eragon could

tell that the trail had been worn into place by the passage of tramping feet. One or more people must have been using the tunnel to surreptitiously enter and exit Dras-Leona.

"We should proceed with caution," whispered Wyrden.

Angela made a faint noise in her throat. "How else were you planning to proceed? With blaring trumpets and shouting heralds? Really."

The elf refrained from answering, but he appeared distinctly uncomfortable.

Arya and Wyrden pulled off the grating and cautiously moved into the tunnel. Both conjured werelights of their own. The flameless orbs floated over their heads like small red suns, though they emitted no more light than a handful of coals.

Eragon hung back and said to Angela, "Why do the elves treat you so respectfully? They seem almost afraid of you."

"Am I not deserving of respect?"

He hesitated. "One of these days, you know, you're going to have to tell me about yourself."

"What makes you think that?" And she pushed past him to enter the tunnel, her cloak flapping like the wings of a Lethrblaka.

Shaking his head, Eragon followed.

The short herbalist did not have to bend much in order to avoid bumping into the ceiling, but Eragon had to hunch like an old man with rheumatism, as did the two elves. For the most part, the tunnel was empty. A fine layer of caked dirt covered the floor. A few sticks and rocks, and even a discarded snakeskin, were scattered near the mouth of the tunnel. The passageway smelled like damp straw and moth wings.

Eragon and the others walked as quietly as they could, but the tunnel magnified sounds. Every bump and scrape echoed, filling the air with a multitude of overlapping whispers that seemed to murmur and sigh with a life of their own. The whispers made Eragon feel as if they were surrounded by a host of disembodied spirits who were commenting on their every move.

So much for sneaking up on anyone, he thought as he scuffed his boot against a rock, which bounced against the side of the tunnel with a loud *clack* that multiplied a hundredfold as it spread through the tunnel.

"Sorry," he mouthed as everyone looked at him.

A wry smile touched his lips. *At least we know what causes the strange sounds underneath Dras-Leona*. He would have to tell Jeod on their return.

When they had gone a fair ways down the tunnel, Eragon paused and looked back at the entrance, which was already lost in darkness.

The gloom seemed almost palpable, like a heavy cloth draped over the world. Combined with the close-set walls and low ceiling, it left him feeling cramped and constricted. Normally, he did not mind being in enclosed places, but the tunnel reminded him of the warren of rough-hewn passageways within Helgrind where he and Roran had fought the Ra'zac—hardly a pleasant memory.

He took a deep breath, then released it.

Just as he was about to continue forward, he caught a glimpse of two large eyes gleaming in the shadows, like a pair of copper-colored moonstones. He grabbed Brisingr and had already drawn the sword several inches from its scabbard when Solembum appeared out of the murk, padding along on silent paws.

The werecat stopped at the edge of the light. He twitched his black-tipped ears, and his jaws parted in what seemed to be an expression of amusement.

Eragon relaxed and acknowledged the werecat's presence with a dip of his head. *I should have guessed*. Wherever Angela went, Solembum invariably followed. Again Eragon wondered about the herbalist's past: *How did she ever win his loyalty?*

As the rest of the party grew distant, the shadows crept over Solembum once more, hiding him from Eragon's sight.

Comforted by the knowledge that the werecat was watching his back, Eragon hurried to catch up.

Before the group left the camp, Nasuada had briefed them on the exact number of soldiers in the city, as well as where they were stationed and their duties and habits. She had also given them details about Murtagh's sleeping quarters, what he ate, and even his mood the previous evening. Her information had been remarkably precise. When questioned, she had smiled and explained that, since the Varden had arrived, the werecats had been spying for her within Dras-Leona. Once Eragon and his companions emerged within the city, the werecats would escort them to the southern gates but would not reveal their own presence to the Empire if at all possible, else they would no longer be able to supply Nasuada with intelligence as effectively. After all, who would suspect that the unusually large cat lounging nearby was actually an enemy spy?

It occurred to Eragon then, as he reviewed Nasuada's briefing, that one of Murtagh's greatest weaknesses was that he still had to sleep. *If we don't capture or kill him today, the next time we meet, it might help us to find a way to wake him in the middle of the night—and for more nights than one, if we could manage it. Three or four days without proper sleep and he'd be in no fit shape to fight*.

On and on they went through the tunnel, which ran straight as an arrow, never bending, never turning. Eragon thought he detected a

slight upward slant to the floor—which would make sense, as it was designed to channel waste out of the city—but he was not entirely sure.

After a while, the dirt beneath their feet began to soften and stick to their boots, like wet clay. Water dripped from the ceiling, sometimes landing on the nape of Eragon's neck and rolling down his spine, like the touch of a cold finger. He slipped once on a patch of mud and, when he put out a hand for balance, found the wall covered in slime.

An indeterminate amount of time passed. They might have spent an hour in the tunnel. They might have spent ten. Or maybe it was only a few minutes. Whatever the case, Eragon's neck and shoulders hurt from standing half bent over, and he grew tired of staring at what seemed to be the same twenty feet of rose-hued stone.

At last he noticed the echoes were waning and ever more of a delay was appearing between each repetition of the sounds. Soon afterward, the tunnel disgorged them into a large rectangular chamber with a ridged, half-dome ceiling over fifteen feet high at its apex. The chamber was empty, except for a rotting barrel in one corner. Across from them, three identical archways opened to three identical rooms, small and dark. Where those led, Eragon could not see.

The group stopped, and Eragon slowly straightened his back, wincing as his sore muscles stretched.

"This would not have been part of Erst Graybeard's plans," said Arya.

"Which path should we pick?" asked Wyrden.

"Isn't it obvious?" asked the herbalist. "The left one. It's always the left one." And she strode toward that selfsame arch even as she spoke.

Eragon could not help himself. "Left according to which direction? If you were starting from the other side, left—"

"Left would be right and right would be left, yes, yes," said the herbalist. Her eyes narrowed. "Sometimes you're too clever for your own good, Shadeslayer.… Very well, we'll try it your way. But don't say I didn't warn you if we end up wandering around here for days on end."

Eragon would actually have preferred to take the center archway, as it seemed the most likely to lead them up to the streets, but he did not want to get into an argument with the herbalist. *Either way, we'll find stairs soon enough*, he thought. *There can't be that many chambers under Dras-Leona.*

Holding her werelight aloft, Angela took the lead. Wyrden and Arya followed while Eragon brought up the rear.

The room through the rightmost archway was larger than it had first appeared, for it extended to the side for twenty feet, then turned and continued for another few yards, whereupon it ended at a

corridor studded with empty sconces. Down the corridor was another small room lined with three arches, each of which led to rooms with even more archways, and so on.

Who built these and why? Eragon wondered, bewildered. All the rooms they saw were deserted and empty of furnishings. The only things they found within were a two-legged stool that fell apart when he nudged it with the tip of his boot and a pile of broken pottery lying in a corner beneath a veil of spiderwebs.

Angela never hesitated or seemed confused about which direction to go, for without fail, she chose the path to the right. Eragon would have objected, except that he could think of no better alternative to her method.

The herbalist stopped when they arrived at a circular room with seven equally spaced archways placed along the walls. Seven corridors, including the one they had just traversed, stretched out from the archways.

"Mark where we came from, or we'll get completely turned around," said Arya.

Eragon went to the corridor and, with the tip of Brisingr's cross-guard, scratched a line on the stone wall. As he did, he peered into the darkness, searching for a glimpse of Solembum, but he saw not so much as a whisker. Eragon hoped the werecat had not gotten lost somewhere in the maze of rooms. He almost reached out with his mind to find him, but resisted the urge; if anyone else felt him groping around, it might alert the Empire to their location.

"Ah!" exclaimed Angela, and the shadows around Eragon shifted as the herbalist stood on tiptoe and raised her werelight as high as she could.

Eragon hurried to the center of the room, where she stood with Arya and Wyrden. "What is it?" he whispered.

"The ceiling, Eragon," murmured Arya. "Look at the ceiling."

He did as he was told, but saw only blocks of ancient, mold-covered stones crazed with so many cracks, it seemed amazing the ceiling had not collapsed long ago.

Then his vision shifted and he gasped.

The lines were not cracks but rather deeply carved runes—rows of them. They were neat and small, with sharp angles and straight stems. Mold and the passage of centuries had obscured parts of the text, but most of it remained legible.

Eragon struggled with the runes for a short while, but he recognized only a few of the words, and those were spelled differently than he was used to. "What does it say?" he asked. "Is it Dwarvish?"

"No," said Wyrden. "It is the language of your people, but as it was spoken and written long ago, and of a very particular dialect: that of

the zealot Tosk."

The name struck a chord in Eragon. "When Roran and I rescued Katrina, we heard the priests of Helgrind mention a book of Tosk."

Wyrden nodded. "It serves as the foundation of their faith. Tosk was not the first to offer up prayers to Helgrind, but he was the first to codify his beliefs and practices, and many others have imitated him since. Those who worship Helgrind regard him as a prophet of the divine. And *this*"—the elf cast his arms out wide—"is a history of Tosk, from his birth to his death: a true history, such as his disciples have never shared with those outside their sect."

"We could learn much from this," said Angela, never taking her eyes off the ceiling. "If only we had the time …" Eragon was surprised to see her so enthralled.

Arya glanced at the seven corridors. "A moment, then, but read quickly."

While Angela and Wyrden perused the runes with avid intensity, Arya walked over to one of the archways and, in an undertone, began to chant a spell for finding and locating. When she finished, she waited a moment with her head cocked, then moved on to the next archway.

Eragon stared at the runes a bit longer. Then he returned to the mouth of the corridor that had brought them to the room and leaned against a wall while he waited. The cold of the stones seeped into his shoulder.

Arya stopped in front of the fourth archway. The now-familiar cadence of her recitation rose and fell like a soft sigh of wind.

Again, nothing.

A faint tickling on the back of his right hand caused Eragon to look down. A huge, wingless cricket clung to his glove. The insect was hideous: black and bulbous, with barbed legs and a massive, skull-like head. Its carapace gleamed like oil.

Eragon shuddered, his skin crawling, and shook his arm, flinging the cricket into the darkness.

It landed with an audible *thump*.

The fifth corridor proved no more fruitful for Arya than the preceding four. She bypassed the opening where Eragon stood and stationed herself in front of the seventh archway.

Before she could cast her spell, a guttural yowl echoed down the corridors, seemingly from all directions at once; then there was a hiss and a spat and a screech that made every hair on Eragon's body stand on end.

Angela whirled around. "Solembum!"

As one, the four of them drew their blades.

Eragon backed into the center of the room, his gaze darting from

one archway to the next. His gedwëy ignasia itched and tingled like a fleabite—a useless warning, for it did not tell him where or what the danger was.

"This way," said Arya, moving toward the seventh archway.

The herbalist refused to budge. "No!" she whispered vehemently. "We have to help him." Eragon noticed that she held a short sword with a strange colorless blade that flashed gemlike in the light.

Arya scowled. "If Murtagh learns we're here, we'll—"

It happened so quickly and silently, Eragon would never have noticed had he not been looking in the right direction: a half-dozen doors hidden within the walls of three different corridors swung open, and thirty or so black-garbed men ran out toward them, swords in hand.

"Letta!" shouted Wyrden, and the men in one group collided with each other as if those in front had run headlong into a wall.

Then the rest of the attackers fell upon them, and there was no time for magic. Eragon easily parried a stab, and with a looping backhanded stroke, sliced off the attacker's head. Like all the others, the man wore a kerchief tied over his face, so only his eyes were exposed, and the kerchief fluttered as the head fell spinning toward the floor.

Eragon was relieved when he felt Brisingr sink into flesh and blood. For a moment, he had feared that their opponents were protected by spells or armor—or, worse, that they were something other than human.

He skewered another man through the ribs and had just turned to deal with two more of his attackers when a sword that should not have been there arced through the air toward his throat. His wards saved him from certain death, yet with the blade an inch away from his neck, Eragon could not help but stumble back.

To his astonishment, the man he had stabbed was still standing, blood streaming down his side, seemingly oblivious to the hole Eragon had poked through him.

Dread settled over Eragon. "They can't feel pain," he shouted, even as he frantically blocked swords from three different directions. If anyone heard him, they failed to respond.

He wasted no more time talking, but concentrated on fighting the men in front of him, trusting his companions to protect his back.

Eragon lunged and parried and dodged, whipping Brisingr through the air as if it weighed no more than a switch. Ordinarily, he could have killed any of the men in an instant, but the fact that they were impervious to pain meant that he had to either behead them, stab them through the heart, or cut them and hold them off until loss of blood rendered them unconscious. Otherwise, the attackers kept

trying to kill him, regardless of their injuries. The number of men made it difficult to evade all of their blows and strike back in return. He could have stopped defending himself and just let his wards protect him, but that would tire him just as quickly as swinging Brisingr. And since he could not predict exactly when his wards would fail—as they must at a certain point, else they would kill him—and he knew he might need them later on, he fought just as carefully and cautiously as if he were facing men whose swords could kill or maim with a single stroke.

More black-garbed warriors streamed out of the hidden doorways within the corridors. They crowded around Eragon, pushing him back through sheer weight of numbers. Hands clung to his legs and arms, threatening to immobilize him.

"Kverst," he growled under his breath, uttering one of the twelve death words Oromis had taught him. As he had suspected, his spell had no effect: the men were warded against direct magical attacks. He quickly readied a spell Murtagh had once used on him: "Thrysta vindr!" It was a roundabout way of striking at the men, as he was not actually hitting them but rather pushing the air against them. In any case, it worked.

A howl of wind filled the chamber, clawing at Eragon's hair and cloak and sending the men closest to him flying back into their compatriots, clearing a space of ten feet in front of him. His strength decreased commensurately, but not enough to incapacitate him.

He turned to see how the others were doing. He had not been the first to find a way to circumvent the men's wards; bolts of lightning extended from Wyrden's right arm and wrapped themselves around any warrior unfortunate enough to pass in front of him. The glowing cables of energy appeared almost liquid as they writhed around their victims.

Still more men were forcing their way into the room, however.

"This way!" cried Arya, and sprang toward the seventh corridor—the one she had failed to examine before the ambush.

Wyrden followed, as did Eragon. Angela brought up the rear, limping and clutching at a bloody cut on her shoulder. Behind them, the black-garbed men hesitated, milling in the chamber for a moment. Then, with a mighty roar, they gave chase.

As he sprinted down the corridor, Eragon strove to compose a variation of his earlier spell that would allow him to kill the men instead of just knocking them away. He quickly devised one and held it in readiness to use as soon as he could see a fair number of the attackers.

Who are they? he wondered. *How many of them are there?*

Up ahead, he glimpsed an opening through which shone a faint

purplish light. He just had time to feel apprehensive about its source before the herbalist uttered a loud cry, and there was a dull orange flash and a teeth-jarring *thud*, and the smell of sulfur filled the air.

Eragon whirled around to see five men dragging the herbalist through a doorway that had opened in the side of the corridor. "No!" yelled Eragon, but before he could stop it, the door swung shut as silently as it had opened, and the wall appeared perfectly solid once more.

"Brisingr!" he shouted, and his sword erupted in flame. He placed the tip against the wall and attempted to push it through the stone, intending to cut open the door. The stone was thick, though, and slow to melt, and he soon realized it would take far more energy than he was willing to sacrifice.

Then Arya appeared beside him, and she placed a hand where the door was and murmured, "Ládrin." *Open*. The door remained stubbornly closed, but Eragon was embarrassed he had not thought to try that first.

Their pursuers were so close by now that he and Arya had no choice but to turn and face them. Eragon wanted to cast the spell he had invented, but the corridor was only wide enough for two men to approach at a time; he would not be able to kill the rest, as they were hidden from sight. Better to keep the spell a secret, he decided, and save it for when he could wipe out most of the warriors at once.

He and Arya beheaded the two lead men, then attacked the next pair of warriors as they stepped over the bodies. In quick succession, they killed six more men, but there seemed to be no end of them.

"Through here!" shouted Wyrden.

"Stenr slauta!" exclaimed Arya, and all along the corridor—up to a few yards from where she stood—the stones in the walls exploded into the passageway. The hail of sharp fragments caused the black-clad men to cower and falter, and more than one fell to the floor, crippled.

Together Eragon and Arya turned to follow Wyrden, who was running toward the opening at the end of the corridor. The elf was only thirty feet away from it.

Then ten …

Then five …

And then a thicket of amethyst spikes shot out of holes in the floor and the ceiling, catching Wyrden between them. The elf seemed to float in the middle of the corridor, the spikes less than an inch away from his skin as his wards repelled the crystal thorns. Then a crackling discharge of energy ran the length of each spike and the needle-sharp tips flared painfully bright, and with an unpleasant *crunch*, they slid home.

Wyrden screamed and thrashed, and then his werelight went out

and he moved no more.

Eragon stared with disbelief as he stumbled to a stop before the spikes. For all his experience in battle, he had never before been present at the death of an elf. Wyrden and Blödhgarm and the rest of their cohort were so accomplished, Eragon had believed that the only way they were likely to die was while fighting either Galbatorix or Murtagh.

Arya appeared equally stunned. She rallied quickly, however. "Eragon," she said in an urgent voice, "cut us a path with Brisingr."

He understood. His sword, unlike hers, would be impervious to whatever evil magic the spikes contained.

He drew back his arm and swung as hard as he could. A half-dozen of the spikes shattered beneath Brisingr's adamantine edge. The amethyst emitted a bell-like tone as it broke, and when the shards struck the ground, they tinkled like ice.

Eragon kept to the right of the corridor, making sure not to hit the blood-streaked spikes that held up Wyrden's body. Again and again he swung, hacking his way through the glittering thicket. With every blow, he sent pieces of amethyst flying through the air. One sliced his left cheek, and he winced, surprised and concerned that his wards had failed.

The jagged remnants of the broken spikes forced him to move carefully. The stumps below could easily pierce his boots, while the ones above threatened to cut him about the head and neck. Still, he managed to navigate to the far side of the thicket with only a small gash on his right calf, which stung whenever he put his weight on the leg.

The black-clad warriors nearly caught up with them as he helped Arya past the last few rows of spikes. Once she was free, they rushed through the opening and into the purplish light, Eragon with every intention of then turning around and confronting their attackers head-on and killing every last one of them in retaliation for Wyrden's death.

On the other side of the opening was a dark, heavily built chamber that reminded Eragon of the caves under Tronjheim. A huge circular pattern of inlaid stone—marble and chalcedony and polished hematite—occupied the center of the floor. Around the edge of the patterned disk stood rough, fist-sized chunks of amethyst set within silver collars. Each piece of the purple rock glowed softly—the source of the light they had seen from the corridor. Across the disk, against the far wall, was a large black altar draped with a gold and crimson cloth. Pillars and candelabra flanked the altar, with a closed door on each side.

All this Eragon saw as he barreled into the room, in the brief instant before he realized that his momentum was going to carry him through

the ring of amethysts and onto the disk. He tried to stop himself, tried to turn aside, but he was moving too fast.

Desperate, he did the one thing he could: he jumped toward the altar, hoping he could clear the disk in a single bound.

As he sailed over the nearest of the amethyst stones, his last feeling was regret, and his last thought was of Saphira.

To Feed a God

The first thing Eragon noticed was the difference in the colors. The stone blocks in the ceiling appeared richer than before. Details that had been obscure now seemed sharp and vivid, while others that had been prominent were subdued. Below him, the sumptuous nature of the patterned disk was even more apparent.

It took him a moment to understand the reason for the change: Arya's red werelight no longer illuminated the chamber. Instead, what light there was came from the muted glow of the crystals and the lit candles in the candelabra.

Only then did he realize that something was crammed into his mouth, stretching his jaw painfully wide, and that he was hanging by his wrists from a chain mounted in the ceiling. He tried to move and found that his ankles were shackled and secured to a metal loop in the floor.

As he twisted in place, he saw Arya next to him, trussed and suspended in the same manner. Like him, she was gagged with a ball of cloth in her mouth and a rag tied around her head to hold it in place.

She was already awake and watching him, and he saw she was relieved at his return to consciousness.

Why hasn't she escaped already? he wondered. Then: *What happened?* His thoughts felt thick and slow, as if he were drunk with exhaustion.

He looked down and saw that he had been stripped of his weapons and armor; he was clad only in his leggings. The belt of Beloth the Wise was gone, as was the necklace the dwarves had given him that prevented anyone from scrying him.

Looking up, he saw that the elf ring Aren was missing from his hand.

A touch of panic gripped him. Then he reassured himself with the knowledge that he was not helpless, not so long as he could work magic. Because of the cloth in his mouth, he would have to cast a spell without uttering it aloud, which was somewhat more dangerous than the normal method—for if his thoughts strayed during the process, he might accidentally select the wrong words—but not so dangerous as casting a spell without any use of the ancient language at all, which was perilous indeed. In any event, it would take only a small amount of energy for him to free himself, and he was confident he could do it without too much trouble.

He closed his eyes and gathered his resources in preparation. As he did, he heard Arya rattling her chain and making muffled noises.

Glancing over, he saw her shaking her head at him. He raised his eyebrows in a wordless inquiry: *what is it?* But she was unable to do anything more than grunt and continue to shake her head.

Frustrated, Eragon cautiously pushed out his mind toward her—alert for the slightest hint of intrusion from anyone else—but to his alarm, he felt only a soft, indistinct pressure surrounding him, as if bales of wool were packed around his mind.

Panic began to well up inside of him again, despite his efforts to control it.

He was not drugged. Of that, he was sure. But he did not know what else besides a drug could prevent him from touching Arya's mind. If it was magic, it was magic unlike any he was familiar with.

He and Arya stared at each other for a moment; then a stir of motion drew Eragon's eye upward and he saw lines of blood running down her forearms from where the manacles around her wrists had scraped away the skin.

Rage engulfed him. He grabbed the chain above him and yanked on it as hard as he could. The links held, but he refused to give up. In a frenzy of anger, he pulled on it again and again, without regard for the harm he was causing himself.

At last he stopped and hung limply while hot blood dripped from his wrists onto the back of his neck and shoulders.

Determined to escape, he delved into the flow of energy within his body and, directing the spell at his shackles, he mentally shouted, *Kverst malmr du huildrs edtha, mar frëma né thön eka threyja!*

He screamed into his gag as every nerve in his body seared with pain. Unable to maintain his concentration, he lost his grip on the spell, and the enchantment ended.

The pain vanished at once, but it left him devoid of breath, with his heart pounding as heavily as if he had just jumped off a cliff. The experience was similar to the seizures he had suffered before the dragons healed the scar on his back during the Agaetí Blödhren.

As he slowly recovered, he saw Arya gazing at him with a concerned expression. *She must have tried a spell herself*. Then: *How could this have happened?* The two of them bound and helpless, Wyrden dead, the herbalist captured or slain, and Solembum most likely lying hurt somewhere in the underground maze, if the black-clad warriors had not already killed the werecat. Eragon could not understand it. He, Arya, Wyrden, and Angela had been as capable and dangerous a group as any in Alagaësia. And yet they had failed, and he and Arya were at the mercy of their enemies.

If we can't escape … He shied away from the thought; it did not bear

dwelling on. More than anything, he wished he could contact Saphira, if only to be assured that she was still safe and to take comfort in her companionship. Though Arya was with him, he felt incredibly alone, and that unnerved him most of all.

Despite the agony in his wrists, he resumed pulling on the chain, convinced that if he just kept at it long enough, he could work it loose from the ceiling. He tried twisting it, thinking it would be easier to break that way, but the fetters around his ankles kept him from turning very far to either side.

The sores on his wrist eventually forced him to stop. They burned like fire, and he was afraid he might end up cutting into muscle if he continued. Also, he worried he might lose too much blood, as the sores were already bleeding heavily, and he did not know how long he and Arya would have to hang there, waiting.

It was impossible to tell what time it was, but he guessed that they had been captives for only a few hours at the most, given that he did not feel the need to eat, drink, or relieve himself. That would change, though, and then their discomfort would only increase.

The pain in Eragon's wrists made every minute seem unbearably long. Occasionally, he and Arya would stare at each other and try to communicate, but their efforts always failed. Twice his sores crusted over enough that he risked yanking on the chain again, but to no avail. For the most part, he and Arya *endured*.

Then, when Eragon had begun to wonder if anyone was ever going to come, he heard the *clang* of iron bells from somewhere in the tunnels and passageways, and the doors on either side of the black altar swung open on silent hinges. Eragon's muscles tensed in anticipation. He fixed his eyes on the openings, as did Arya.

A seemingly endless minute passed.

With a brash, jarring toll, the bells sounded again, filling the chamber with a swarm of angry echoes. Through the doorways marched three novitiates: young men garbed in golden cloth, each carrying a metal frame hung with bells. Behind them followed twenty-four men and women, not one of whom possessed a full set of limbs. Unlike their predecessors, the cripples wore robes of dark leather, tailored to match their individual infirmities. And last of all, six oiled slaves carried in a bier, upon which, propped upright, rested an armless, legless, toothless, seemingly sexless figure: the High Priest of Helgrind. From its head rose a three-foot-high crest, which only made the creature appear even more misshapen.

The priests and novitiates positioned themselves around the edge of the patterned disk on the floor, while the slaves gently lowered the bier onto the altar at the head of the room. Then the three perfect, handsome young men shook the bells once more, creating a

discordant crash, and the leather-clad priests chanted a short phrase so quickly that Eragon was not sure what they said, though it had the sound of ritual. Amongst the crush of words, he caught the names of the three peaks of Helgrind: Gorm, Ilda, and Fell Angvara.

The High Priest gazed at him and Arya with eyes like chips of obsidian. “Welcome to the halls of Tosk,” it said, and its withered mouth distorted the words. “Twice now you have invaded our inner sanctums, Dragon Rider. You shall not have the opportunity to do so again.… Galbatorix would have us spare your lives and send you to Urû’baen. He believes he can force you to serve him. He dreams of resurrecting the Riders and restoring the race of dragons. I say his dreams are folly. You are too dangerous, and we do not want to see the dragons resurgent. It is commonly believed that we worship Helgrind. That is a lie we tell others to conceal the true nature of our religion. It is not Helgrind that we revere—it is the Old Ones who made their lair within and to whom we sacrificed our flesh and blood. The Ra’zac are our gods, Dragon Rider—the Ra’zac and the Lethrblaka.”

Dread crept through Eragon like a sickness.

The High Priest spat at him, and spittle drooled from its slack lower lip. “There is no torture horrible enough for your crime, Rider. You killed our gods, you and that accursed dragon of yours. For that, you must die.”

Eragon struggled against his bonds and tried to shout through his gag. If he could talk, he could stall for time by telling them what the Ra’zac’s last words had been, perhaps, or by threatening them with Saphira’s vengeance. But their captors showed no inclination to remove his gag.

In a hideous gesture, the High Priest smiled, showing its gray gums. “You will never escape, Rider. The crystals here were enchanted to trap any who might try to desecrate our temple or steal our treasures, even one such as you. Nor is there anyone to rescue you. Two of your companions are dead—yes, even that meddlesome witch—and Murtagh knows nothing of your presence here. Today is the day of your doom, Eragon *Shadeslayer*.” Then the High Priest tilted back its head and uttered a gruesome, gurgling whistle.

From the dark doorway to the left of the altar, there appeared four bare-chested slaves. On their shoulders, they bore a platform with two large, shallow, cuplike protrusions in the middle. Within the protrusions lay a pair of oval objects, each about a foot and a half long and half a foot thick. The objects were blue black and pitted like sandstone.

Time seemed to slow for Eragon. *They can’t be* …, he thought. Saphira’s egg had been smooth, however, and veined like marble.

Whatever these objects were, they were not dragon eggs. The alternatives frightened him even more.

"Since you killed the Old Ones," said the High Priest, "it is only fitting that you provide the food for their rebirth. You do not deserve such a great honor, but it will please the Old Ones, and in all things we strive to satisfy their desires. We are their faithful servants, and they our masters cruel and implacable: the three-faced god—the hunters of men, the eaters of flesh, and the drinkers of blood. To them, we offer up our bodies in hope of revelation into the mysteries of this life and in hope of absolution for our transgressions. As Tosk wrote, so shall it be."

In unison, the leather-clad priests repeated: "As Tosk wrote, so shall it be."

The High Priest nodded. "The Old Ones have always nested on Helgrind, but in the time of my grandfather's father, Galbatorix stole their eggs and killed their young, and he forced them to swear fealty to him lest he eradicate their line entirely. He hollowed out the caves and tunnels they have used ever since, and to us, to their devoted acolytes, he gave charge of their eggs—to watch and to hold and to care for until they were needed. This we have done, and none may fault us for our service.

"But we pray that someday Galbatorix shall be overthrown, for none should bind the Old Ones to their will. It is an abomination." The deformed creature licked its lips, and to his disgust, Eragon saw that part of its tongue was missing: carved away by a knife. "You, too, we wish gone, Rider. The dragons were the Old Ones' greatest enemies. Without them, and without Galbatorix, there would be no one to stop the Old Ones from feasting where and how they will."

As the High Priest spoke, the four slaves bearing the platform walked forth and carefully lowered it from their shoulders onto the patterned disk, setting it down several paces in front of Eragon and Arya. Once they finished, they bowed their heads and retreated through the doorway from which they had come.

"Who could ask for anything more than to feed a god with the marrow of their bones?" asked the High Priest. "Rejoice, both of you, for today you receive the blessing of the Old Ones, and by your sacrifice, the record of your sins shall be washed clean and you shall enter the afterlife as pure as a newly born child."

Then the High Priest and its followers raised their faces toward the ceiling and began to intone a strange, oddly accented song that Eragon had trouble understanding. He wondered if it was in the dialect of Tosk. At times, he heard what he thought were words in the ancient language—mangled and misused, but still the ancient language.

When the grotesque congregation finished, ending with another chorus of "As Tosk wrote, so shall it be," the three novitiates shook the bells in an ecstasy of religious fervor, and the resulting clamor seemed loud enough to bring down the ceiling.

Still shaking the bells, the novitiates filed out of the room. The four-and-twenty lesser priests departed next, and then, bringing up the rear of the procession, their limbless master, transported upon its bier by the six oiled slaves.

The door closed behind them with an ominous *boom*, and Eragon heard a heavy bar fall into place on the other side.

He turned to look at Arya. The expression in her eyes was that of despair, and he knew she had no more idea of how to escape than he did.

He gazed upward again and pulled on the chain that held him, using as much of his strength as he dared. The sores on his wrists again tore open, and they sprinkled him with drops of blood.

In front of them, the leftmost egg began to rock back and forth ever so slightly, and from it came a faint tapping, like the rapping of a tiny hammer.

A profound sense of horror suffused Eragon. Of all the ways he could imagine dying, being eaten alive by a Ra'zac was by far the worst. He yanked on the chain with renewed determination, biting his gag to help him withstand the agony in his arms. The resulting pain caused his vision to flicker.

Next to him, Arya thrashed and twisted as well, both of them fighting in deadly silence to free themselves.

And still the *tap-tap-tap*ping continued on the blue-black shell.

It's no use, Eragon realized. The chain would not give. As soon as he accepted the fact, it became obvious that it would be impossible to avoid being hurt far worse than he already was. The only question was whether his injuries would be forced upon him or whether they would be of his own choosing. *If nothing else, I have to save Arya*.

He studied the iron bands around his wrists. *If I can break my thumbs, I might be able to pull my hands out. Then at least I could fight. Maybe I could grab a piece of the Ra'zac's shell and use it as a knife*. With something to cut, he could free his legs as well, though the thought was so terrifying, he ignored it for the time being. *All I would have to do is crawl out of the circle of stones*. He would be able to use magic then, and he could stop the pain and the bleeding. What he was considering would only take a few minutes, but he knew they would be the longest minutes of his life.

He drew in a breath in preparation. *Left hand first.*

Before he could start, Arya screamed.

He spun toward her and uttered a wordless exclamation as he saw

the mangled fingers of her right hand. Her skin was pushed up like a glove toward her nails, and the white of bone showed amid crimson muscle. Arya sagged and appeared to lose consciousness for a moment; then she recovered and pulled on her arm once more. Eragon cried out with her as her hand slid through the metal cuff, tearing off skin and flesh. Her arm fell to her side, hiding the hand from his sight, though he could see the blood splattering on the floor by her feet.

Tears blurred his eyes, and he shouted her name into his gag, but she seemed not to hear him.

As she braced herself to repeat the process, the door to the right of the altar opened, and one of the golden-robed novitiates slipped into the chamber. Seeing him, Arya hesitated, though Eragon knew she would pull her other hand out of the manacle at the slightest hint of danger.

The young man looked askance at Arya, then cautiously made his way to the center of the patterned disk, casting apprehensive glances at the egg that was rocking back and forth. The youth was slight, with large eyes and delicate features; it seemed obvious to Eragon that he had been chosen for his position because of his appearance.

"Here," whispered the youth. "I brought these." From within his robes, he produced a file, a chisel, and a wooden mallet. "If I help, you have to take me with you. I can't stand it here any longer. I hate it. It's horrible! Promise you'll take me with you!"

Even before he finished speaking, Eragon was nodding his assent. As the young man started toward him, though, Eragon growled and motioned with his head in Arya's direction. It took a few seconds before the novitiate understood.

"Oh, yes," murmured the young man, and went over to Arya instead. Eragon ground his teeth through the gag in anger over the youth's slowness.

The harsh scrape of the file soon drowned out the tapping from within the wobbling egg.

Eragon watched as best he could while their would-be rescuer sawed on a section of chain above Arya's left hand. *Keep the file on the same link, you fool!* Eragon raged. The novitiate looked as if he had never used a file before, and Eragon doubted that the youth had the strength or endurance to cut through even a small amount of metal.

Arya hung limply while the novitiate worked, her long hair covering her face. She trembled at regular intervals, and the fall of blood from her ruined hand continued unabated.

To Eragon's dismay, the file did not seem to be leaving a mark on the chain. Whatever magics protected the metal, they were too strong for something as simple as a file to overcome.

The novitiate huffed, appearing petulant at his lack of progress. He

paused and wiped his brow, then, frowning, attacked the chain once again, elbows flailing, chest heaving, the sleeves of his robe flapping wildly.

Don't you realize it's not going to work? thought Eragon. *Try the chisel on the shackles around her ankles instead.*

The young man continued as he was.

A sharp *crack* echoed through the chamber, and Eragon saw a thin fissure appear at the top of the dark, pitted egg. The fissure lengthened, and a web of hairline fractures spread outward from it.

Then the second egg began to wobble as well, and from it came another *tap-tap-tap*ping, which joined with the first to form a maddening rhythm.

The novitiate went pale, then dropped the file and backed away from Arya, shaking his head. "I'm sorry.… I'm sorry. It's too late." His face crumpled, and tears rolled from his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Eragon's alarm increased as the young man pulled a dagger from within his robes. "There's nothing else I can do," he said, almost as if he were speaking to himself. "Nothing else …" He sniffed and moved toward Eragon. "It's for the best."

As the young man stepped forward, Eragon wrenched at his bonds, trying to pull one of his hands out of the manacles. The iron cuffs were too tight, however, and all he succeeded in doing was scraping more of the skin off his wrists.

"I'm sorry," whispered the young man as he stopped in front of Eragon and drew back the dagger.

No! Eragon shouted in his mind.

A chunk of glittering amethyst hurtled out of the tunnel that had brought Eragon and Arya to the chamber. It struck the novitiate in the back of the head, and he fell against Eragon. Eragon flinched as he felt the edge of the dagger slide across his ribs. Then the young man tumbled to the floor and lay there, unconscious.

From within the depths of the tunnel emerged a small, limping figure. Eragon stared, and as the figure moved into the light, he saw that it was none other than Solembum.

Relief swept through Eragon.

The werecat was in his human form, and he was naked except for a ragged loincloth that looked as if it had been torn from the clothes of their attackers. His spiky black hair stood nearly on end, and a feral snarl disfigured his lips. Several cuts covered his forearms, his left ear hung drooping from the side of his head, and a strip of skin was missing from his scalp. He carried a blood-smeared knife.

And following a few paces behind the werecat was the herbalist, Angela.

INFIDELS ON THE LOOSE

"What an idiot," proclaimed Angela as she hurried to the edge of the patterned disk on the floor. She was bleeding from a number of cuts and scratches, and her clothes were stained with even more blood, which Eragon suspected was not her own. Otherwise, she appeared unharmed. "All he had to do was—*this*!"

And she swung her sword with its transparent blade up and over her head, and brought the pommel down against one of the amethysts that ringed the disk. The crystal shattered with an odd *snap*, like a shock of static, and the light it emitted flickered and went out. The other crystals maintained their radiance.

Without pause, Angela stepped to the next piece of amethyst and broke it as well, then the one after it, and so on.

Never in his life had Eragon been so grateful to see anyone.

He alternated between watching the herbalist and watching the cracks widening at the top of the first egg. The Ra'zac had almost pecked its way out, a fact it seemed to be aware of, for it was squeaking and tapping with increased vigor. Between the pieces of shell, Eragon saw a thick white membrane and the beaked head of the Ra'zac pushing blindly against it, horrible and monstrous.

Hurry, hurry, Eragon thought as a fragment as large as his hand fell from the egg and clattered against the floor, like a plate made of fired clay.

The membrane tore, and the young Ra'zac stuck its head out of the egg, revealing its barbed purple tongue as it uttered a triumphant screech. Slime dripped from its carapace, and a fungus-like smell pervaded the chamber.

Eragon tugged at his bonds once more, futile as it was.

The Ra'zac screeched again, then struggled to extricate itself from the remainder of the egg. It pulled one clawed arm free, but in the process it unbalanced the egg, which tipped to one side, spilling a thick, yellowish fluid across the patterned disk. The grotesque hatchling lay on its side for a moment, stunned. Then it stirred and got to its feet, where it stood, swaying and uncertain, clicking to itself like an agitated insect.

Eragon stared, appalled and terrified, but also fascinated.

The Ra'zac had a deep, ridged chest that made it look as if its ribs were on the outside of its body, not the inside. The creature's limbs were thin and knobby, like sticks, and its waist was narrower than any

human's. Each leg had an extra backward-bending joint, something that Eragon had never seen before, but which accounted for the Ra'zac's unsettling gait. Its carapace appeared soft and malleable, unlike those of the more mature Ra'zac Eragon had encountered. No doubt it would harden in time.

The Ra'zac tilted its head—its huge, protruding, pupil-less eyes catching the light—and it chittered as if it had just discovered something exciting. Then it took a tentative step toward Arya … and another … and then another, its beak parting as it strained toward the pool of blood by her feet.

Eragon shouted into his gag, hoping to distract the creature, but other than a quick glance, it ignored him.

"Now!" exclaimed Angela, and she broke the last of the crystals.

Even as the shards of amethyst skittered across the floor, Solembum leaped toward the Ra'zac. The werecat's form blurred in midair—head shrinking, legs shortening, fur sprouting—and he landed on all fours, his body once more that of an animal.

The Ra'zac hissed and clawed at Solembum, but the werecat dodged the blow and, faster than the eye could follow, slapped the Ra'zac's head with one of his large, heavy paws.

The Ra'zac's neck broke with a *crack*, and the creature flew across the room and landed in a twisted heap, where it lay twitching for several seconds.

Solembum hissed, his one uninjured ear pressed flat against his skull; then he wriggled out of the loincloth that was still tied around his hips and went over to sit and wait by the other egg.

"What *have* you done to yourself?" said Angela as she hurried over to Arya. Arya wearily lifted her head, but she made no attempt to answer.

With three swift strokes of her colorless blade, the herbalist sliced through Arya's remaining cuffs, as if the tempered metal were no harder than cheese.

Arya fell to her knees and doubled over, pressing her injured hand against her stomach. With her other hand, she tore at her gag.

The burning in Eragon's shoulders eased when Angela cut him free and he was finally able to lower his arms. He pulled the cloth out of his mouth and, in a hoarse voice, said, "We thought you were dead."

"They'll have to try harder than that if they want to kill me. Bunglers, the lot of them."

Still doubled over, Arya began to chant spells of binding and healing. Her words were soft and strained, but she never faltered or misspoke.

While she worked to repair the damage to her hand, Eragon healed the cut on his ribs as well as the sores on his wrists. Then he motioned

at Solembum and said, “Move.”

The werecat flicked his tail but did as Eragon asked.

Lifting his right hand, Eragon said, “Brisingr!”

A pillar of blue flame erupted around the second egg. The creature inside screamed: a terrible, unearthly sound, more like the screech of tearing metal than the cry of person or beast.

Narrowing his eyes against the heat, Eragon watched with satisfaction as the egg burned. *And let that be the last of them*, he thought. When the screaming ceased, he extinguished the flame, and it went out from the bottom up. The silence afterward was unexpectedly complete, for Arya had finished her incantations and all was still.

Angela was the first to stir. She went to Solembum and stood over him, murmuring in the ancient language as she mended his ear and other wounds.

Eragon knelt by Arya and put a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him, then uncurled her body enough to show him her hand. The skin along the lower third of her thumb, as well as along the outer edge of her palm and across the back of her hand, was shiny and bright red. However, the muscles underneath appeared sound.

“Why didn’t you finish healing it?” he asked. “If you’re too tired, I can—”

She shook her head. “I damaged several nerves … and I can’t seem to repair them. I need Blödhgarm’s help; he is more skilled than I at manipulating flesh.”

“Can you fight?”

“If I’m careful.”

He tightened his grip on her shoulder for a moment. “What you did—”

“I only did what was logical.”

“Most people wouldn’t have had the strength.… I tried, but my hand was too big. See?” And he held up his hand against hers.

She nodded, then grasped his arm and slowly got to her feet. Eragon rose with her, providing her with a steady support.

“We have to find our weapons,” he said, “as well as my ring, my belt, and the necklace the dwarves gave me.”

Angela frowned. “Why your belt? Is it enchanted?”

When Eragon hesitated, unsure whether to tell her the truth, Arya said, “You would not know the name of its maker, wise one, but during your travels, you must surely have heard tell of the belt of the twelve stars.”

The herbalist’s eyes widened. “*That* belt?! But I thought it was lost over four centuries ago, destroyed during the—”

“We recovered it,” said Arya flatly.

Eragon could see that the herbalist longed to ask more questions, but she merely said, “I see.… We can’t waste time searching every room in this warren, though. Once the priests realize you’ve escaped, we’ll have the whole pack of them nipping at our heels.”

Eragon motioned toward the novitiate on the floor and said, “Maybe he can tell us where they took our things.”

Dropping into a squat, the herbalist placed two fingers against the youth’s jugular vein, feeling his pulse. Then she slapped his cheeks and peeled back his eyelids.

The novitiate remained slack and motionless.

His lack of response seemed to annoy the herbalist. “One moment,” she said, closing her eyes. A slight frown creased her brow. For a while, she was still; then she sprang upward with sudden speed. “What a self-absorbed little wretch! No wonder his parents sent him to join the priests. I’m surprised they put up with him as long as they did.”

“Does he know anything of use?” asked Eragon.

“Only the path to the surface.” She pointed toward the door to the left of the altar, the same door through which the priests had entered and departed. “It’s amazing that he tried to free you; I suspect it’s the first time in his life he’s ever done anything of his own accord.”

“We have to bring him with us.” Eragon hated to say it, but duty compelled him. “I promised we would if he helped us.”

“He tried to kill you!”

“I gave my word.”

Angela sighed and rolled her eyes. To Arya, she said, “I don’t suppose you can convince him otherwise?”

Arya shook her head, then hoisted the young man onto her shoulder without apparent effort. “I’ll carry him,” she said.

“In that case,” the herbalist said to Eragon, “you had best have this, since it seems you and I are to do most of the fighting.” She handed him her short sword, then drew a poniard with a jeweled hilt from within the folds of her dress.

“What is it made of?” Eragon asked as he peered through the transparent blade of the sword, noticing how it caught and reflected the light. The substance reminded him of diamond, but he could not imagine that anyone would make a weapon out of a gemstone; the amount of energy required to keep the stone from breaking with every blow would soon exhaust any normal magician.

“Neither stone nor metal,” said the herbalist. “A word of caution, though. You must take great care when handling it. Never touch the edge or allow anything you cherish to come near it, else you will regret it. Likewise, never lean the sword against something you might need—your leg, for example.”

Wary, Eragon held the sword farther away from his body. “Why?”

“Because,” said the herbalist with evident relish, “*this* is the sharpest blade in all of existence. No other sword or knife or ax can match the keenness of its edge, not even Brisingr. It is the ultimate embodiment of an incision-making instrument. *This*”—she paused for emphasis—“is the archetype of an inclined plane.… You’ll not find its equal anywhere. It can cut through anything not protected by magic, and many things that are. Try it if you don’t believe me.”

Eragon looked around for something to test the sword against. In the end, he strode over to the altar and swung the blade at one corner of the stone slab.

“Not so quickly!” cried Angela.

The transparent blade passed through four inches of stone as if the granite were no harder than custard, then continued down toward his feet. Eragon yelped and jumped back, barely managing to stop his arm before he cut himself.

The corner of the altar bounced off the step below and then tumbled clacking toward the middle of the room.

The blade of the sword, Eragon realized, might very well be diamond after all. It would not need as much protection as he had assumed, since it would rarely meet with any substantial resistance.

“Here,” said Angela. “You had better have this as well.” She unbuckled the sword’s scabbard and gave it to him. “It’s one of the few things you *can’t* cut with that blade.”

It took Eragon a moment to find his voice after so nearly lopping off his toes. “Does the sword have a name?”

Angela laughed. “Of course. In the ancient language, its name is Albitr, which means exactly what you think. But I prefer to call it Tinkledeath.”

“Tinkledeath!”

“Yes. Because of the sound the blade makes when you tap it.” She demonstrated with the tip of a fingernail and smiled at the resulting high-pitched note that pierced the darkened chamber like a ray of sunshine. “Now then, shall we be off?”

Eragon checked to make sure they were not forgetting anything; then he nodded, strode to the left-hand door, and opened it as quietly as he could.

Through the doorway was a long, broad hallway lit by torches. And standing guard in two smart rows, one along each side of the hallway, were twenty of the black-garbed warriors who had ambushed them earlier.

They looked at Eragon and reached for their weapons.

A curse ran through Eragon’s mind, and he sprang forward, intending to attack before the warriors could draw their swords and

organize themselves into an effective group. He had only covered a few feet, however, when a flicker of movement appeared next to each man: a soft, shadowy blur, like the motion of a windblown pennant seen at the edge of his vision.

Without so much as a single cry, the twenty men stiffened and fell to the floor, dead, every last one of them.

Alarmed, Eragon slowed to a stop before he ran into the bodies. Each of the men had been stabbed through an eye, as neat as could be.

He turned to ask Arya and Angela if they knew what had happened, but the words died in his throat as he beheld the herbalist. She stood braced against a wall, leaning on her knees and panting heavily. Her skin had gone deathly white, and her hands were shaking. Blood dripped from her poniard.

Awe and fear filled Eragon. Whatever the herbalist had done, it was beyond his understanding.

"Wise one," said Arya, and she too sounded uncertain, "how did you manage to do this?"

The herbalist chuckled between breaths, then said, "I used a trick … I learned from my master … Tenga … ages ago. May a thousand spiders bite his ears and knobbly bits."

"Yes, but *how* did you do it?" insisted Eragon. *A trick like that might be useful in Urû'baen*.

The herbalist chuckled again. "What is time but motion? And what is motion but heat? And are not heat and energy but different names for the same thing?" She pushed herself off the wall, walked over to Eragon, and patted him on the cheek. "When you understand the implications of that, you'll understand how and what I did.… I won't be able to use the spell again today, not without hurting myself, so don't expect me to kill everyone the next time we run into a batch of men."

With some difficulty, Eragon swallowed his curiosity and nodded.

He stripped a tunic and a padded jerkin off one of the fallen men, and after donning the clothes, he led the way down the hall and through the archway at the far end.

They encountered no one else in the complex of rooms and corridors thereafter, nor did they find any sign of their stolen possessions. Although Eragon was glad to avoid notice, the absence of even servants worried him. He hoped that he and his companions had not triggered alarms that had warned the priests of their escape.

Unlike the abandoned chambers they had seen before the ambush, those they passed through now were filled with tapestries, furniture, and strange devices made of brass and crystal, the purpose of which Eragon could not fathom. More than once, a desk or a bookcase tempted him to pause and inspect its contents, but he always resisted

the urge. They did not have time to read musty old papers, no matter how intriguing.

Angela chose the path they took whenever there was more than one option, but Eragon remained in the lead, clutching the wire-wrapped hilt of Tinkledeath with a grip so hard, his hand began to cramp.

Soon enough, they arrived at a passageway ending in a flight of stone steps that narrowed as it rose. Two novitiates stood by the stairs, one on either side, each holding a rack of bells such as Eragon had seen earlier.

He ran at the two young men and managed to stab one novitiate through the neck before he could shout or ring his bells. The other, however, had time to do both before Solembum leaped on him and bore him to the ground, tearing at his face, and the whole of the passageway rang with the clamor.

"Hurry!" Eragon cried as he bounded up the stairs.

At the top of the steps was a freestanding wall some ten feet wide, covered with ornate scrollwork and carvings that seemed vaguely familiar to Eragon. He dodged around the wall and came out into a beam of rose-tinted light of such intensity that he faltered, confused. He lifted Tinkledeath's scabbard to shade his eyes.

Not five feet in front of him, the High Priest sat on its bier, blood dripping from a cut on its shoulder. Another of the priests—a woman missing both her hands—sat kneeling by the side of the bier, catching the fall of blood in a golden chalice that she held clamped between her forearms. Both she and the High Priest stared at Eragon with astonishment.

Then Eragon looked past them and saw, as if in a series of lightning flashes: Massive ribbed columns rising toward a vaulted ceiling that vanished into shadow. Stained-glass windows set within towering walls—the windows on the left burning with light from the rising sun; those on the right dull and flat, lifeless. Pale statues standing between the windows. Rows of granite pews, dappled with different colors, extending all the way to the far-off entrance to the nave. And, filling the first four rows, a flock of leather-garbed priests, their faces upturned and their mouths opened in song, like so many hatchlings begging for food.

He was, Eragon belatedly realized, standing in the great cathedral of Dras-Leona, on the other side of the altar he had once knelt before in reverence, long ago.

The handless woman dropped the chalice and stood, throwing her arms out wide as she shielded the High Priest with her body. Behind her, Eragon glimpsed the blue of Brisingr's sheath lying near the leading edge of the bier, and he thought he saw Aren next to it.

Before he could chase after his sword, two guards rushed toward

him from either side of the altar, slashing at him with engraved, red-tasseled pikes. He sidestepped the first guard and sliced the shaft of the man's pike in half, sending the blade flying through the air. Then Eragon sliced the man himself in half; Tinkledeath passed through his flesh and bones with shocking ease.

Eragon dispatched the second guard just as quickly and turned to face a pair approaching from behind. The herbalist joined him, brandishing her poniard, and somewhere off to his left, Solembum growled. Arya hung back from the fighting, still carrying the young man.

The spilled blood from the chalice had coated the floor around the altar. The guards slipped in the puddle and the rear man fell and knocked his companion off his feet. Eragon shuffled toward them—never lifting his feet off the floor so as to avoid losing his balance—and before the guards could react, he slew them both, taking care to control the herbalist's enchanted blade as it effortlessly cut through the two men.

As he did, Eragon was aware that the High Priest was screaming, as if at a great distance, "Kill the infidels! Kill them! Don't let the blasphemers escape! They must be punished for their crimes against the Old Ones!"

The congregation of priests began to howl and stamp their feet, and Eragon felt their minds clawing at his, like a pack of wolves tearing at a weakened deer. He retreated deep within himself, warding off the attacks with techniques he had been practicing under Glaedr's tutelage. It was difficult to defend himself from so many foes, however, and he feared that he would not be able to maintain his barriers for long. His one advantage was that the panicked, disorganized priests attacked him as individuals, not as a unit; their combined might would have overwhelmed him.

Then Arya's consciousness was pressing against his—a familiar, comforting presence amid the clutch of enemies scrabbling against his inner self. Relieved, he opened himself to her, and they joined their minds, even as he and Saphira would do, and for a time their identities merged and he lost the ability to determine where many of their shared thoughts and feelings came from.

Together they stabbed with their minds at one of the priests. The man struggled to evade their grasp, like a fish wriggling through their fingers, but they tightened their grip and refused to let him escape. He was reciting a stilted, oddly worded phrase in an attempt to keep them out of his consciousness; Eragon assumed it was a scrap of scripture from the Book of Tosk.

The priest lacked discipline, however, and his concentration soon wavered as he thought, *The infidels are too close to Master. We have to*

kill them before—Wait! No! No …!

Eragon and Arya seized upon the priest's weakness and quickly subjugated the man's thoughts to their will. Once they were certain he could not retaliate against them with mind or body, Arya cast a spell that, from examining the priest's memories, she knew could slip past his wards.

In the third row of pews, a man screamed and burst into flame, green fire pouring from his ears, mouth, and eyes. The flames ignited the clothes of several priests close to him, and the burning men and women began to thrash and run about wildly, further disrupting the attacks against Eragon. The rippling flames sounded like branches snapping in a storm.

The herbalist ran down from the altar and moved among the priests, stabbing here and there. Solembum followed close at her heels, finishing off those she felled.

After that, it was easy for Eragon and Arya to invade and seize control of their enemies' minds. Continuing to work together, they killed four more priests, at which point the rest of the congregation broke and scattered. Some fled through the vestibule that Eragon remembered led to the priory next to the cathedral, while others crouched behind the pews and wrapped their arms around their heads.

Six of the priests, however, neither fled nor hid, but rather charged Eragon, brandishing curved knives with what hands they still possessed. Eragon cut at the first priest before she could strike at him. To his annoyance, the woman was protected by a ward that stopped Tinkledeath half a foot from her neck, causing the sword to turn in his hand and a shock to run up his arm. With his left hand, Eragon swung at the woman. For whatever reason, the spell did not stop his fist, and he felt the bones in her chest give way as he knocked her sprawling into the people behind her.

The remaining priests extricated themselves and resumed their charge. Stepping forward, Eragon blocked a clumsy slash from the foremost priest; then—with a shout of *"Ha!"*—he drove his fist into the man's gut and sent him flying into a pew, which the priest struck with a nasty crack.

Eragon killed the next man in a similar manner. A green and yellow dart buried itself in the throat of the priest to his right, and there was a tawny blur as Solembum leaped past him and tackled another of the group.

That left but one of Tosk's followers standing before him. With her free hand, Arya grabbed the woman by the front of her leather robes and threw her screaming thirty feet over the pews.

Four novitiates had lifted up the High Priest's bier and were

carrying it at a quick trot along the east side of the cathedral as they headed toward the front entrance of the building.

Seeing them escaping, Eragon uttered a roar and bounded onto the altar, knocking a plate and goblet to the floor. From there, he jumped out over the bodies of the fallen priests. He landed lightly in the aisle and sprinted to the end of the cathedral, heading off the novitiates.

The four young men stopped when they saw Eragon arrive at the doors. “Turn around!” shrieked the High Priest. “Turn around!” Its servants obeyed, only to be confronted by Arya standing behind them, one of their own slung over her right shoulder.

The novitiates yelped and turned sideways, darting between two rows of pews. Before they had gone more than a few feet, Solembum stepped around the end of the pews and began to pad toward them. The werecat’s ears were pressed flat against his skull, and the constant low rumble of his growl made Eragon’s neck prickle. Close behind him came Angela, striding down the cathedral from the altar, her poniard in one hand and a green and yellow dart in the other.

Eragon wondered how many weapons she had about herself.

To their credit, the novitiates did not lose their courage or abandon their master. Instead, the four shouted and ran even faster at Solembum, presumably because the werecat was the smallest and the closest of their opponents, and because they believed he would be the easiest to overcome.

They were mistaken.

In a single lithe movement, Solembum crouched, jumped from the floor to the top of a pew. Then, without stopping, he leaped toward one of the two lead novitiates.

As the werecat sailed through the air, the High Priest shouted something in the ancient language—Eragon did not recognize the word, but the sound of it was unmistakably that of the elves’ native language. Whatever the spell was, it seemed to have no effect on Solembum, although Eragon saw Angela stumble as if she had been struck.

Solembum collided with the novitiate at whom he had flung himself, and the young man tumbled to the floor, screaming as Solembum mauled him. The rest of the novitiates tripped over their companion’s body, and the lot of them fell in a tangled heap, spilling the High Priest off its bier and onto one of the pews, where the creature lay squirming like a maggot.

Eragon caught up with them a second later, and with three swift strokes, he slew all of the novitiates, save the one whose neck Solembum held clamped between his jaws.

Once Eragon was sure the men were dead, he turned to strike down the High Priest once and for all. As he started toward the limbless

figure, another mind invaded his, probing and grasping at the most intimate parts of his self, seeking to control his thoughts. The vicious attack forced Eragon to stop and concentrate on defending himself from the intruder.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Arya and Solembum also appeared immobilized. The herbalist was the sole exception. She paused for a moment when the attack commenced, but then she continued to walk with slow, shuffling steps toward Eragon.

The High Priest stared at Eragon, its deep-set, dark-ringed eyes burning with hate and fury. If the creature had had arms and legs, Eragon was convinced that it would have tried to tear out his heart with its bare hands. As it was, the malevolence of its gaze was so intense, Eragon half expected the priest to wiggle off the pew and start biting at his ankles.

The assault on his mind intensified as Angela drew near. The High Priest—for it *had* to be the High Priest who was responsible—was far more skilled than any of its underlings. To engage in mental combat with four different people at once, and to present a credible threat to each of the four, was a remarkable feat, especially when the enemies were an elf, a Dragon Rider, a witch, and a werecat. The High Priest had one of the most formidable minds Eragon had ever encountered; if not for the help of his companions, Eragon suspected that he would have succumbed to the creature's onslaughts. The priest did things the likes of which Eragon had never experienced before, such as binding Eragon's stray thoughts to Arya's and Solembum's, wrapping them into a knot of such confusion that for brief moments Eragon lost track of his own identity.

At last Angela turned in to the space between the pews. She picked her way around Solembum—who crouched next to the novitiate he had killed, every hair on his body standing on end—and then carefully made her way over the corpses of the three novitiates Eragon had slain.

As she approached, the High Priest began to thrash like a hooked fish in an attempt to push itself farther up the pew. At the same time, the pressure on Eragon's mind lessened, although not enough for him to risk moving.

The herbalist stopped when she reached the High Priest, and the High Priest surprised Eragon by giving up its struggle and lying panting on the seat of the bench. For a minute, the hollow-eyed creature and the short, stern-faced woman glared at each other, an invisible battle of wills taking place between them.

Then the High Priest flinched, and a smile appeared on Angela's lips. She dropped her poniard and, from within her dress, drew forth a tiny dagger with a blade the color of a ruddy sunset. Leaning over the

High Priest, she whispered, ever so faintly, “You ought to know my name, tongueless one. If you had, you never would have dared oppose us. Here, let me tell it to you.…”

Her voice dropped even lower then, too low for Eragon to hear, but as she spoke, the High Priest blanched, and its puckered mouth opened, forming a round black oval, and an unearthly howl emanated from its throat, and the whole of the cathedral rang with the creature’s baying.

“Oh, be quiet!” exclaimed the herbalist, and she buried her sunset-colored dagger in the center of the High Priest’s chest.

The blade flashed white-hot and vanished with a sound like a far-off thunderclap. The area around the wound glowed like burning wood; then skin and flesh began to disintegrate into a fine, dark soot that poured into the High Priest’s chest. With a choked gargle, the creature’s howl ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

The spell quickly devoured the rest of the High Priest, reducing its body to a pile of black powder, the shape of which matched the outline of the priest’s head and torso.

“And good riddance,” said Angela with a firm nod.

The Tolling of the Bell

Eragon shook himself as if waking from a bad dream.

Now that he no longer had to fight off the High Priest, he gradually became aware that the priory bell was tolling—a loud, insistent sound that reminded him of when the Ra'zac had chased him from the cathedral during his first visit to Dras-Leona, with Brom.

Murtagh and Thorn will be here soon, he thought. *We have to leave before then.*

He sheathed Tinkledeath and handed it to Angela. "Here," he said, "I think you'll want this." Then he pulled the corpses of the novitiates aside until he uncovered Brisingr. As his hand closed around the hilt, a sense of relief swept through him. Though the herbalist's sword was a good and dangerous blade, it was not *his* weapon. Without Brisingr, he felt exposed, vulnerable—the same as he did whenever he and Saphira were apart.

It took him another few moments of searching to find his ring, which had rolled under one of the pews, and his necklace, which was wrapped around one of the handles of the bier. Among the pile of bodies, he also discovered Arya's sword, which she was pleased to recover. But of his belt, the belt of Beloth the Wise, there was no sign.

Eragon looked under all the nearby pews, and he even ran back to the altar and inspected the area around it.

"It's not here," he finally said, despairing. He turned toward the freestanding wall that hid the entrance to the underground chambers. "They must have left it in the tunnels." He cast his gaze in the direction of the priory. "Or maybe …" He hesitated, torn between the two options.

Muttering the words under his breath, he cast a spell designed to find and lead him to the belt, but the only result he received was an image of smooth gray emptiness. As he had feared, there were wards around the belt that protected it from magical observation or interference, just as similar wards protected Brisingr.

Eragon scowled and took a half step toward the freestanding wall.

The bell tolled louder than ever.

"Eragon," called Arya from the other end of the cathedral, shifting the unconscious novitiate from one shoulder to the other. "We have to go."

"But—"

"Oromis would understand. It's not your fault."

"But—"

"Leave it! The belt has been lost before. We will find it again. But for now, we must fly. Hurry!"

Eragon cursed, spun around, and ran to join Arya, Angela, and Solembum at the front of the cathedral. *Of all the things to lose …* It seemed almost sacrilegious to abandon the belt when so many creatures had died to fill it with energy. Besides, he had a horrible feeling that he might have need of that energy before the day was out.

Even as he and the herbalist pushed open the heavy doors that led out of the cathedral, Eragon sent his mind questing for Saphira, who he knew would be circling high above the city, waiting for him to contact her. The time for discretion had long since passed, and Eragon no longer cared if Murtagh or some other magician sensed his presence.

He soon felt the familiar touch of Saphira's consciousness. As their thoughts melded together once again, a certain tightness in Eragon's chest vanished.

What took you so long? exclaimed Saphira. He could taste her worry, and he knew she had been considering descending upon Dras-Leona and tearing it to pieces in search of him.

He poured his memories into her, sharing everything that had happened to him since they parted. The process took a few seconds, by which time he, Arya, Angela, and the werecat had exited the cathedral and were running down the front steps.

Without pausing to give Saphira an opportunity to make sense of his jumbled recollections, Eragon said, *We need a distraction—now!*

She acknowledged his statement, and he could feel her tip into a steep dive.

Also, tell Nasuada to start her attack. We'll be at the south gate in a few minutes. If the Varden aren't there when we open it, I don't know how we're going to escape.

BLACK-SHRIKE-THORN-CAVE

The cool, moist, morning-air-off-water whistled past Saphira's head as she dove toward the rat-nest-city half lit by the rising sun. The low rays of light made the smelly-wood-eggshell-buildings stand out in high relief, their western sides black with shadow.

The wolf-elf-in-Eragon's-shape who was riding on her back shouted something at her, but the hungry wind tore at his words, and she could not make out his meaning. He began to ask her questions with his song-filled-mind, but she did not wait to let him finish. Instead, she told him of Eragon's plight and asked him to alert Nasuada that now was the time for action.

How the shadow-of-Eragon that Blödhgarm wore was supposed to fool anyone, Saphira could not understand. He did not smell like her partner-of-heart-and-mind, nor did his thoughts feel like Eragon's. Still, the two-legs seemed impressed by the apparition, and it was two-legs they were trying to fool.

On the left side of the rat-nest-city, the glittering shape of Thorn lay stretched out along the battlements above the southern gate. He lifted his crimson head, and she could tell that he had spotted her hurtling toward the break-bone-ground, as she had expected. Her feelings toward Thorn were too complicated to sum up in a few brief impressions. Every time she thought of him, she became confused and uncertain, something she was unaccustomed to.

Nevertheless, she was not about to let the upstart whelp best her in battle.

As the dark chimneys and sharp-edged roofs grew larger, she spread her wings a bit more, feeling the increased strain in her chest, shoulders, and wing muscles as she began to slow their descent. When she was only a few hundred feet above the closely packed swell of buildings, she swooped upward and allowed her wings to snap out to their full extent. The effort required to stop her fall was immense; for a moment, it felt as if the wind might tear her wings free of their sockets.

She shifted her tail to maintain balance, then wheeled over the city until she located the black-shrike-thorn-cave where the blood-mad-priests worshipped. Tucking in her wings again, she dropped the last number of feet and, with a thunderous crash, landed on the middle of the cathedral's roof.

She dug her claws into the tiles of the roof to stop herself from

sliding off into the street below. Then she threw back her head and roared as loudly as she could, challenging the world and everything in it.

There was a bell clanging in the tower of the building next to the black-shrike-thorn-cave. She found the noise irritating, so she twisted her neck and loosed a jet of blue and yellow flame at it. The tower did not catch fire, as it was stone, but the rope and beams supporting the bell ignited, and a few seconds later, the bell fell crashing into the interior of the tower.

That pleased her, as did the two-legs-round-ears who ran screaming from the area. She was a dragon, after all. It was only right that they should fear her.

One of the two-legs paused by the edge of the square in front of the black-shrike-thorn-cave, and she heard him shout a spell at her, his voice like the squeaking of a frightened mouse. Whatever the spell was, Eragon's wards shielded her from it—at least she assumed they did, for she noticed no difference in how she felt or in the appearance of the world around her.

The wolf-elf-in-Eragon's-shape killed the magician for her. She could feel how Blödhgarm grasped hold of the spellcaster's mind and wrestled the two-legs-round-ears' thoughts into submission, whereupon Blödhgarm uttered a single word in the ancient-elf-magic-language, and the two-legs-round-ears fell to the ground, blood seeping from his open mouth.

Then the wolf-elf tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Ready yourself, Brightscales. Here they come."

She saw Thorn rising above the edge of the rooftops, Eragon-half-brother-Murtagh a small, dark figure on his back. In the light of the morning sun, Thorn shone and sparkled almost as brilliantly as she herself did. Her scales were cleaner than his, though, as she had taken special care when grooming earlier. She could not imagine going into battle looking anything but her best. Her enemies should not only fear her, but admire her.

She knew it was vanity on her part, but she did not care. No other race could match the grandeur of the dragons. Also, she was the last female of her kind, and she wanted those who saw her to marvel at her appearance and to remember her well, so if dragons were to vanish forevermore, two-legs would continue to speak of them with the proper respect, awe, and wonder.

As Thorn climbed a thousand or more feet above the rat-nest-city, Saphira spared a quick glance around to make sure that partner-of-her-heart-and-mind-Eragon was nowhere near the black-shrike-thorn-cave. She did not want to hurt him by accident in the fight that was about to take place. He was a fierce hunter, but he was small and

easily squished.

She was still working to unravel the dark-echoing-painful-memories Eragon had shared with her, but she understood enough of them to know that events had once again proved what she had long believed: that whenever she and her partner-of-heart-and-mind were apart, he ended up in trouble of one form or another. Eragon, she knew, would disagree, but his latest misadventure had done nothing to convince her otherwise, and she felt a perverse satisfaction in having been right.

Once Thorn reached an appropriate height, he twisted round and dove toward her, flames shooting from his open maw.

The fire she did not fear—Eragon's wards would shield her from it—but Thorn's massive weight and strength would allow him to quickly exhaust any spells designed to shield her from physical danger. To protect herself, she ducked and pressed her body flat against the cathedral, even as she twisted her neck and snapped at Thorn's pale underbelly.

A swirling wall of flames engulfed her, rumbling and roaring like a giant waterfall. The flames were so bright, she instinctively closed her inner eyelids, the same as she would when underwater, and then the light was no longer blinding.

The flames soon cleared, and as Thorn rushed past overhead, the tip of his thick, rib-bruising tail traced a line across the membrane of her right wing. The scratch bled, but not profusely, and she did not think it would cause her much difficulty while flying, painful though it was.

Thorn dove at her again and again, trying to bait her into taking to the air. She refused to budge, however, and after a few more passes, he tired of harrying her and landed on the other end of the black-shrike-thorn-cave, his huge wings outstretched for balance.

The entire building shook as Thorn dropped to all fours, and many of the gem-glass-picture-windows in the walls below shattered and fell tinkling to the ground. Thorn was bigger than her now, as a result of the egg-breaker-Galbatorix's meddling, but she was not intimidated. She had more experience than Thorn, and besides, she had trained with Glaedr, who had been larger than both she and Thorn combined. Also, Thorn dared not kill her … nor did she think he wanted to.

The red dragon snarled and stepped forward, the tips of his claws scraping against the tiles on the roof. She snarled in return and retreated several feet, until she could feel her tail pressing against the base of the spires that rose up like a wall at the front of the black-shrike-thorn-cave.

The tip of Thorn's tail twitched, and she knew he was about to pounce.

She drew in her breath and bathed him in a torrent of flickering

flames. Her task now was to keep Thorn and Murtagh from realizing that it was not Eragon who was sitting on her. To that end, she could either stay far enough away from Thorn that Murtagh would be unable to read the thoughts of the wolf-elf-in-Eragon's-shape, or she could attack often and ferociously enough that Murtagh would not have the opportunity—which would be difficult, as Murtagh was used to fighting from Thorn's back even while Thorn turned and twisted through the air. Still, they were close to the ground, and that would help her, for she preferred to attack. Always to attack.

"Is that the best you can do?" Murtagh shouted with a magically enhanced voice from within the ever-shifting cocoon of fire.

Even as the last of the flames died in her mouth, Saphira leaped toward Thorn. She struck him full in the chest, and their necks intertwined, heads slapping against one another as they each tried to fix their teeth around the other's throat. The force of the impact pushed Thorn backward off the black-shrike-thorn-cave, and he flailed his wings, buffeting Saphira as both he and she fell toward the ground.

They landed with a crash that split paving stones and jarred the nearby houses. Something cracked in Thorn's left wing-shoulder, and his back arched unnaturally as Murtagh's wards kept the dragon from crushing him flat.

Saphira could hear Murtagh cursing from underneath Thorn, and she decided that it would be best to move away before the angry two-legs-round-ears started casting spells.

She jumped up, kicking Thorn in the belly as she did so, and alit on the peak of the house behind the red dragon. The building was too weak to support her, so she took flight again and, just for good measure, set the row of buildings on fire.

Let them deal with that, she thought, satisfied, as the flames gnawed hungrily at the wooden structures.

Returning to the black-shrike-thorn-cave, she slipped her claws under the tiles and began to tear open the roof, ripping it apart the same as she had ripped apart the roof of the castle in Durza-Gil'ead. Only now she was bigger. Now she was stronger. And the blocks of stone seemed to weigh no more than pebbles did to Eragon. The blood-mad-priests who worshipped within had hurt the partner-of-her-heart-and-mind, had hurt dragon-blood-elf-Arya, young-face-old-mind-Angela, and the werecat Solembum—he of the many names—and they had killed Wyrden. For that, Saphira was determined to destroy the black-shrike-thorn-cave in revenge.

Within seconds, she opened a gaping hole in the ceiling of the building. She filled the interior with a burst of flame, then hooked her claws into the ends of the brass pipes of the wind organ and pulled

them free of the rear wall of the cathedral. They fell clanging and crashing onto the pews below.

Thorn roared, and then he sprang up from the street into the air above the black-shrike-thorn-cave and hung there, flapping heavily to maintain his position. He appeared as a featureless black silhouette against the wall of flames rising from the houses behind him, save for his translucent wings, which glowed orange and crimson.

He lunged toward her, reaching out with his serrated claws.

Saphira waited until the last possible moment; then she leaped to the side, off the black-shrike-thorn-cave, and Thorn rammed headfirst into the base of the cathedral's central spire. The tall-hole-ridden-stone-spike shuddered under the impact, and the very top of it—an ornate golden rod—toppled over and plunged more than four hundred feet to the square below.

Roaring with frustration, Thorn struggled to right himself. His hindquarters slid into the opening Saphira had torn in the roof, and he scrabbled against the tiles as he tried to claw his way back out.

While he did, Saphira flew to the front of the black-shrike-thorn-cave and positioned herself on the opposite side of the spire Thorn had collided with.

She gathered her strength, then batted the spire with her right forepaw.

Statues and carved decorations shattered underneath her foot; clouds of dust clogged her nostrils; and bits of stone and mortar rained down upon the square. The spire held, though, so she struck it again.

Thorn's bellowing took on a frantic note as he realized what she was doing, and he strove even harder to pull himself free.

On Saphira's third blow, the tall-stone-spike cracked at the base and, with agonizing slowness, collapsed backward, falling toward the roof. Thorn only had time to utter a furious snarl, and then the tower of rubble landed on top of him, knocking him down into the shell of the ruined building and burying him under piles of rubble.

The sound of the spire smashing to pieces echoed across the whole of the rat-nest-city, like a clap of rolling thunder.

Saphira snarled in response, this time with a sense of savage victory. Thorn would dig himself out soon enough, but until then, he was at her mercy.

Tilting her wings, she circled the black-shrike-thorn-cave. As she passed along the sides of the building, she swung at the fluted buttresses that supported the walls, demolishing them one at a time. The blocks of stone tumbled to the ground, creating an unpleasant din.

When she had removed all the buttressess, the unsupported walls began to sway and bulge outward. Thorn's efforts to extricate himself

only worsened the situation, and after a few seconds, the walls gave way. The entire structure collapsed with an avalanche-like rumble, and a huge plume of dust billowed upward.

Saphira crowed with triumph; then she landed on her hind legs next to the mound of debris and proceeded to paint the blocks of stone with the hottest stream of fire she could summon forth. Flames were easy to deflect with magic, but deflecting actual heat required greater effort and energy. By forcing Murtagh to expend even more of his strength to keep Thorn and himself from being cooked alive, as well as whatever energy he was using to avoid being squished, she hoped to deplete his reserves enough that Eragon and the two-legs-pointed-ears might have a chance of defeating him.

While she breathed fire, the wolf-elf on her back chanted spells, though what they were for she did not know, nor did she particularly care. She trusted the two-legs. Whatever he was doing, she was sure it would help.

Saphira skittered backward as the blocks in the center of the mound exploded outward and, with a roar, Thorn lurched free of the rubble. His wings were crumpled like those of a stepped-on butterfly, and he was bleeding from several gashes along his legs and back.

He glared at her and snarled, his ruby eyes dark with battle rage. For the first time, she had truly angered him, and she could see that he was eager to tear at her flesh and taste her blood.

Good, she thought. Maybe he was not quite such a beaten-frightened-cur as she had assumed.

Murtagh reached into a pouch on his belt and removed a small round object. From experience, Saphira knew that it was enchanted and he would use it to heal Thorn's injuries.

Without waiting, she took flight, trying to gain as much altitude as possible before Thorn was able to set off in pursuit. She glanced down after a few wing beats and saw him rising toward her at a furious speed, a large-red-sharp-claw-sparrowhawk.

She twisted in the air and was just about to dive at him when, in the depths of her mind, she heard Eragon shout:

Saphira!

Alarmed, she continued to twist until she was aimed at the southern arch-gate of the city, where she had sensed Eragon's presence. She pulled in her wings as close as she dared and dropped in a steep angle toward the arch.

Thorn lunged at her as she plummeted past, and she knew without looking that he was following close behind.

And so the two of them raced toward the thin wall of the rat-nest-city, and the cool morning-air-off-water howled like a wounded wolf in Saphira's ears.

HAMMER AND HELM

At last! thought Roran as the Varden's horns sounded the advance.

He glanced at Dras-Leona and caught a glimpse of Saphira diving toward the dark mass of buildings, her scales blazing in the light of the rising sun. Below, Thorn stirred, like some great cat that had been sunning itself on a fence, and took off in pursuit.

A surge of energy coursed through Roran. The time for battle had finally arrived, and he was eager to be done with it. He spared a quick thought of concern for Eragon, then pushed himself off the log where he was sitting and trotted over to join the rest of the men as they gathered in a wide rectangular formation.

Roran glanced up and down the ranks, checking that the troops were ready. They had been waiting for most of the night, and the men were tired, but he knew that fear and excitement would soon clear their minds. Roran was tired as well, but he paid it no mind; he could sleep when the battle was over. Until then, his main concern was keeping his men and himself alive.

He did wish he had time for a cup of hot tea, though, to help settle his stomach. He had eaten something bad for dinner and had been racked with cramps and nausea ever since. Still, the discomfort was not enough to prevent him from fighting. Or so he hoped.

Satisfied with the state of his men, Roran pulled on his helm, pushing it down over his quilted arming cap. Then he drew his hammer and slipped his left arm through the straps on his shield.

"At your command," said Horst, walking up to him.

Roran nodded. He had chosen the smith as his second in command, a decision that Nasuada had accepted without dissent. Other than Eragon, there was no one Roran would rather have by his side. It was selfish of him, he knew—Horst had a newborn child, and the Varden needed his metalworking skills—but Roran could not think of anyone else as well suited for the job. Horst had not seemed especially pleased by the promotion, but neither had he seemed upset. Instead, he had gone about organizing Roran's battalion with the calm assurance and competency that Roran knew he possessed.

The horns sounded again, and Roran lifted his hammer over his head. "Forward!" he shouted.

He took the lead as the many hundreds of men started off, accompanied on either side by the Varden's four other battalions.

As the warriors trotted across the open fields that separated them

from Dras-Leona, cries of alarm rang out in the city. Bells and horns sounded a moment later, and soon the whole city was filled with an angry clamor as the defenders roused themselves. Adding to the commotion were the most terrible roars and crashes from the center of the city, where the two dragons were fighting. Occasionally, Roran saw one or another of them appear above the tops of the buildings, the dragon's hide bright and sparkling, but for the most part, the two giants remained hidden from sight.

The maze of ramshackle buildings that surrounded the city walls quickly drew near. The narrow, gloomy streets looked ominous and foreboding to Roran. It would be easy for the Empire's soldiers—or even the citizens of Dras-Leona—to ambush them within the twisting passageways. Fighting in such close quarters would be even more brutal, confusing, and messy than normal. If it came to that, Roran knew that few of his men would escape unscathed.

As he moved into the shadows beneath the eaves of the first line of hovels, a hard knot of unease settled in Roran's gut, exacerbating his queasiness. He licked his lips, feeling sick.

Eragon had better open that gate, he thought. *If not … we'll be stuck out here like so many lambs penned up for slaughter*.

AND THE WALLS FELL ...

The sound of crashing masonry caused Eragon to pause and look back.

Between the peaks of two distant houses, he saw an empty space where the barbed spire of the cathedral used to be. In its place, a column of dust billowed toward the clouds above, like a pillar of white smoke.

Eragon smiled to himself, proud of Saphira. When it came to spreading chaos and destruction, dragons were without equal. *Go on*, he thought. *Smash it to pieces! Bury their holy places under a thousand feet of stone!*

Then he resumed trotting down the dark, winding cobblestone street, along with Arya, Angela, and Solembum. There were a number of people already in the streets: merchants going to open their shops, night watchmen on their way to bed, drunk noblemen just emerging from their revels, vagrants sleeping in doorways, as well as soldiers running pell-mell toward the city walls.

All of the people, even those who were running, kept looking in the direction of the cathedral as the noise of the two dragons fighting rumbled through the city. Everyone—from the sore-ridden beggars to the hardened soldiers to the richly dressed nobles—appeared terrified, and none of them gave Eragon or his companions so much as a second glance.

It helped, Eragon supposed, that he and Arya could pass for ordinary humans on brief inspection.

At Eragon's insistence, Arya had deposited the unconscious novitiate in an alleyway a fair distance from the cathedral. "I promised we'd take him with us," Eragon had explained, "but I never said how far. He can find his own way from here." Arya had acquiesced and seemed relieved to be rid of the novitiate's weight.

As the four of them hurried down the street, a strange sense of familiarity came over Eragon. His last visit to Dras-Leona had ended in much the same way: with him running between the dirty, close-set buildings, hoping to reach one of the city's gates before the Empire found him. Only this time he had more to fear than just the Ra'zac.

He glanced toward the cathedral again. All Saphira had to do was keep Murtagh and Thorn busy for another few minutes, and then it would be too late for either of them to stop the Varden. However, minutes could be like hours during a battle, and Eragon was acutely aware of how fast the balance of power could change.

Hold fast! he thought, though he did not send his words to Saphira, lest he distract her or give away his position. *Just a little longer!*

The streets grew ever narrower as they approached the city wall, and the overhanging buildings—houses mostly—blocked out everything but a thin strip of the azure sky. Sewage lay stagnant in the gutters along the edges of the buildings; Eragon and Arya used their sleeves to mask their noses and mouths. The stench seemed not to affect the herbalist, although Solembum growled and whipped his tail in annoyance.

A flicker of movement on the roof of a nearby building caught Eragon's attention, but whatever caused it had vanished by the time he looked. He continued to gaze upward and, after a few moments, began to pick out certain odd sights: a patch of white against the soot-coated bricks of a chimney; strange pointed shapes outlined against the morning sky; a small oval spot, the size of a coin, that gleamed firelike in the shadows.

With a shock, he realized that the rooftops were lined with dozens of werecats, all in their animal form. The werecats ran from building to building, watching silently from above as Eragon and his companions threaded their way through the dim maze of the city.

Eragon knew that the elusive shapeshifters would not deign to help except in the most desperate of circumstances—they wished to keep their involvement with the Varden a secret from Galbatorix for as long as possible—but he found it heartening to have them so close.

The street ended at an intersection of five other lanes. Eragon consulted with Arya and the herbalist; then they decided to take the path opposite theirs and continue in the same direction.

A hundred feet ahead, the street they had chosen took a sharp turn and opened onto the square that lay before Dras-Leona's southern gate.

Eragon stopped.

Hundreds of soldiers stood gathered before the gate. The men milled about in seeming confusion as they donned weapons and armor, and their commanders bellowed orders at them. The golden thread stitched onto the soldiers' crimson tunics glittered as they rushed to and fro.

The presence of the soldiers dismayed Eragon, but he was even more dismayed to see that the city's defenders had piled a huge mound of rubble against the inside of the gates, to keep the Varden from battering them in.

Eragon swore. The mound was so large, it would take a team of fifty men several days to clear it away. Saphira could dig the gates free in a few minutes, but Murtagh and Thorn would never give her the opportunity.

We need another distraction, he thought. What that distraction should be, however, eluded him. *Saphira!* he cried, casting his thoughts out toward her. She heard him, of that he was sure, but he had no time to explain the situation to her, for at that very moment, one of the soldiers stopped and pointed at Eragon and his companions.

"Rebels!"

Eragon tore Brisingr from its scabbard and sprang forward before the rest of the soldiers could heed the man's warning. He had no other choice. To retreat would be to abandon the Varden to the mercies of the Empire. Besides, he could not leave Saphira to deal with both the wall *and* the soldiers by herself.

He shouted as he leaped, as did Arya, who joined him in his mad charge. Together they cut their way into the midst of the surprised soldiers. For a few brief moments, the men were so bewildered, several did not seem to realize Eragon was their foe until he had stabbed them.

Flights of arrows arced down into the square from the bowmen stationed on the parapet. A handful of the shafts bounced off Eragon's wards. The rest killed or injured the Empire's own men.

Fast as he was, Eragon could not block all of the swords and spears and daggers poking at him. He could feel his strength ebbing at an alarming rate as his magic repelled the attacks. Unless he could win free of the press, the soldiers would end up exhausting him to the point where he could no longer fight.

With a ferocious war cry, he spun in a circle, holding Brisingr close to his waist as he scythed down all the soldiers standing within reach.

The iridescent blue blade cut through bone and flesh as if they were equally insubstantial. Blood trailed from the tip in long, twisting ribbons that slowly separated into glistening drops, like orbs of polished coral, while the men he cut doubled over, clutching at their bellies as they attempted to hold closed their wounds.

Every detail seemed bright and hard-edged, as if sculpted from glass. Eragon could make out individual hairs in the beard of the swordsman in front of him. He could count the drops of sweat that beaded the skin below the man's eyes, and he could have pointed to every stain, scuff, and tear in and on the swordsman's outfit.

The noise of combat was painfully loud to his sensitive ears, but Eragon felt a deep sense of calm. He was not immune to the fears that had troubled him before, but they did not waken quite so easily, and he fought better because of it.

He completed his spin and was just moving toward the swordsman when Saphira swooped past overhead. Her wings were pulled tight against her body, and they fluttered like leaves in a gale. As she passed by, a blast of wind tousled Eragon's hair and pressed him

toward the ground.

An instant later, Thorn followed Saphira, teeth bared, flames boiling in his open maw. The two dragons hurtled a half mile beyond Dras-Leona's yellow mud wall; then they looped around and began to race back.

From outside the walls, Eragon heard a loud cheer. *The Varden must be almost to the gates*.

A patch of skin on his left forearm burned as if someone had poured hot fat on it. He hissed and shook his arm, but the feeling persisted. Then he saw a blotch of blood soaking through his tunic. He glanced back at Saphira. It had to be dragon blood, but he could not tell whose.

As the dragons approached, Eragon took advantage of the soldiers' momentary daze to kill three more. Then the rest of the men regained their wits, and the battle resumed in earnest.

A soldier with a battle-ax stepped in front of Eragon and started to swing at him. Halfway through the stroke, Arya dispatched the man with a slash from behind, nearly cutting him in twain.

With a quick nod, Eragon acknowledged her help. By unspoken agreement, they stood back to back and faced the soldiers together.

He could feel Arya panting as hard as he was. Though they were stronger and faster than most humans, there was a limit to their endurance, a limit to their resources. They had already killed dozens, but hundreds remained, and Eragon knew that reinforcements would soon arrive from elsewhere in Dras-Leona.

"What now?" he shouted, parrying a spear jabbed at his thigh.

"Magic!" Arya replied.

As Eragon fended off the soldiers' attacks, he began to recite every spell he could think of that might kill their enemies.

Another gust of wind ruffled his hair, and a cool shadow swept over him as Saphira circled above, dissipating her excess speed. She flared her wings and started to drop toward the battlements of the wall.

Before she could land, Thorn caught up with her. The red dragon dove, breathing a jet of flame over a hundred feet long. Saphira roared with frustration and veered away from the wall as she flapped quickly to gain altitude. The two dragons spiraled around each other as they climbed into the sky, biting and clawing with furious abandon.

Seeing Saphira in danger only reinforced Eragon's determination. He increased the speed with which he spoke, chanting the words of the ancient language as quickly as he could without mispronunciation. But no matter what he tried, neither his spells nor Arya's had any effect on the soldiers.

Then Murtagh's voice boomed out of the sky, like the voice of a cloud-scraping giant: "Those men are under *my* protection, Brother!"

Eragon looked up and saw Thorn plummeting toward the square. The red dragon's sudden change in direction had caught Saphira unawares. She still hung high above the city, a dark blue shape against the lighter blue of the sky.

They know, Eragon thought, and dread punctured his earlier calm.

He lowered his gaze and swept it over the throng. More and more soldiers were streaming out of the streets along either side of Dras-Leona's wall. The herbalist was backed up against one of the bordering houses, throwing glass vials with one hand and swinging Tinkledeath with the other. The vials released clouds of green vapor when they broke, and any soldiers caught in the miasma fell to the ground, clutching their throats and thrashing as little brown mushrooms sprang up on every inch of exposed skin. Behind Angela, upon a flat-topped garden wall, crouched Solembum. The werecat used his vantage point to claw at the soldiers' faces and pull off their helms, distracting them as they attempted to close with the herbalist. Both he and Angela looked beleaguered, and Eragon doubted they would be able to hold out much longer.

Nothing Eragon saw gave him hope. He turned his eyes back toward the immense bulk of Thorn even as the red dragon filled his wings with air and slowed his descent.

"We have to leave!" Arya shouted.

Eragon hesitated. It would be a simple matter to lift Arya, Angela, Solembum, and himself over the wall, to where the Varden would be waiting. But if they fled, the Varden would be no better off than before. Their army could not afford to wait any longer: after another few days, their supplies would run out and the men would begin to desert. Once that happened, Eragon knew they would never again succeed in uniting all the races against Galbatorix.

Thorn's body and wings blotted out the sky, casting the area in ruddy darkness and hiding Saphira from view. Globules of blood, each the size of Eragon's fist, dripped from Thorn's neck and legs, and more than one of the soldiers cried out in pain as the liquid scalded them.

"Eragon! Now!" shouted Arya. She grabbed his arm and pulled, but still he held his ground, unwilling to admit defeat.

Arya pulled harder, forcing Eragon to look down in order to stay on his feet. As he did, his eye fell on the third finger of his right hand, where he wore Aren.

He had hoped to save the energy contained within the ring for the day when he might finally confront Galbatorix. It was a meager amount compared with what the king had undoubtedly accumulated during his long years on the throne, but it was the greatest store of power Eragon possessed, and he knew he would not have the chance to gather its equal before the Varden reached Urû'baen, if indeed they

did. Also, it was one of the few things Brom had left him. For both those reasons he was reluctant to use any of the energy.

Nevertheless, he could think of no alternative.

The pool of energy within Aren had always seemed enormous to Eragon; now he wondered if it would be enough for what he intended.

At the edge of his vision, he saw Thorn reaching toward him with talons as large as a man, and some small part of him screamed to run away before the monster above caught him and ate him alive.

Eragon drew in his breath, then he breached Aren's precious hoard and shouted, "Jierda!"

The torrent of energy that flowed through him was greater than any he had ever experienced; it was like an ice-cold river that burned and tingled with almost unbearable intensity. The sensation was both agonizing and ecstatic.

At his command, the huge pile of rubble blocking the gates erupted toward the sky in a solid pillar of earth and stone. The rubble struck Thorn in the side, shredding his wing and knocking the screeching dragon beyond the outskirts of Dras-Leona. Then the pillar spread outward, forming a loose canopy over the southern half of the city.

The launch of the rubble shook the square and drove everyone to the ground. Eragon landed on his hands and knees and remained there, staring upward as he maintained the spell.

When the energy in the ring was almost depleted, he whispered, "Gánga raehta." Like a dark thunderhead caught in a gale, the plume drifted to the right, in the direction of the docks and Leona Lake. Eragon continued to push the rubble away from the center of the city for as long as he could; then, as the last remnants of the energy coursed through him, he ended the spell.

With a deceptively soft sound, the cloud of debris collapsed inward. The heavier elements—the stones, the broken pieces of wood, and the clumps of dirt—fell straight down, pummeling the surface of the lake, while the smaller particles remained suspended in the air, forming a large brown smudge that slowly drifted farther west.

Where the rubble had been was now an empty crater. Broken paving stones edged the hollow, like a circle of shattered teeth. The gates to the city hung open, warped and splintered, damaged beyond repair.

Through the off-kilter gates, Eragon saw the Varden massed in the streets beyond. He released his breath and allowed his head to fall forward in exhaustion. *It worked*, he thought, dumbfounded. Then he slowly pushed himself upright, vaguely aware that the danger had not yet passed.

While the soldiers struggled to their feet, the Varden poured into Dras-Leona, shouting war cries and banging their swords on their

shields. A few seconds later, Saphira landed among them, and what had been about to turn into a pitched battle became a rout as the soldiers scrambled to save themselves.

Eragon glimpsed Roran among the sea of men and dwarves but lost sight of him before he could catch his cousin's attention.

Arya …? Eragon turned and was alarmed to find that she was not next to him. He broadened his search and soon spotted her halfway across the square, surrounded by twenty or so soldiers. The men were holding her arms and legs with grim tenacity as they tried to drag her away. Arya freed one of her hands and struck a man in the chin, breaking his neck, but another soldier took his place before she could swing again.

Eragon sprinted toward her. In his exhaustion, he let his sword arm swing too low, and the tip of Brisingr caught on the mail hauberk of a fallen soldier, tearing the hilt from his grip. The sword clattered to the ground, and Eragon hesitated, not sure if he should turn back, but then he saw two of the soldiers stabbing at Arya with daggers, and he redoubled his speed.

Just as he reached her, Arya shook off her attackers for a moment. The men lunged with outstretched hands, but before they could recapture her, Eragon struck one man in the side, driving his fist into the man's rib cage. A soldier with a pair of waxed mustachios stabbed at Eragon's chest. Eragon caught the blade with his bare hands, ripped it from the soldier's grip, broke the sword in two, and eviscerated the soldier with the stump of his own weapon. Within seconds, all the soldiers who had threatened Arya lay dead or dying. Those Eragon had not killed, Arya slew.

Afterward, Arya said, "I would have been able to defeat them on my own."

Eragon leaned over, resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. "I know…." He nodded toward her right hand—the one she had injured pulling through the iron cuff—which she held curled against her leg. "Consider it my thanks."

"A grim sort of present." But she said it with a faint smile on her lips.

Most of the soldiers had fled the square; those who remained were backed against the houses, hemmed in by the Varden. Even as Eragon looked about, he saw scores of Galbatorix's men throw down their weapons and surrender.

Together he and Arya retrieved his sword, and then they walked to the yellow mud wall, where the ground was relatively clear of filth. Sitting against the wall, they watched the Varden march into the city.

Saphira soon joined them. She nuzzled Eragon, who smiled and scratched her snout. She hummed in response. *You did it*, she said.

We did it, he replied.

Up on her back, Blödhgarm loosened the straps that held his legs in Saphira's saddle, then slid down her side. For a moment, Eragon had the supremely disorienting experience of meeting himself. He immediately decided that he disliked how his hair curled at the temples.

Blödhgarm uttered an indistinct word in the ancient language; then his shape shimmered like a heat reflection and he was once again himself: tall, furred, yellow-eyed, long-eared, and sharp-toothed. He appeared neither elf nor human, but in his tense, hard-set expression, Eragon detected the stamp of sorrow and anger combined.

"Shadeslayer," he said, and bowed to both Arya and Eragon. "Saphira has told me of Wyrden's fate. I—"

Before he could finish his sentence, the ten remaining elves under Blödhgarm's command emerged from within the press of the Varden and hurried over, swords in hand.

"Shadeslayer!" they exclaimed. "Argetlam! Brightscales!"

Eragon greeted them tiredly and strove to answer their questions, even though he would rather have done nothing at all.

Then a roar cut through their conversation, and a shadow fell across them, and Eragon looked up to see Thorn—whole and sound once more—balancing on a column of air high above.

Eragon cursed and scrambled onto Saphira, drawing Brisingr, while Arya, Blödhgarm, and the other elves formed a protective circle around her. Their combined might was formidable, but whether it would be enough to fend off Murtagh, Eragon did not know.

As one, the Varden gazed upward. Brave they might be, but even the bravest might shrink before a dragon.

"Brother!" shouted Murtagh, his augmented voice so loud that Eragon covered his ears. "I'll have blood from you for the injuries you caused Thorn! Take Dras-Leona if you want. It means nothing to Galbatorix. But you've not seen the last of us, Eragon Shadeslayer, that I swear."

And then Thorn turned and flew north over Dras-Leona, and soon vanished within the veil of smoke that rose from the houses burning next to the ruined cathedral.

By the Banks of Lake Leona

Eragon strode through the darkened camp, his jaw set and his fists clenched.

He had spent the last few hours in conference with Nasuada, Orik, Arya, Garzhvog, King Orrin, and their various advisers, discussing the day's events and assessing the Varden's current situation. Near the end of the meeting, they had contacted Queen Islanzadí to inform her that the Varden had captured Dras-Leona, as well as to tell her of Wyrden's death.

Eragon had not enjoyed explaining to the queen how one of her oldest and most powerful spellcasters had died, nor had the queen been pleased to receive the news. Her initial reaction had been one of such sadness, it surprised him; he had not thought she knew Wyrden that well.

Talking with Islanzadí had left Eragon in a foul mood, for it had reinforced for him how random and unnecessary Wyrden's death had been. *If I had been in the lead, I would have been the one impaled on those spikes*, he thought as he continued his search through the camp. *Or it could have been Arya*.

Saphira knew what he was up to, but she had decided to return to the space by his tent where she normally slept, for as she said, *If I go tromping up and down the rows of tents, I'll keep the Varden awake, and they have earned their rest*. Their minds remained joined, though, and he knew if he needed her, she would be at his side within seconds.

To preserve his night vision, Eragon avoided going near the bonfires and torches that burned before many of the tents, but he made sure to inspect each pool of light for his prey.

As he hunted, it occurred to him that she might elude him entirely. His feelings for her were far from friendly, and that would allow her to sense his location and avoid him, if she wanted. Yet he did not think she was a coward. Despite her youth, she was one of the hardest people he had met, human, elf, or dwarf.

At last he spotted Elva sitting in front of a small, nondescript tent, weaving a cat's cradle by the light of a dying fire. Next to her sat the girl's caretaker, Greta, a pair of long wooden knitting needles darting in her gnarled hands.

For a moment, Eragon stood and watched. The old woman appeared more content than he had ever seen her, and he found himself reluctant to disturb her repose.

Then Elva said, “Do not lose your nerve now, Eragon. Not when you have come so far.” Her voice was curiously subdued, as if she had been crying, but when she looked up, her gaze was fierce and challenging.

Greta appeared startled when Eragon made his way into the light; she gathered up her yarn and needles and bowed, saying, “Greetings, Shadeslayer. May I offer you anything to eat or drink?”

“No, thank you.” Eragon stopped before Elva and stared down at the small-framed girl. She stared back at him for a moment, then returned to weaving the loop of yarn between her fingers. Her violet eyes, he noted with a strange twist in his stomach, were the same color as the amethyst crystals the priests of Helgrind had used to kill Wyrden and imprison Arya and himself.

Eragon knelt and grabbed the tangle of yarn about the middle, stopping Elva’s motion.

“I know what you intend to say,” she stated.

“That may be,” he growled, “but I’m still going to say it. You killed Wyrden—you killed him as surely as if you had stabbed him yourself. If you had come with us, you could have warned him about the trap. You could have warned all of us. I watched Wyrden die, and I watched Arya tear half her hand off, because of *you*. Because of your anger. Because of your stubbornness. Because of your pride.… Hate me if you will, but don’t you dare make anyone else suffer for it. If you want the Varden to lose, then go join Galbatorix and be done with it. Well, is that what you want?”

Elva slowly shook her head.

“Then I don’t ever want to hear that you’ve refused to help Nasuada for no other reason than spite, else there will be a reckoning between you and me, Elva Farseer, and it’s not one you would win.”

“You could never defeat me,” she mumbled, her voice thick with emotion.

“You might be surprised. You have a valuable talent, Elva. The Varden needs your help, now more than ever. I don’t know how we’re going to defeat the king at Urû’baen, but if you stand with us—if you turn your skill against him—we might just have a chance.”

Elva seemed to struggle with herself. Then she nodded, and Eragon saw that she was crying, tears overflowing from her eyes. He took no pleasure in her distress, but he felt a certain amount of satisfaction that his words had affected her so strongly.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He released the yarn and stood. “Your apologies cannot bring back Wyrden. Do better in the future, and perhaps you can atone for your mistake.”

He nodded to the old woman Greta, who had remained silent

throughout their exchange, and then he strode out of the light and back between the dark rows of tents.

You did well, said Saphira. *She will act differently from now on, I think.*

I hope so.

Upbraiding Elva had been an unusual experience for Eragon. He remembered when Brom and Garrow had chastised him for making mistakes, and to now find himself the one doing the chastising left him feeling … different … more mature.

And so the wheel turns, he thought.

He took his time walking through the camp, enjoying the cool breeze wafting off the lake hidden within the shadows.

* * *

After the capture of Dras-Leona, Nasuada had surprised everyone by insisting that the Varden not stay the night in the city. She had given no explanation for her decision, but Eragon suspected it was because the long delay at Dras-Leona had left her overeager to resume their journey to Urû'baen, and also because she had no desire to linger within the city, where any number of Galbatorix's agents might be lurking.

Once the Varden had secured the streets, Nasuada detailed a number of warriors to remain in the city, under the command of Martland Redbeard. Then the Varden had left Dras-Leona and marched north, following the shore of the neighboring lake. Along the way, a constant stream of messengers had ridden back and forth between the Varden and Dras-Leona as Martland and Nasuada conferred about the numerous issues attending the governance of the city.

Before the Varden had departed, Eragon, Saphira, and Blödhgarm's spellcasters had returned to the ruined cathedral, retrieved Wyrden's body, and searched for the belt of Beloth the Wise. It had taken only a few minutes for Saphira to pull aside the jumble of stone that blocked the entrance to the underground chambers and for Blödhgarm and the other elves to fetch Wyrden. But no matter how long they looked, and no matter what spells they used, they could not find the belt.

The elves had carried Wyrden on their shields out of the city, to a knoll next to a small creek. There they buried him while singing several aching laments in the ancient language—songs so sad that Eragon had wept without restraint and all the birds and animals within hearing had stopped and listened.

The silver-haired elf woman Yaela had knelt by the side of the grave, taken an acorn from the pouch on her belt, and planted it directly above Wyrden's chest. And then the twelve elves, Arya included, sang to the acorn, which took root and sprouted and grew

twining upward, reaching and grasping toward the sky like a clutch of hands.

When the elves had finished, the leafy oak stood twenty feet high, with long strings of green flowers at the end of every branch.

Eragon had thought it was the nicest burial he had ever attended. He much preferred it to the dwarves' practice of entombing their dead in hard, cold stone deep below the ground, and he liked the idea of one's body providing food for a tree that might live for hundreds of years more. If he had to die, he decided that he would want an apple tree planted over him, so that his friends and family could eat the fruit born of his body.

The concept had amused him tremendously, albeit in a rather morbid manner.

Besides searching the cathedral and retrieving Wyrden's body, Eragon had also done one other thing of note in Dras-Leona after its capture. He had, with Nasuada's approval, declared every slave within the city a free person, and he had personally gone to the manors and auction houses and cut loose many of the men, women, and children chained therein. The act had given him a great deal of satisfaction, and he hoped it would improve the lives of the people he had released.

As he drew near his tent, he saw Arya waiting for him by the entrance. Eragon quickened his stride, but before he could greet her, someone called out: "Shadeslayer!"

Eragon turned and saw one of Nasuada's pages trotting toward them. "Shadeslayer," the boy repeated, somewhat out of breath, and bowed to Arya. "Lady Nasuada would like you to come to her tent an hour before dawn tomorrow morning, in order to confer with her. What shall I tell her, Lady Arya?"

"You may tell her I will be there when she wishes," Arya replied, inclining her head slightly.

The page bowed again, and then he spun around and ran off in the direction from which he had come.

"It's somewhat confusing, now that we've both killed a Shade," Eragon observed with a faint grin.

Arya smiled as well, the motion of her lips almost invisible in the darkness. "Would you rather I had let Varaug live?"

"No … no, not at all."

"I could have kept him as a slave, to do my bidding."

"Now you're teasing me," he said.

She made a soft sound of amusement.

"Perhaps I should call you Princess instead—Princess Arya." He said it again, enjoying the feel of the words in his mouth.

"You should not call me that," she said, more serious. "I am not a

princess."

"Why not? Your mother is a queen. How can you not be a princess? Her title is *dröttning*, yours is *dröttningu*. One means 'queen,' and the other—"

"Does not mean 'princess,' " she said. "Not exactly. There is no true equivalent in this language."

"But if your mother were to die or step down from her throne, you would take her place as ruler of your people, wouldn't you?"

"It is not that simple."

Arya did not seem inclined to explain further, so Eragon said, "Would you like to go in?"

"I would," she said.

Eragon pulled open the entrance to his tent, and Arya ducked inside. After a quick glance at Saphira—who lay curled up nearby, breathing heavily as she drifted off to sleep—Eragon followed.

He went to the lantern that hung from the pole in the center of the tent and murmured, "Istalrí," not using *brisingr*, so as to avoid igniting his sword. The resulting flame filled the interior with a warm, steady light that made the sparsely furnished army tent seem almost cozy.

They sat, and Arya said, "I found this among Wyrden's belongings, and I thought we might enjoy it together." From the side pocket of her pants, she produced a carved wooden flask about the size of Eragon's hand. She handed it to him.

Eragon unstoppered the flask and sniffed at the mouth. He raised his eyebrows as he smelled the strong, sweet scent of liqueur.

"Is it faelnirv?" he asked, naming the drink the elves made from elderberries and, Narí had claimed, moonbeams.

Arya laughed, and her voice rang like well-tempered steel. "It is, but Wyrden added something else to it."

"Oh?"

"The leaves of a plant that grows in the eastern part of Du Weldenvarden, along the shores of Röna Lake."

He frowned. "Do I know the name of this plant?"

"Probably, but it's of no importance. Go on: drink. You'll like it; I promise."

And she laughed again, which gave him pause. He had never seen her like this before. She seemed fey and reckless, and with a jolt of surprise, he realized she was already rather tipsy.

Eragon hesitated, and he wondered if Glaedr was watching them. Then he lifted the flask to his lips and swallowed a mouthful of the faelnirv. The liqueur tasted different than he was accustomed to; it had a potent, musky flavor similar to the scent of a marten or a stoat.

Eragon grimaced and fought the urge to gag as the faelnirv burned a track down his throat. He took another, smaller sip and then passed

the flask back to Arya, who drank as well.

The past day had been one of blood and horror. He had spent most of it fighting, killing, almost being killed himself, and he needed a release.… He needed to forget. The tension he felt was too deep-seated to ease with mental tricks alone. Something else was required. Something that came from outside of himself, even as the violence he had participated in had, for the most part, been external, not internal.

When Arya returned the flask to him, he downed a large quaff and then chuckled, unable to help himself.

Arya raised an eyebrow and regarded him with a thoughtful, if merry, expression. "What amuses you so?"

"This … Us … The fact that we're still alive, and *they*"—he waved his hand in the direction of Dras-Leona—"aren't. Life amuses me, life and death." A warm glow had already begun to form in his belly, and the tips of his ears had started to tingle.

"It is nice to be alive," said Arya.

They continued to pass the flask back and forth until it was empty, at which point Eragon fit the stopper back into the mouth of the container—a task that required several attempts, for his fingers felt thick and clumsy, and the cot seemed to tilt underneath him, like the deck of a ship at sea.

He gave the empty flask to Arya, and as she took it, he grasped her hand, her right hand, and turned it toward the light. The skin was once more smooth and unblemished. No sign of her injury remained. "Blödhgarm healed you?" said Eragon.

Arya nodded, and he released her. "Mostly. I have full use of my hand again." She demonstrated by opening and closing it several times. "But there is still a patch of skin by the base of my thumb where I have no feeling." She pointed with her left index finger.

Eragon reached out and lightly touched the area. "Here?"

"Here," she said, and moved his hand a bit to the right.

"And Blödhgarm wasn't able do anything about it?"

She shook her head. "He tried a half-dozen spells, but the nerves refuse to rejoin." She made a dismissive motion. "It's of no consequence. I can still wield a sword and I can still draw a bow. That is all that matters."

Eragon hesitated, then said, "You know … how grateful I am for what you did—what you tried to do. I'm only sorry it left you with a permanent mark. If I could have prevented it somehow …"

"Do not feel bad because of it. It's impossible to go through life unscathed. Nor should you want to. By the hurts we accumulate, we measure both our follies and our accomplishments."

"Angela said something similar about enemies—that if you didn't make them, you were a coward or worse."

Arya nodded. “There is some truth to that.”

They continued to talk and laugh as the night wore on. Instead of weakening, the effects of the altered faelnirv continued to strengthen. A giddy haze settled over Eragon, and he noticed that the pockets of shadow in the tent looked as if they were swirling, and strange, flashing lights—like those he normally saw when he closed his eyes at night—floated across his field of vision. The tips of his ears were burning fever-hot, and the skin on his back itched and crawled, as if ants were marching over it. Also, certain sounds had acquired a peculiar intensity—the rhythmic chirping of the lakeside insects, for example, and the crackle of the torch outside his tent; they dominated his hearing to the point where he had difficulty singling out any other noise.

Have I been poisoned? he wondered.

“What is it?” asked Arya, noticing his alarm.

He wet his mouth, which had become incredibly, painfully dry, and told her what he was experiencing.

Arya laughed and leaned back, her eyes heavy and half-lidded. “That is as it should be. The sensations will wear off by dawn. Until then, relax and allow yourself to enjoy them.”

Eragon struggled with himself for a moment as he debated whether to use a spell to clear his mind—if indeed he could—but then he decided to trust Arya and follow her advice.

As the world bent around him, it occurred to Eragon how dependent he was on his senses to determine what was real and what was not. He would have sworn that the flashing lights were there, though the rational part of his mind knew they were only faelnirv-induced apparitions.

He and Arya continued to talk, but their conversation became increasingly disjointed and incoherent. Nevertheless, Eragon was convinced that everything they said was of paramount importance, although he could not have explained why, nor could he remember what they had discussed only moments before.

Some time later, Eragon heard the low, throaty sound of a reed pipe being played somewhere in the camp. At first he thought he was imagining the lilting tones, but then he saw Arya cock her head and turn in the direction of the music, as if she too had noticed it.

Who was playing and why, Eragon could not tell. Nor did he care. It was as if the melody had sprung out of the blackness of the night itself, like a wind, lonely and forsaken.

He listened with his head tilted back and his eyelids nearly closed while fantastical images roiled within his mind, images that the faelnirv had induced but that the music shaped.

As it progressed, the melody grew ever more wild, and what had

been plaintive became urgent, and the notes trilled up and down in a manner so fast, so insistent, so complicated, so *alarming* that Eragon began to fear for the safety of the musician. To play that quickly and that skillfully seemed unnatural, even for an elf.

Arya laughed as the music reached a particularly fevered pitch, and she leaped to her feet and struck a pose, lifting her arms over her head. She stamped her foot against the ground and clapped her hands —once, twice, three times—and then, much to Eragon's astonishment, she began to dance. Her movements were slow at first, almost languorous, but soon her pace increased until she matched the frenzied beat of the music.

The music soon peaked, then began to gradually subside as the piper restated and resolved the themes of the melody. But before the music ceased, a sudden itch made Eragon grab his right hand and scratch at the palm. At the same moment, he felt a twinge in the back of his mind as one of his wards flared to life, warning him of some danger.

A second later, a dragon roared overhead.

Cold fear stabbed through Eragon.

The roar did not belong to Saphira.

Eragon grabbed Brisingr, and then he and Arya dashed from the tent.

Outside, Eragon staggered and fell to one knee as the ground seemed to pitch underneath him. He clutched at a tuft of grass, using it as an anchor while he waited for the dizziness to abate.

When he dared look up, he squinted. The light from the nearby torches was painfully bright; the flames swam before him like fish, as if detached from the oil-soaked rags that fed them.

Balance is gone, thought Eragon. *Can't trust my vision. Have to clear my mind. Have to—*

A patch of motion caught his eye, and he ducked. Saphira's tail swept over him, passing only inches above his head, then struck his tent and flattened it, breaking the wooden poles like so many dry twigs.

Saphira snarled, snapping at the empty air as she struggled to her feet. Then she paused, confused.

Little one, what—

A sound like a mighty wind interrupted her, and from out of the blackness of the sky, there emerged Thorn, red as blood and glittering like a million shifting stars. He landed close to Nasuada's pavilion, and the earth shook from the impact of his weight.

Eragon heard Nasuada's guards shouting; then Thorn swung his right forepaw across the ground, and half the shouts went silent.

From rigging strapped to the sides of the red dragon, several dozen soldiers leaped down and spread outward, stabbing into tents and cutting down the watchmen who ran at them.

Horns blared along the perimeter of the camp. At the same time, the sounds of combat erupted near their outer defenses, marking, Eragon thought, a secondary attack, from the north.

How many soldiers are there? he wondered. *Are we surrounded?* Panic blossomed within him so strongly that it almost overrode his sense of reason and sent him running blindly into the night. Only the knowledge that the faelnirv was responsible for his reaction held him in place.

He whispered a quick healing spell, hoping it might counteract the effects of the liqueur, but to no avail. Disappointed, he carefully stood, drew Brisingr, and joined Arya to stand shoulder to shoulder with her as five soldiers ran toward them. Eragon was not sure how he and Arya could fight them off. Not in their condition.

The men were less than twenty feet away when Saphira growled and slapped the ground with her tail, knocking the soldiers over. Eragon—who had sensed what Saphira was about to do—grabbed Arya, and she grabbed him, and by supporting each other, they were able to remain upright.

Then Blödhgarm and another elf, Laufin, sprinted out of the maze of tents and slew the five soldiers before they could regain their footing. The other elves followed close behind.

Another group of soldiers, this one over twenty strong, ran toward Eragon and Arya, almost as if the men knew where to find them.

The elves arranged themselves in a line in front of Eragon and Arya. But before the soldiers came within reach of the elves' swords, one of the tents burst open and Angela charged howling into the midst of the soldiers, catching them by surprise.

The herbalist was wearing a red nightgown, her curly hair was in disarray, and in each hand she wielded a wool comb. The combs were three feet long and had two rows of steel tines mounted at an angle on the ends. The tines were longer than Eragon's forearm and were sharpened to needle-like points—he knew that if you pricked yourself, you could catch blood poisoning from the unwashed wool they had been drawn through.

Two of the soldiers fell as Angela buried the wool combs in their sides, driving the tines right through their hauberks. The herbalist was more than a foot shorter than some of the men, but she showed no sign of fear as she bounded among them. To the contrary, she was the picture of ferocity, with her wild hair and her shouting and her dark-eyed expression.

The soldiers encircled Angela and closed in around her, hiding her from sight, and for a moment, Eragon feared they would overwhelm her.

Then, from elsewhere in the camp, he saw Solembum racing toward the knot of soldiers, the werecat's ears pressed flat against his skull. More werecats trailed him: twenty, thirty, forty—a whole pack, and all in their animal forms.

A cacophony of hisses, yowls, and screams filled the night as the werecats sprang upon the soldiers and pulled them to the ground, tearing at them with claws and teeth. The soldiers fought back as best they could, but they were no match for the large, shaggy cats.

The whole sequence, from Angela's appearance to the intervention of the werecats, transpired with such speed, Eragon barely had time to react. As the werecats swarmed the soldiers, he blinked and wet his parched mouth, feeling a sense of unreality about everything around him.

Then Saphira said, *Quick, onto my back*, and she crouched so he

could climb onto her.

"Wait," said Arya, and put a hand on his arm. She murmured a few phrases in the ancient language. An instant later, the distortion of Eragon's senses vanished and he again found himself in full command of his body.

He gave Arya a grateful glance, then tossed Brisingr's scabbard onto the remains of his tent, scrambled up Saphira's right foreleg, and settled into his usual position at the base of her neck. Without a saddle, the sharp edges of her scales dug into the insides of his legs, a feeling he well remembered from their first flight together.

"We need the Dauthdaert," he shouted down to Arya.

She nodded and ran toward her own tent, which was several hundred feet away, on the eastern side of the camp.

Another consciousness, not Saphira's, pressed against Eragon's mind, and he drew in his thoughts to protect himself. Then he realized the being was Glaedr, and he allowed the golden dragon past his guard.

I will help, said Glaedr. Behind his words, Eragon sensed a terrible, seething anger directed at Thorn and Murtagh, an anger that seemed powerful enough to burn the world to cinders. *Join your minds with me, Eragon, Saphira. And you as well, Blödhgarm, and you, Laufin, and the rest of your kind. Let me see with your eyes, and let me listen with your ears, so that I can advise you as to what to do, and so that I can lend you my strength when needed.*

Saphira leaped forward, half flying, half gliding over the rows of tents toward the huge ruby mass of Thorn. The elves followed below, killing what soldiers they encountered.

Saphira had the advantage of height, as Thorn was still on the ground. She angled toward him—intending, Eragon knew, to alight on Thorn's back and fix her jaws upon his neck—but as he saw her coming, the red dragon snarled and twisted to face her, crouching like a smaller dog confronting a larger one.

Eragon just had time to notice that Thorn's saddle was empty, and then the dragon reared and batted at Saphira with one of his thick, muscular forelegs. His heavy paw swung through the air with a loud rushing sound. In the gloom, his claws appeared startlingly white.

Saphira veered to the side, contorting her body to avoid the blow. The ground and the sky tilted around Eragon, and he found himself looking up at the camp as the tip of Saphira's right wing tore apart someone's tent.

The force of the turn tugged on Eragon, pulling him away from Saphira. Her scales started to slip out from between his legs. He clenched his thighs and tightened his hold on the spike in front of him, but Saphira's motion was too violent to withstand, and a second

later, his grip gave way and he found himself tumbling through the air, without a clear idea of which direction was up and which was down.

Even as he fell, he made sure to maintain his grasp on Brisingr and to keep the blade well away from his body; wards or no wards, the sword could still injure him, due to Rhunön's spellwork.

Little one!

"Letta!" Eragon shouted, and with a jolt, he stopped dead in the air, no more than ten feet above the ground. While the world seemed to keep spinning for another few seconds, he glimpsed Saphira's sparkling outline as she circled around to retrieve him.

Thorn bellowed and sprayed the rows of tents between him and Eragon with a layer of white-hot flames that leaped up toward the sky. Screams of agony swiftly followed as the men within burned to death.

Eragon raised a hand to shield his face. His magic protected him from serious injury, but the heat was uncomfortable. *I'm fine. Don't turn back*, he said, not only to Saphira but also to Glaedr and the elves. *You have to stop them. I'll meet you by Nasuada's pavilion*.

Saphira's disapproval was palpable, but she altered her course to resume her attack on Thorn.

Eragon released his spell and dropped to the ground. He landed lightly on the balls of his feet, then set off at a run between the burning tents, many of which were already collapsing, sending up pillars of orange sparks.

The smoke and the stench of burnt wool made it hard for Eragon to breathe. He coughed, and his eyes began to water, blurring the lower part of his vision.

Several hundred feet ahead, Saphira and Thorn tussled, two giants in the night. Eragon felt a sense of primal fear. What was he doing running *toward* them, toward a pair of snapping, snarling creatures, each larger than a house—larger than two houses in Thorn's case—and each with claws, fangs, spikes larger than his whole body? Even after the initial surge of fear subsided, a small amount of trepidation remained as he raced ahead.

He hoped Roran and Katrina were safe. Their tent was on the opposite side of the camp, but Thorn and the soldiers might turn in that direction at any moment.

"Eragon!"

Arya loped through the burning debris, carrying the Dauthdaert in her left hand. A faint green nimbus surrounded the barbed blade of the lance, although the glow was hard to see against the backdrop of flames. Trotting alongside her was Orik, who barreled through the tongues of fire as if they were no more dangerous than wisps of vapor. The dwarf was shirtless and helmetless. He held the ancient war

hammer Volund in one hand and a small round shield in the other. Blood smeared both ends of the hammer.

Eragon greeted them with a raised hand and a cry, glad to have his friends with him. When she caught up, Arya offered him the lance, but Eragon shook his head. “Keep it!” he said. “We’ll have a better chance of stopping Thorn if you use Niernen and I use Brisingr.”

With a soft thump, a sheath of rippling flame enveloped the blade of his sword. He bit off a curse and blocked the flow of energy to the weapon. The fire vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Arya nodded and tightened her grip on the lance. For the first time, Eragon wondered if, as an elf, she would be able to bring herself to kill a dragon. Then he put the thought aside. If there was one thing he knew about Arya, it was that she always did what was necessary, no matter how difficult.

Thorn clawed Saphira’s ribs, and Eragon gasped as he felt her pain through their bond. From Blödhgarm’s mind, he gathered that the elves were close to the dragons, busy fighting the soldiers. Not even they dared move any nearer to Saphira and Thorn, for fear of being crushed underfoot.

“Over there,” said Orik, and pointed with his hammer toward a cluster of soldiers moving through the rows of destroyed tents.

“Leave them,” said Arya. “We have to help Saphira.”

Orik grunted. “Right, then, off we go.”

The three of them dashed forward, but Eragon and Arya soon left Orik far behind. No dwarf could hope to keep up with them, not even one as strong and fit as Orik.

“Go on!” shouted Orik from behind. “I’ll follow as fast as I can!”

As Eragon dodged scraps of burning fabric that were floating through the air, he spotted Nar Garzhvog amid a knot of ten soldiers. The horned Kull appeared grotesque by the ruddy light of the flames; his lips were drawn back from his fangs, and the shadows on his heavy brow ridge gave his face a crude, brutal look, as if his skull had been hacked out of a boulder with a dull chisel. Fighting barehanded, he grabbed a soldier and tore him limb from limb as easily as Eragon might tear apart a roast chicken.

A few paces later, the burning tents ended. On the other side of the flames, all was confusion.

Blödhgarm and two of his spellcasters stood facing four black-robed men, who Eragon assumed were magicians of the Empire. Neither the men nor the elves stirred, though their faces displayed immense strain. Dozens of soldiers lay dead on the ground, but others still ran free, some bearing wounds so horrendous that Eragon knew at once the men were immune to pain.

He could not see the rest of the elves, but he could sense their

presence on the other side of Nasuada's red pavilion, which stood in the center of the havoc.

Groups of werecats chased soldiers back and forth throughout the clearing around the pavilion. King Halfpaw and his mate, Shadowhunter, led two of the groups; Solembum led a third.

Close to the pavilion stood the herbalist, dueling with a large, burly man—she fighting with her wool combs, he with a mace in one hand and a flail in the other. The two seemed fairly matched, despite their differences in sex, weight, height, reach, and equipment.

To Eragon's surprise, Elva was there as well, sitting on the end of a barrel. The witch-child had her arms wrapped around her stomach and appeared deathly ill, but she too was participating in the battle, albeit in her own unique way. Clustered before her were a dozen soldiers, and Eragon saw that she was speaking rapidly to them, her small mouth moving in a blur. As she spoke, each man reacted differently: one stood fixed in place, seemingly unable to move; one cringed and covered his face with his hands; one knelt and stabbed himself in the chest with a long dagger; another flung down his weapons and ran off through the camp; and still another babbled like a fool. None lifted their swords against her, and none went on to attack anyone else.

And looming above the mayhem, like two living mountains, were Saphira and Thorn. They had moved off to the left of the pavilion and were circling each other, trampling row after row of tents. Tongues of flames flickered in the pits of their nostrils and in the gaps between their saber-like teeth.

Eragon hesitated. The welter of sounds and motions was hard to take in, and he was uncertain where he was needed most.

Murtagh? he asked Glaedr.

We've yet to find him, if he's even here. I can't feel his mind, but it's hard to know for sure with so many people and spells in one place. Through their link, Eragon could tell that the golden dragon was doing far more than just talking to him; Glaedr was listening simultaneously to the thoughts of Saphira and the elves, as well as helping Blödhgarm and his two companions in their mental struggle against the Empire's magicians.

Eragon was confident that they would be able to defeat the magicians, just as he was confident that Angela and Elva were perfectly capable of defending themselves from the rest of the soldiers. Saphira, however, was already wounded in several places, and she was hard-pressed to keep Thorn from attacking the rest of the camp.

Eragon glanced at the Dauthdaert in Arya's hand, then back at the massive shapes of the dragons. *We have to kill him*, Eragon thought, and his heart grew heavy. Then his eye fell on Elva, and a new idea

took root in his mind. The girl's words were more powerful than any weapon; no one, not even Galbatorix, could withstand them. If she could but speak to Thorn, she could drive him away.

No! growled Glaedr. *You waste time, youngling. Go to your dragon—now! She needs your help. You must kill Thorn, not scare him into fleeing! He is broken, and there is nothing you can do to save him*.

Eragon looked at Arya, and she looked at him.

"Elva would be faster," he said.

"We have the Dauthdaert—"

"Too dangerous. Too difficult."

Arya hesitated, then nodded. Together they started toward Elva.

Before they reached her, Eragon heard a muffled scream. He turned and, to his horror, saw Murtagh striding out of the pavilion, dragging Nasuada by her wrists.

Nasuada's hair was disheveled. A nasty scratch marred one of her cheeks, and her yellow dressing gown was torn in several places. She kicked at Murtagh's knee, but her heel bounced off a ward, leaving Murtagh untouched. He pulled her closer with a cruel tug, then struck her on the temple with the pommel of Zar'roc, knocking her unconscious.

Eragon yelled and swerved toward them.

Murtagh gave him a brief look. Then he sheathed his sword, hoisted Nasuada onto a shoulder, and knelt on one knee, where he bowed his head, as if in prayer.

A spike of pain from Saphira distracted Eragon, and she cried, *Beware! He's escaped me!*

As Eragon leaped over a mound of corpses, he risked a quick glance upward and saw Thorn's glittering belly and velvet wings blotting out half the stars in the sky. The red dragon spun slightly as he drifted downward, like a large, weighted leaf.

Eragon dove to the side and rolled behind the pavilion, trying to put distance between himself and the dragon. A rock dug into his shoulder as he landed.

Without slowing, Thorn reached down with his right foreleg, which was as thick and knotted as a tree trunk, and closed his enormous paw around Murtagh and Nasuada. His claws sank into the earth, excavating a plug of dirt several feet deep as he picked up the two humans.

Then, with a triumphant roar and the bone-jarring *thuds* of flapping wings, Thorn arched upward and started to climb away from the camp.

From where she and Thorn had been grappling, Saphira took off in pursuit, streamers of blood unfurling from bites and claw marks along her limbs. She was faster than Thorn, but even if she caught him,

Eragon could not imagine how she could rescue Nasuada without injuring her.

A breath of wind tugged at his hair as Arya sped past him. She ran up a pile of barrels and jumped, and her leap carried her high into the air, higher than any elf could jump without assistance. Reaching out, she grabbed hold of Thorn's tail and hung dangling from it like an ornament.

Eragon took a half step forward, as if to stop her, then cursed and growled, "Audr!"

The spell launched him into the sky, like an arrow from a bow. He reached out to Glaedr, and the old dragon fed him energy to sustain his ascension. Eragon burned the energy without heed, not caring the price, only wanting to reach Thorn before something horrible happened to Nasuada or Arya.

As he hurtled past Saphira, Eragon watched as Arya began to climb up Thorn's tail. She clung to the spikes along his spine with her right hand, using them like the rungs on a ladder. With her left, she plunged the Dauthdaert into Thorn, anchoring herself with the blade of the spear even as she pulled herself higher and higher up his heaving body. Thorn wriggled and twisted and snapped at her, like a horse irritated by a fly, but he could not reach her.

Then the blood-red dragon drew in his wings and legs, and with his precious cargo cradled close against his chest, he dove toward the ground, spinning round and round in a death spiral. The Dauthdaert tore loose from Thorn's flesh, and Arya stretched out at an angle to him as she held on to a spike with only her right hand—her weak hand, the hand she had injured in the catacombs under Dras-Leona.

Ere long, her fingers loosened and she fell away from Thorn, her arms and legs flung outward like the spokes of a wagon wheel. No doubt the result of a spell she had cast, her gyrations slowed and then ceased, as did her downward trajectory, until at last she floated upright in the night sky. Illuminated by the glow of the Dauthdaert, which she still held, she appeared to Eragon like a green firefly hovering in the darkness.

Thorn flared his wings and looped back toward her. Arya's head swiveled as she looked over at Saphira; then she rotated in the air to face Thorn.

A malefic light sprang into existence between Thorn's jaws an instant before an ever-expanding wall of flames billowed out of his maw and rolled over Arya, obscuring her form.

By then, Eragon was less than fifty feet away—close enough that the heat stung his cheeks.

The flames cleared to reveal Thorn turning away from Arya, doubling back on himself as quickly as his bulk would allow. As he

did, he swung his tail, whipping it through the air faster than she could hope to evade.

"No!" shouted Eragon.

There was a *crack* as the tail struck Arya. It knocked her into the darkness, like a stone loosed from a sling, and the Dauthdaert separated from her and arced downward, its glow dwindling to a faint point that soon vanished altogether.

Iron bands seemed to tighten around Eragon's chest, squeezing the breath out of him. Thorn was pulling away, but Eragon might still be able to overtake the dragon if he drew even more energy from Glaedr. However, his connection with Glaedr was growing tenuous and Eragon could not hope to best Thorn and Murtagh alone and high above the ground, not when Murtagh had dozens or more Eldunarí at his disposal.

Eragon swore, cut off the spell that was propelling him through the air, and dove headfirst after Arya. The wind screamed in his ears and tore at his hair and clothes, and mashed the skin on his cheeks flat, and forced him to narrow his eyes to slits. An insect struck him on the neck; the impact stung as fiercely as if he had been hit by a pebble.

As he fell, Eragon searched with his mind for Arya's consciousness. He had just sensed a glimmer of awareness somewhere in the gloom below when Saphira shot out beneath him, her scales muted in the light of the stars. She turned upside down, and Eragon saw her reach out and catch a small, dark object with her forepaws.

A jolt of pain went through the mind Eragon had touched; then all thought ceased within it and he felt no more.

I have her, little one, said Saphira.

"Letta," Eragon said, and he slowed to a halt.

He looked for Thorn again, but saw only stars and blackness. To the east, he heard twice the indistinct sound of flapping wings, then all was silent.

Eragon looked toward the Varden's camp. Patches of fire glowed orange and sullen through layers of smoke. Hundreds of tents lay crumpled in the dirt, along with however many men had failed to escape before Saphira and Thorn trampled them. But those men were not the only victims of the attack. From his height, Eragon could not pick out the bodies, but he knew the soldiers had killed scores.

The taste of ashes filled Eragon's mouth. He was shaking; tears of rage and fear and frustration clouded his eyes. Arya was injured—perhaps dead. Nasuada was gone, captured, and soon she would be at the mercy of Galbatorix's most skilled torturers.

Hopelessness overcame Eragon.

How could they continue now? How could they possibly hope for victory without Nasuada to lead them?

Conclave of Kings

Upon landing in the Varden's camp with Saphira, Eragon slid down her side and ran to the patch of grass where she had gently deposited Arya.

The elf lay facedown, limp and motionless. When Eragon rolled her over, her eyes flickered open. "Thorn … What of Thorn?" she whispered.

He escaped, said Saphira.

"And … Nasuada? Did you rescue her?"

Eragon looked down and shook his head.

Sorrow passed over Arya's face. She coughed and winced, then started to sit up. A thread of blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

"Wait," said Eragon. "Don't move. I'll fetch Blödhgarm."

"There's no need." Grasping his shoulder, Arya pulled herself onto her feet, then gingerly rose to her full height. Her breath caught as her muscles stretched, and Eragon saw the pain she was trying to hide. "I'm only bruised, not broken. My wards protected me from the worst of Thorn's blow."

Eragon was doubtful, but he accepted her statement.

What now? asked Saphira, moving closer to them. The sharp, musky smell of her blood was thick in Eragon's nostrils.

Eragon looked around at the flames and destruction in the camp. Again he thought of Roran and Katrina and wondered if they had survived the attack. *What now indeed?*

Circumstances answered his question. First, a pair of wounded soldiers ran out of a bank of smoke and attacked him and Arya. By the time Eragon dispatched them, eight of the elves had converged upon their location.

After Eragon convinced them he was unharmed, the elves turned their attention to Saphira and insisted on healing the bites and scratches Thorn had given her, even though Eragon would have preferred to do it himself.

Knowing that the healing was going to require several minutes, Eragon left Saphira with the elves and hurried back through the rows of tents to the area near Nasuada's pavilion, where Blödhgarm and the two other elven spellcasters were still locked in mental combat with the last of the four enemy magicians.

The remaining magician was kneeling on the ground, his brow

pressed against his knees and his arms wrapped around the nape of his neck. Instead of adding his thoughts to the invisible fray, Eragon strode over to the magician, tapped him on the shoulder, and shouted, *"Ha!"*

The magician quivered, startled, and the distraction allowed the elves to slip past his defenses. This Eragon knew because the man convulsed and then rolled over, the whites of his eyes showing, and a yellowish foam bubbled out of his mouth. Soon afterward, he ceased breathing.

With clipped sentences, Eragon explained to Blödhgarm and the two other elves what had happened to Arya and Nasuada. Blödhgarm's fur bristled, and his yellow eyes burned with anger. But his only comment was to say in the ancient language, "Dark times are upon us, Shadeslayer." Then he sent Yaela to find and retrieve the Dauthdaert from wherever it had fallen.

Together Eragon, Blödhgarm, and Uthinarë, the elf who had stayed with them, ranged through the camp, rounding up and killing the few soldiers who had escaped the teeth of the werecats and the blades of the men, dwarves, elves, and Urgals. They also used their magic to extinguish some of the larger blazes, snuffing them out as easily as the flame of a candle.

The whole while, an overwhelming sense of dread clutched at Eragon, pressing down on him like a pile of sodden fleeces and constricting his mind so that he found it difficult to think of anything other than death, defeat, and failure. He felt as if the world were crumbling around him—as if everything he and the Varden had striven to accomplish was unspooling rapidly, and there was nothing he could do to regain control. The sense of helplessness sapped his will to do anything other than sit in a corner and give in to misery. Still, he refused to satisfy the urge, for if he did, then he might as well be dead. So he kept moving, laboring alongside the elves in spite of his despair.

It did not improve his mood when Glaedr contacted him and said, *If you had listened to me, we might have stopped Thorn and saved Nasuada*.

And we might not have, said Eragon. He did not want to discuss the subject further but felt compelled to add: *You let your anger cloud your sight. Killing Thorn wasn't the only solution, nor should you have been so quick to destroy one of the only remaining members of your kind*.

Do not think to lecture me, youngling! snapped Glaedr. *You cannot begin to understand what I have lost*.

I understand better than most, Eragon replied, but Glaedr had already withdrawn from his mind, and Eragon did not think the dragon heard him.

Eragon had just put out one fire and was moving to the next when

Roran hurried to him and grasped his arm. “Are you hurt?”

Relief swept through Eragon as he saw his cousin alive and well.

“No,” he said.

“And Saphira?”

“The elves have already mended her wounds. What of Katrina? Is she safe?”

Roran nodded, and his posture relaxed slightly, but his expression remained troubled. “Eragon,” he said, drawing closer, “what’s happened? What *is* happening? I saw Jörmundur running around like a chicken with its head cut off, and Nasuada’s guards look grim as death, and I can’t get anyone to talk to me. Are we still in danger? Is Galbatorix about to attack?”

Eragon glanced around, then drew Roran to the side, where no one else could hear. “You can’t tell anyone. Not yet,” he cautioned.

“You have my word.”

With a few quick sentences, Eragon summarized the situation to Roran. By the time he finished, Roran’s expression had grown bleak. “We can’t let the Varden disband,” he said.

“Of course not. That won’t happen, but King Orrin may try to assume command, or—” Eragon fell silent as a group of warriors passed nearby. Then: “Stay with me, will you? I may need your help.”

“My help? For what would you need *my* help?”

“The whole army admires you, Roran, even the Urgals. You’re Stronghammer, the hero of Aroughs, and your opinion carries weight. That might prove important.”

Roran was silent for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll do what I can.”

“For now, just keep watch for soldiers,” said Eragon, and continued toward the fire that was his intended destination.

Half an hour later, as quiet and order had begun to settle over the camp again, a runner informed Eragon that Arya desired his immediate presence in King Orik’s pavilion.

Eragon and Roran exchanged glances, then set out toward the northwestern quadrant of the camp, where the majority of the dwarves had pitched their tents.

“There is no choice,” said Jörmundur. “Nasuada made her wishes perfectly clear. You, Eragon, must take her place and lead the Varden in her stead.”

The faces ringing the interior of the tent were stern and unyielding. Dark shadows clung to the hollows of their temples and to the deep frown lines of the assorted two-legs, as Eragon knew Saphira would have called them. The only one not frowning was Saphira—her head was pushed through the entrance to the pavilion so that she could participate in the conclave—but her lips were pulled back slightly, as if she was about to snarl.

Also present were King Orrin, a purple cloak wrapped over his night robes; Arya, looking shaken but determined; King Orik, who had found a mail shirt to cover himself; the werecat king, Grimrr Halfpaw, a white linen bandage wrapped around a sword cut on his right shoulder; Nar Garzhvog, the Kull, stooping to avoid brushing his horns against the ceiling; and Roran, who stood by the wall of the tent listening to the proceedings, so far without comment.

No one else had been allowed into the pavilion. Not guards, not advisers, not servants, not even Blödhgarm or the other elves. Outside, a block of men, dwarves, and Urgals stood twelve deep before the entrance—their task to prevent anyone, no matter how powerful or dangerous, from interfering with the meeting. And woven about the tent were a number of hastily cast spells intended to prevent eavesdropping both mundane and magical.

"I never wanted this," said Eragon, staring down at the map of Alagaësia stretched out on the table in the center of the pavilion.

"None of us did," said King Orrin in a biting tone.

It had been wise of Arya, Eragon thought, to stage the meeting in Orik's pavilion. The dwarf king was known to be a staunch supporter of Nasuada and the Varden—as well as being Eragon's clan chief and foster brother—but no one could accuse him of aspiring to Nasuada's position, nor would the humans necessarily accept him as her replacement.

Still, by staging the meeting in Orik's pavilion, Arya had strengthened Eragon's case and undercut his critics, without appearing to endorse or attack either. She was, Eragon had to admit, far more accomplished at manipulating others than he. The only risk in what she had done was that it might cause others to think Orik was his master, but that was a risk Eragon was willing to accept in exchange for his friend's support.

"I never wanted this," he repeated, then lifted his gaze to meet the watchful eyes of those around him. "But now that it's happened, I swear on the graves of all we've lost that I'll do my best to live up to Nasuada's example and lead the Varden to victory against Galbatorix and the Empire." He strove to project an air of confidence, but the truth was, the enormity of the situation frightened him and he had no idea whether he was up to the task. Nasuada had been impressively capable, and it was intimidating to consider trying to do even half of what she had done.

"Very commendable, I'm sure," said King Orrin. "However, the Varden has always worked in concert with its allies—with the men of Surda; with our royal friend King Orik and the dwarves of the Beor Mountains; with the elves; and now, more recently, with the Urgals, as led by Nar Garzhvog, and with the werecats." He nodded toward

Grimrr, who nodded briefly in return. “It would not do for the rank and file to see us disagreeing with one another in public. Would you not agree?”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” said King Orrin. “I take it, then, you will continue to consult with us on matters of importance, even as Nasuada did?” Eragon hesitated, but before he could reply, Orrin resumed speaking: “All of us”—he motioned toward the others in the tent—“have risked an enormous amount in this venture, and none of us would appreciate being dictated to. Nor would we submit to it. To be blunt, despite your many accomplishments, Eragon *Shadeslayer*, you are still young and inexperienced, and that inexperience might very well prove fatal. The rest of us have had the benefit of many years leading our respective forces, or watching others lead. We can help guide you onto the right path, and perhaps together we can still find a way to right this mess and overthrow Galbatorix.”

Everything Orrin said was true, Eragon thought—he *was* still young and inexperienced, and he *did* need the others’ advice—but he could not admit as much without appearing weak.

So, instead, he replied, “You may rest assured that I will consult with you when needed, but my decisions, as always, will remain my own.”

“Forgive me, Shadeslayer, but I have difficulty believing that. Your familiarity with the elves”—Orrin eyed Arya—“is commonly known. What’s more, you are an adopted member of the Ingeitum clan, and subject to the authority of their clan chief, who just so happens to be King Orik. Perhaps I am mistaken, but it seems doubtful that your decisions will be your own.”

“First, you counsel me to listen to our allies. Now you don’t. Is it perhaps that you would prefer I listen to you, and you alone?” Eragon’s anger grew as he spoke.

“I would prefer that your choices be in the best interests of our people, and not those of another race!”

“They have been,” growled Eragon. “And they will continue to be. I owe my allegiance to both the Varden and the Ingeitum clan, yes, but also to Saphira, and Nasuada, and my family as well. Many have claim on me, even as many have claim on you, *Your Majesty*. My foremost concern, however, is defeating Galbatorix and the Empire. It always has been, and if there is a conflict among my loyalties, *that* is what shall take precedence. Question my judgment, if you must, but do not question my motives. And I would thank you to refrain from implying that I’m a traitor to my kind!”

Orrin scowled, color rising in his cheeks, and he was about to utter a retort when a loud *bang* interrupted him as Orik struck his war

hammer, Volund, against his shield.

"Enough of this nonsense!" exclaimed Orik, glowering. "You worry about a crack in the floor while the whole mountain is about to come down upon us!"

Orrin's scowl deepened, but he did not pursue the matter further. Instead, he picked up his goblet of wine from the table and sank back into the depths of his chair, where he stared at Eragon with a dark, smoldering gaze.

I think he hates you, said Saphira.

That, or he hates what I represent. Either way, I'm an obstacle to him. He'll bear watching.

"The question before us is simple," said Orik. "What should we do now that Nasuada is gone?" He placed Volund flat on the table and ran his gnarled hand over his head. "Mine opinion is that our situation is the same as it was this morning. Unless we admit defeat and sue for peace, we still have only one choice: march to Urû'baen fast as our feet will carry us. Nasuada herself was never going to fight Galbatorix. That will fall to you"—he motioned toward Eragon and Saphira—"and the elves. Nasuada brought us this far, and while she will be greatly missed, we do not need her to continue. Our path allows for little deviation. Even if she were present, I cannot see her doing anything else. To Urû'baen, we must go, and that's the end of it."

Grimrr toyed with a small black-bladed dagger, seemingly indifferent to the conversation.

"I agree," said Arya. "We have no other choice."

Above them, Garzhvog's massive head dipped, causing misshapen shadows to glide across the pavilion walls. "The dwarf speaks well. The Urgralgra will stay with the Varden as long as Firesword is war chief. With him and Flametongue to lead our charges, we will collect the debt of blood that the lack-horned betrayer, Galbatorix, still owes us."

Eragon shifted slightly, uncomfortable.

"That's all very well and good," said King Orrin, "but I've yet to hear how we are supposed to defeat Murtagh and Galbatorix when we get to Urû'baen."

"We have the Dauthdaert," Eragon pointed out, for Yaela had retrieved the spear, "and with it, we can—"

King Orrin waved one hand. "Yes, yes, the Dauthdaert. It didn't help you stop Thorn, and I can't imagine that Galbatorix will let you come anywhere near him or Shruikan with it. Either way, it doesn't change the fact that you're still no match for that black-hearted traitor. Blast it, Shadeslayer, you're not even a match for your own brother, and he's been a Rider for less time than you!"

Half brother, Eragon thought, but he held his tongue. He could find

no way to rebut Orrin's points; they were valid, each and every one, and they left him feeling shamed.

The king continued: "We entered this war with the understanding that you would find a way of countering Galbatorix's unnatural strength. So Nasuada promised and assured us. And yet here we are, about to confront the most powerful magician in recorded history, and we're no closer to defeating him than when we began!"

"We went to war," Eragon said quietly, "because it was the first time since the Riders fell that we've had even the slightest chance of overthrowing Galbatorix. You know that."

"What chance?" sneered the king. "We're puppets, all of us, dancing according to Galbatorix's whims. The only reason we've gotten this far is because he's *let* us. Galbatorix *wants* us to go to Urû'baen. He *wants* us to bring you to him. If he cared about stopping us, he would have flown out to meet us at the Burning Plains and crushed us then and there. And once he has you in his reach, he'll do just that: crush us."

The air in the tent seemed to grow taut between them.

Careful, said Saphira to Eragon. *He'll leave the pack if you can't convince him otherwise*.

Arya appeared similarly worried.

Eragon spread his hands flat on the table and took a moment to gather his thoughts. He did not want to lie, but at the same time he had to find a way to inspire hope in Orrin, which was difficult when Eragon felt little himself. *Is this what it was like for Nasuada all those times she rallied us to the cause, convinced us to keep going even when we couldn't see a way clear?*

"Our position isn't quite as … precarious as you make it out to be," said Eragon.

Orrin snorted and drank from his goblet.

"The Dauthdaert *is* a threat to Galbatorix," continued Eragon, "and that's to our advantage. He'll be wary of it. Because of that, we can force him to do what we want, perhaps just a bit. Even if we can't use it to kill him, we might be able to kill Shruikan. Theirs isn't a true pairing of dragon and Rider, but Shruikan's death would still wound him to the core."

"It'll never happen," said Orrin. "He knows that we have the Dauthdaert now, and he'll take the appropriate precautions."

"Maybe not. I doubt Murtagh and Thorn recognized it."

"No, but Galbatorix will when he examines their memories."

And he'll also know of Glaedr's existence, if they haven't told him already, Saphira said to Eragon.

Eragon's spirits sank further. He had not thought of that, but she was right. *So much for any hope of surprising him. We have no more secrets*.

Life is full of secrets. Galbatorix cannot predict exactly how we will choose to fight him. In that, at least, we can confound him.

"Which of the death spears have you found, O Shadeslayer?" asked Grimrr in a seemingly bored tone.

"Du Niernen—the Orchid."

The werecat blinked, and Eragon had the impression that he was surprised, although Grimrr's expression remained blank as ever. "The Orchid. Is that so? How very strange to find such a weapon in this age, especially that … particular weapon."

"Why so?" asked Jörmundur.

Grimrr's small pink tongue passed over his fangs. "Niernen is *notoriousss*." He drew out the end of the word into a short hiss.

Before Eragon could press the werecat for more information, Garzhvog spoke, his voice grinding like boulders: "What is this death spear you speak of, Firesword? Is it the lance that wounded Saphira in Belatona? We heard tales of it, but they were odd indeed."

Eragon belatedly remembered that Nasuada had told neither the Urgals nor the werecats what Niernen truly was. *Oh well*, he thought. *It can't be helped*.

He explained to Garzhvog about the Dauthdaert, then insisted everyone in the pavilion swear an oath in the ancient language that they would not discuss the spear with anyone else without permission. There was some grumbling, but in the end they all complied, even the werecat. Trying to hide the spear from Galbatorix might have been pointless, but Eragon could see no good in allowing the Dauthdaert to become general knowledge.

When the last of them had finished their oaths, Eragon resumed speaking, "So. First, we have the Dauthdaert, and that's more than we had before. Second, I don't plan on facing Murtagh and Galbatorix together; I've never planned to. When we arrive at Urû'baen, we'll lure Murtagh out of the city, and then we'll surround him, with the whole army if necessary—the elves included—and we'll kill or capture him once and for all." He looked round at the gathered faces, trying to impress them with the force of his conviction. "Third—and this is what you have to believe deep in your hearts—Galbatorix isn't invulnerable, however powerful he is. He might have cast thousands upon thousands of wards to protect himself, but in spite of all his knowledge and cunning, there are still spells that can kill him, if only we are clever enough to think of them. Now, maybe I'll be the one to find the spell that is his undoing, but it might just as well be an elf or a member of Du Vrangr Gata. Galbatorix seems untouchable, I know, but there's always a weakness—there's always a crevice you can slip a blade through and thus stab your foe."

"If the Riders of old couldn't find his weakness, what is the

likelihood we can?" demanded King Orrin.

Eragon spread his hands, palms upward. "Maybe we can't. Nothing is certain in life, much less in war. However, if the combined spellcasters of our five races can't kill him, then we might as well accept that Galbatorix is going to rule as long as he pleases, and nothing we can do is going to change that."

Silence pervaded the tent, short and profound.

Then Roran stepped forward. "I would speak," he said.

Eragon saw the others around the table exchange glances.

"Say what you will, Stronghammer," said Orik, to King Orrin's evident annoyance.

"It is this: too much blood and too many tears have been shed for us to turn back now. It would be disrespectful, both to the dead and to those who remember the dead. This may be a battle between gods"—he appeared perfectly serious to Eragon as he said this—"but I for one will keep fighting until the gods strike me down, or until I strike them down. A dragon might kill ten thousand wolves one at a time, but ten thousand wolves together can kill a dragon."

Not likely, Saphira snorted in the privacy of her and Eragon's shared mind space.

Roran smiled without humor. "And we have a dragon of our own. Decide as you wish. But I, for one, am going to Urû'baen, and I'll face Galbatorix, even if I have to do it by myself."

"Not by yourself," said Arya. "I know I speak for Queen Islanzadí when I say that our people will stand with you."

"As will ours," rumbled Garzhvog.

"And ours," affirmed Orik.

"And ours," Eragon said in a tone that he hoped would discourage dissent.

When, after a pause, the four of them turned toward Grimrr, the werecat sniffed and said, "Well, I suppose we'll be there too." He inspected his sharp nails. "Someone has to sneak past enemy lines, and it certainly won't be the dwarves bumbling around in their iron boots."

Orik's eyebrows rose, but if he was offended, he hid it well.

Two more drinks Orrin quaffed; then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "Very well, as you wish; we'll continue on to Urû'baen." His cup empty, he reached for the bottle in front of him.

A Maze Without End

Eragon and the others spent the rest of the conclave discussing practicalities: lines of communication—who was supposed to answer to whom; assignments of duty; rearrangements of the camp wards and sentinels to prevent Thorn or Shruikan from sneaking up on them again; and how to secure new equipment for the men whose belongings had been burned or squashed during the attack. By consensus they decided to hold off announcing what had happened to Nasuada until the following day; it was more important for the warriors to get what sleep they could before dawn brightened the horizon.

And yet, the one thing they never discussed was whether they should try to rescue Nasuada. It was obvious that the only way to free her would be to seize Urû'baen, and by then she would probably be dead, injured, or bound to Galbatorix in the ancient language. So they avoided the subject entirely, as if to mention it was forbidden.

Nevertheless, she was a constant presence in Eragon's thoughts. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Murtagh striking her, then the scaly fingers of Thorn's paw closing round her, and then the red dragon flying off into the night. The memories only made Eragon more miserable, but he could not stop himself from reliving them.

As the conclave dispersed, Eragon motioned to Roran, Jörmundur, and Arya. They followed him without question back to his tent, where Eragon spent some time asking their advice and planning for the day to come.

"The Council of Elders will give you some trouble, I'm sure," Jörmundur said. "They don't consider you as skilled at politics as Nasuada, and they'll try to take advantage of that." The long-haired warrior had appeared preternaturally calm since the attack, so much so that Eragon suspected he was on the verge of either tears or rage, or perhaps a combination of both.

"I'm not," Eragon said.

Jörmundur inclined his head. "Nevertheless, you must hold strong. I can help you some, but much will depend on how you comport yourself. If you allow them to unduly influence your decisions, they'll think *they* have inherited the leadership of the Varden, not you."

Eragon glanced at Arya and Saphira, concerned.

Never fear, said Saphira to them all. *No one shall get the better of him while I stand watch.*

When their smaller, secondary meeting came to an end, Eragon waited until Arya and Jörmundur had filed out of the tent; then he caught Roran by the shoulder. “Did you mean what you said about this being a battle of the gods?”

Roran stared at him. “I did.… You and Murtagh and Galbatorix—you’re too powerful for any normal person to defeat. It’s not right. It’s not fair. But so it is. The rest of us are like ants under your boots. Have you any idea how many men you’ve killed single-handedly?”

“Too many.”

“Exactly. I’m glad you’re here to fight for us, and I’m glad to count you as my brother in all but name, but I wish we didn’t have to rely on a Rider or an elf or any sort of magician to win this war for us. No one should be at the mercy of another person. Not like this. It unbalances the world.”

Then Roran strode out of the tent.

Eragon sank onto his cot, feeling as if he had been struck in the chest. He sat there for a while, sweating and thinking, until the strain of his overactive thoughts caused him to spring upright and hurry outside.

As he exited the tent, the six Nighthawks jumped to their feet, readying their weapons to accompany him wherever he might be going.

Eragon motioned for them to stay put. He had protested, but Jörmundur insisted upon assigning Nasuada’s guards, in addition to Blödhgarm and the other elves, to protect him. “We can’t be too careful,” he had said. Eragon disliked having even more people follow him around, but he had been forced to agree.

Walking past the guards, Eragon hurried over to where Saphira lay curled on the ground.

She opened one eye as he neared and then lifted her wing so he could crawl under it and nestle against her warm belly. *Little one*, she said, and began to hum softly.

Eragon sat against her, listening to her humming and to the soft rustle of air flowing in and out of her mighty lungs. Behind him, her belly rose and fell with a gentle, soothing cadence.

At any other time, her presence would have been enough to calm him, but not now. His mind refused to slow, his pulse continued to hammer, and his hands and feet were uncomfortably hot.

He kept his feelings to himself, to avoid disturbing Saphira. She was tired after her two fights with Thorn, and she soon fell into a deep slumber, her humming fading into the ever-present sound of her breathing.

And still Eragon’s thoughts would not give him rest. Over and over, he returned to the same impossible, incontrovertible fact: *he* was the

leader of the Varden. He, who had been nothing more than the youngest member of a poor farming family, was now the leader of the second-largest army in Alagaësia. That it had happened at all seemed outrageous, as if fate was toying with him, baiting him into a trap that would destroy him. He had never wanted it, never sought it, and yet events had thrust it upon him.

What was Nasuada thinking when she chose me as her successor? he wondered. He remembered the reasons she had given him, but they did nothing to alleviate his doubts. *Did she really believe I could take her place? Why not Jörmundur? He's been with the Varden for decades, and he knows so much more about command and strategy*.

Eragon thought of when Nasuada had decided to accept the Urgals' offer of an alliance in spite of all the hate and grief that existed between their two races, and even though it had been Urgals who had killed her father. *Could I have done that?* He imagined not—not then, at least. *Can I make those sorts of decisions now, if they're what's required to defeat Galbatorix?*

He was not sure.

He made an effort to still his mind. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on counting his breaths in batches of ten. It was difficult to keep his attention focused on the task; every few seconds, another thought or sensation would threaten to distract him, and he often forgot the count.

In time, however, his body began to relax, and almost without his realizing it, the shifting, rainbow visions of his waking dreams crept over him.

Many things he saw, some grim and unsettling, as his dreams reflected the events of the past day. Others were bittersweet: memories of what had been or what he wished could have been.

Then, like a sudden change of wind, his dreams rippled and became harder and more substantial, as if they were tangible realities that he could reach out and touch. Everything around him faded away, and he beheld another time and place—one that seemed both strange and familiar, as if he had seen it once long before, and then it had passed from recollection.

Eragon opened his eyes, but the images stayed with him, obscuring his surroundings, and he knew that he was experiencing no normal dream:

A dark and lonely plain lay before him, cut by a single strip of water that flowed slow-moving into the east: a ribbon of beaten silver bright beneath the glare of a full moon.… Floating on the nameless river, a ship, tall and proud, with pure white sails raised and ready.… Ranks of warriors holding lances, and two hooded figures walking among them, as if in a stately procession. The smell of willows and cottonwoods, and a sense of

passing sorrow.… Then a man's anguished cry, and a flash of scales, and a muddle of motion that concealed more than it revealed.

And then nothing but silence and blackness.

Eragon's sight cleared, and he again found himself looking at the underside of Saphira's wing. He released his pent-up breath—which he had not realized he was holding—and with a shaky hand wiped the tears from his eyes. He could not understand why the vision had affected him so strongly.

Was that a premonition? he wondered. *Or something actually happening at this very moment? And why is it of any importance to me?*

Thereafter, he was unable to continue resting. His worries returned in force and assailed him without reprieve, gnawing at his mind like a host of rats, each bite of which seemed to infect him with a creeping poison.

At last he crawled out from under Saphira's wing—taking care not to wake her—and wandered back to his tent.

As before, the Nighthawks rose when they saw him. Their commander, a thickset man with a crooked nose, came forward to meet Eragon. "Is there anything you need, Shadeslayer?" he asked.

Eragon dimly remembered that the man's name was Garven and something Nasuada had told him about the man losing his senses after examining the minds of the elves. The man appeared well enough now, although his gaze had a certain dreamy quality. Still, Eragon assumed Garven was capable of carrying out his duties; otherwise, Jörmundur would never have allowed him to return to his post.

"Not at the moment, Captain," Eragon said, keeping his voice low. He took another step forward, then paused. "How many of the Nighthawks were killed tonight?"

"Six, sir. An entire watch. We'll be shorthanded for a few days until we can find suitable replacements. And we'll need more recruits in addition to that. We want to double the force around you." A look of anguish perturbed Garven's otherwise distant gaze. "We failed her, Shadeslayer. If there had been more of us there, maybe—"

"We all failed her," said Eragon. "And if there had been more of you there, more of you would have died."

The man hesitated, then nodded, his expression miserable.

I failed her, thought Eragon as he ducked into his tent. Nasuada was his liegelord; it was his duty to protect her even more than it was that of the Nighthawks. And yet the one time she had needed his help, he had been unable to save her.

He cursed once, viciously, to himself.

As her vassal, he ought to be searching for a way to rescue her, to the exclusion of all else. But he also knew that she would not want

him to abandon the Varden just for her sake. She would rather suffer and die than allow her absence to harm the cause to which she had devoted her life.

Eragon cursed again and began to pace back and forth within the confines of the tent.

I'm the leader of the Varden.

Only now that she was gone did Eragon realize that Nasuada had become more than just his liegelord and commander; she had become his friend, and he felt the same urge to protect her that he often felt with Arya. If he tried, however, he could end up costing the Varden the war.

I'm the leader of the Varden.

He thought of all the people who were now his responsibility: Roran and Katrina and the rest of the villagers from Carvahall; the hundreds of warriors whom he had fought alongside, and many more as well; the dwarves; the werecats; and even the Urgals. All now under his command and dependent on him to make the right decisions in order to defeat Galbatorix and the Empire.

Eragon's pulse surged, causing his vision to flicker. He stopped pacing and clutched at the pole in the center of the tent, then dabbed the sweat from his brow and upper lip.

He wished he had someone to talk to. He considered waking Saphira but discounted the idea. Her rest was more important than listening to him complain. Nor did he want to burden Arya or Glaedr with problems they could do nothing to solve. In any event, he doubted he would find a sympathetic listener in Glaedr when their last exchange had been so barbed.

Eragon resumed his monotonous circuit: three steps forward, turn, three steps back, turn, and repeat.

He had lost the belt of Beloth the Wise. He had allowed Murtagh and Thorn to capture Nasuada. And now he was in charge of the Varden.

Again and again, the same few thoughts kept running through his mind, and with each repetition, his sense of anxiety increased. He felt as if he were caught in a maze without end, and round every unseen corner lurked monsters waiting to pounce. Despite what he had said during the meeting with Orik, Orrin, and the others, he could not see how he, the Varden, or their allies could defeat Galbatorix.

I wouldn't even be able to rescue Nasuada, assuming I had the freedom to chase after her and try. Bitterness welled up inside him. The task before them seemed hopeless. *Why did this have to fall to us?* He swore and bit the inside of his mouth until he could not bear the pain.

He stopped pacing and crumpled to the ground, wrapping his hands around the back of his neck. "It can't be done. It can't be done," he

whispered, rocking from side to side upon his knees. “It can’t.”

In his despair, Eragon thought of praying to the dwarf god Gûntera for help, even as he had done before. To lay his troubles at the feet of one greater than himself and to trust his fate to that power would be a relief. Doing so would allow him to accept his fate—as well as the fates of those he loved—with greater equanimity, for he would no longer be directly responsible for whatever happened.

But Eragon could not bring himself to utter the prayer. He *was* responsible for their fates, whether he liked it or not, and he felt it would be wrong to pass off his responsibility to anyone else, even a god—or the idea of a god.

The problem was, he did not think he could do what needed to be done. He could command the Varden; of that, he was reasonably sure. But as for how he might go about capturing Urû’baen and killing Galbatorix, there he was at a loss. He did not have the strength to go up against Murtagh, much less the king, and it seemed unlikely in the extreme that he could think of a way around either of their wards. Capturing their minds, or at least Galbatorix’s, seemed equally improbable.

Eragon dug his fingers into the nape of his neck, stretching and scratching his skin as he frantically considered every possibility, no matter how unlikely.

Then he thought of the advice Solembum had given him in Teirm, so long ago. The werecat had said, *Listen closely and I will tell you two things. When the times comes and you need a weapon, look under the roots of the Menoa tree. Then, when all seems lost and your power is insufficient, go to the Rock of Kuthian and speak your name to open the Vault of Souls*.

His words concerning the Menoa tree had proven true; under it Eragon had found the brightsteel he needed for the blade of his sword. Now a desperate hope flared inside Eragon as he pondered the second of the werecat’s pronouncements.

If ever my power was insufficient, and if ever all seemed lost, it is now, thought Eragon. However, he still had no idea where or what the Rock of Kuthian or the Vault of Souls were. He had asked both Oromis and Arya at different times, but they had never returned an answer.

Eragon reached out with his mind then, and searched through the camp until he found the distinctive feel of the werecat’s mind. *Solembum*, he said, *I need your help! Please come to my tent*.

After a moment, he felt a grudging acknowledgment from the werecat, and he severed the contact.

Then Eragon sat alone in the dark … and waited.

Fragments, Half-Seen and Indistinct

Over a quarter of an hour passed before the flap to Eragon's tent stirred and Solembum pushed his way inside, his padded feet nearly silent upon the ground.

The tawny werecat walked past Eragon without looking at him, jumped onto his cot, and settled among his blankets, whereupon he began to lick the webbing between the claws of his right paw. Still not looking at Eragon, he said, *I am not a dog to come and go at your summons, Eragon.*

"I never thought you were," Eragon replied. "But I have need of you, and it is urgent."

Mmh. The rasping of Solembum's tongue grew louder as he concentrated on the leathery palm of his foot. *Speak then, Shadeslayer. What do you want?*

"One moment." Eragon stood and went over to the pole where his lantern hung. "I'm going to light this," he warned Solembum. Then Eragon spoke a word in the ancient language, and a flame sprang to life atop the wick of the lantern, filling the tent with a warm, flickering illumination.

Both Eragon and Solembum squinted while they waited for their eyes to adjust to the increase in brightness. When the light no longer felt quite so uncomfortable, Eragon seated himself on his stool, not far from the cot.

The werecat, he was puzzled to see, was watching him with ice-blue eyes.

"Weren't your eyes a different color?" he asked.

Solembum blinked once, and his eyes changed from blue to gold. Then he resumed cleaning his paw. *What do you want, Shadeslayer? The night is for the doing of things, not sitting and talking.* The tip of his tasseled tail lashed from side to side.

Eragon wet his lips, his hope making him nervous. "Solembum, you told me that when all seemed lost and my power was insufficient, I should go to the Rock of Kuthian and open the Vault of Souls."

The werecat paused in his licking. *Ah, that.*

"Yes, that. And I need to know what you meant by it. If there's anything that can help us against Galbatorix, I need to know about it now—not later, not once I manage to solve one riddle or another, but *now*. So, where can I find the Rock of Kuthian, how do I open the Vault of Souls, and what will I find inside it?"

Solembum's black-tipped ears angled backward slightly, and the claws on the paw he was cleaning extended halfway from their sheaths. *I don't know*.

"You don't know?!" exclaimed Eragon in disbelief.

Must you repeat everything I say?

"How can you not know?"

I don't know.

Leaning forward, Eragon grabbed Solembum's large, heavy paw. The werecat's ears flattened, and he hissed and curled his paw inward, digging his claws into Eragon's hand. Eragon smiled tightly and ignored the pain. The werecat was stronger than he had expected, almost strong enough to pull him off the stool.

"No more riddles," Eragon said. "I need the truth, Solembum. Where did you get this information and what does it mean?"

The fur along Solembum's spine bristled. *Sometimes riddles are the truth, you thick-headed human. Now let me go, or I'll tear your face off and feed your guts to the crows*.

Eragon maintained his grip for a moment longer, then he released Solembum's paw and leaned back. He clenched his hand to help dull the pain and stop the bleeding.

Solembum glared at him with slitted eyes, all pretense of detachment gone. *I said I don't know because, despite what you might think, I do not know. I have no knowledge of where the Rock of Kuthian might lie, nor how you might open the Vault of Souls, nor what the vault might contain.*

"Say that in the ancient language."

Solembum's eyes narrowed even farther, but he repeated himself in the tongue of the elves, and then Eragon knew he was speaking the truth.

So many questions occurred to Eragon, he hardly knew which to ask first. "How did you learn of the Rock of Kuthian, then?"

Again Solembum's tail lashed from side to side, flattening wrinkles in the blanket. *For the last time, I do not know. Nor do any of my kind*.

"Then how …?" Eragon trailed off, overcome by confusion.

Soon after the fall of the Riders, a certain conviction came upon the members of our race that, should we encounter a new Rider, one who was not beholden to Galbatorix, we should tell him or her what I told you: of the Menoa tree and of the Rock of Kuthian.

"But … where did the information come from?"

Solembum's muzzle wrinkled as he bared his teeth in an unpleasant smile. *That we cannot say, only that whoever or whatever was responsible for it meant well*.

"How can you know that?" exclaimed Eragon. "What if it was Galbatorix? He could be trying to trick you. He could be trying to trick

Saphira and me, so as to capture us."

No, said Solembum, and his claws sank into the blanket under him. *Werecats are not so easily fooled as others. Galbatorix is not the one behind this. Of that, I am sure. Whoever wanted you to have this information is the same person or creature who arranged for you to find the brightsteel for your sword. Would Galbatorix have done that?*

Eragon frowned. "Haven't you tried to find out who is behind this?"

We have.

"And?"

We failed. The werecat ruffled his fur. *There are two possibilities. One, that our memories were altered against our will and we are the pawns of some nefarious entity. Or two, that we agreed to the alteration, for whatever reason. Perhaps we even excised the memories ourselves. I find it difficult and distasteful to believe that anyone could have succeeded in meddling with our minds. A few of us, I could understand. But our entire race? No. It cannot be*.

Why would you, the werecats, have been entrusted with this information?

Because, I would guess, we have always been friends of the Riders and friends of the dragons.… We are the watchers. The listeners. The wanderers. We walk alone in the dark places of the world, and we remember what is and what has been.

Solembum's gaze shifted away. *Understand this, Eragon. None of us have been happy with the situation. We long debated whether it would cause more harm than good to pass on this information should the moment arise. In the end, the decision was mine, and I decided to tell you, for it seemed you needed all the help you could get. Make of it what you will*.

"But what am I supposed to do?" said Eragon. "How am I supposed to find the Rock of Kuthian?"

That I cannot say.

"Then what use is the information? I might as well have never heard it."

Solembum blinked, once. *There is one other thing I can tell you. It may mean nothing, but perhaps it can show you the way*.

"What? What is it?"

If you but wait, I will tell you. When I first met you in Teirm, I had a strange feeling that you ought to have the book Domia abr Wyrda. *It took me time to arrange it, but it was I who was responsible for Jeod giving the book to you*. Then the werecat lifted his other paw and, after a cursory examination, began to lick it.

"Have you gotten any *other* strange feelings in the past few months?" asked Eragon.

Only the urge to eat a small red mushroom, but it passed quickly enough.

Eragon grunted and bent down to retrieve the book from under his cot, where he kept it with the rest of his writing supplies. He stared at the large, leather-bound volume before opening it to a random page. As usual, the thicket of runes within made little sense to him at first glance. It was only with a concerted effort that he was able to decipher even a few of them:

> *… which, if Taladorous is to be believed, would mean that the mountains themselves were the result of a spell. That, of course, is absurd, for …*

Eragon growled with frustration and closed the book. “I don’t have time for this. It’s too big, and I’m too slow of a reader. I’ve already gone through a fair number of chapters, and I’ve seen nothing having to do with the Rock of Kuthian or the Vault of Souls.”

Solembum eyed him for a moment. *You could ask someone else to read it for you, but if there is a secret hidden in* Domia abr Wyrda, *you may be the only one who can see it.*

Eragon resisted the desire to curse. Springing up from the stool, he began to pace again. “Why didn’t you tell me about all this sooner?”

It didn’t seem important. Either my advice concerning the vault and the rock would be of help or it wouldn’t, and knowing the origins of that information—or lack thereof—would … have … changed … nothing!

“But if I had known it had something to do with the Vault of Souls, I would have spent more time reading it.”

But we don’t know that it does, said Solembum. His tongue slipped out of his mouth and passed over the whiskers on each side of his face, smoothing them. *The book may have nothing to do with the Rock of Kuthian or the Vault of Souls. Who can say? Besides, you were already reading it. Would you really have spent more time with it if I had said that I had a feeling—and mind you, nothing more—that the book was of some significance to you? Hmm?*

“Maybe not … but you still should have told me.”

The werecat tucked his front paws under his breast and did not answer.

Eragon scowled, gripping the book and feeling as if he wanted to tear it apart. “This can’t be everything. There has to be some other piece of information that you’ve forgotten.”

Many, but none, I think, related to this.

“In all your travels around Alagaësia, with Angela and without, you’ve never found anything that might explain this mystery? Or even just something that might be of use against Galbatorix.”

I found you, didn’t I?

“That’s not funny,” growled Eragon. “Blast it, you have to know something more.”

I do not.

“Think, then! If I can’t find some sort of help against Galbatorix, we’ll lose, Solembum. We’ll lose, and most of the Varden, including the werecats, will die.”

Solembum hissed again. *What do you expect of me, Eragon? I cannot invent help where none exists. Read the book.*

“We’ll be at Urû’baen before I can finish it. The book might as well not exist.”

Solembum’s ears flattened again. *That is not my fault.*

“I don’t care if it is. I just want a way to keep us from ending up dead or enslaved. Think! You have to know something else!”

Solembum uttered a low, warbling growl. *I do not. And—*

“You have to, or we’re doomed!”

Even as Eragon uttered the words, he saw a change come over the werecat. Solembum’s ears swiveled until they were upright, his whiskers relaxed, and his gaze softened, losing its hard-edged brilliance. At the same time, the werecat’s mind grew unusually empty, as if his consciousness had been stilled or removed.

Eragon froze, uncertain.

Then he felt Solembum say, with thoughts that were as flat and colorless as a pool of water beneath a wintry, cloud-ridden sky: *Chapter forty-seven. Page three. Start with the second passage thereon.*

Solembum’s gaze sharpened, and his ears returned to their previous position. *What?* he said with obvious irritation. *Why are you gaping at me like that?*

“What did you just say?”

I said that I do not know anything else. And that—

“No, no, the other thing, about the chapter and page.”

Do not toy with me. I said no such thing.

“You did.”

Solembum studied him for several seconds. Then, with thoughts that were overly calm, he said, *Tell me exactly what you heard, Dragon Rider.*

So, Eragon repeated the words as closely as he could. When he finished, the werecat was silent for a while. *I have no memory of that,* he said.

“What do you think it means?”

It means that we should look and see what’s on page three of chapter forty-seven.

Eragon hesitated, then nodded and began to flip through the pages. As he did, he remembered the chapter in question; it was the one devoted to the aftermath of the Riders’ secession from the elves, following the elves’ brief war with the humans. Eragon had read the beginning of the section, but it had seemed to be nothing more than a dry discussion of treaties and negotiations, so he had left it for another

time.

Soon enough, he arrived at the proper page. Tracing the lines of runes with the tip of his finger, Eragon slowly read out loud:

> *… The island is remarkably temperate compared with areas of the mainland at the same latitude. Summers are often cool and rainy, but then the winters are mild and tend not to assume the brutal cold of the northern reaches of the Spine, which means that crops could be grown for a goodly portion of the year. By all accounts, the soil is rich and fertile—the one benefit of the fire mountains that are known to erupt from time to time and cover the island with a thick layer of ash—and the forests were full of large game such as the dragons preferred to hunt, including many species not found elsewhere in Alagaësia.*

Eragon paused. "None of this seems relevant."

Keep reading.

Frowning, Eragon continued on to the next paragraph:

> *It was there, in the great cauldron at the center of Vroengard, that the Riders built their far-famed city, Doru Araeba.*
>
> *Doru Araeba! The only city in history designed to house dragons as well as elves and humans. Doru Araeba! A place of magic and learning and ancient mysteries. Doru Araeba! The very name seems to hum with excitement. Never was there a city like it before, and never shall there be again, for now it is lost, destroyed—ground to dust by the usurper Galbatorix.*
>
> *The buildings were constructed in the elvish style—with some influence from human Riders in later years—but out of stone, not wood; wooden buildings, as must be obvious to the reader, fare poorly around creatures with razor-sharp claws and the ability to breathe fire. The most notable feature of Doru Araeba, however, was its enormous scale. Every street was wide enough for at least two dragons to walk abreast, and with few exceptions, rooms and doorways were large enough to accommodate dragons of most any size.*
>
> *As a result, Doru Araeba was a vast, sprawling affair, dotted with buildings of such immense proportions, even a dwarf would have been impressed. Gardens and fountains were common throughout the city, on account of the elves' irrepressible love of nature, and there were many soaring towers among the Riders' halls and holds.*
>
> *Upon the peaks surrounding the city, the Riders placed watchtowers and eyries—to guard against attack—and more than one dragon and Rider had a well-appointed cave high in the mountains, where they lived apart from the rest of their order. The older, larger dragons were especially partial to this arrangement, as they often preferred solitude, and living above the floor of the cauldron made it easier for them to take flight.*

Frustrated, Eragon broke off. The description of Doru Araeba was interesting enough, but he had read other, more detailed accounts of the Riders' city during his time in Ellesméra. Nor did he enjoy having to decipher the cramped runes, a painstaking process even at the best of times.

"This is pointless," he said, lowering the book.

Solembum looked as annoyed as Eragon felt. *Don't give up yet. Read another two pages. If there's nothing by then, then you can stop.*

Eragon took a breath and agreed. He ran his finger down the page until he found his place, whereupon he began to again pick out the sounds of the words:

> *The city contained many marvels, from the Singing Fountain of Eldimírim to the crystal fortress of Svellhjall to the rookeries of the dragons themselves, but for all their splendor, I*

believe that Doru Araeba's greatest treasure was its library. Not, as one might assume, because of its imposing structure—although it was indeed imposing—but because over the centuries the Riders collected one of the most comprehensive stores of knowledge in the whole of the land. By the time of the Riders' fall, there were only three libraries that rivaled it—that of Ilirea, that of Ellesméra, and that of Tronjheim—and none of those three contained as much information about the workings of magic as did the one in Doru Araeba.

The library was located on the northwestern edge of the city, near the gardens that surrounded Moraeta's Spire, also known as the Rock of Kuthian …

Eragon's voice died in his throat as he stared at the name. After a moment, he began again, even slower:

… also known as the Rock of Kuthian (see chapter twelve), and not far from the high seat, where the leaders of the Riders held court when various kings and queens came to petition them.

A sense of awe and fear came over Eragon. Some person or some thing had arranged for him to learn this particular piece of information, the same person or thing that had made it possible for him to find the brightsteel for his sword. The thought was intimidating, and now that Eragon knew where to go, he was no longer quite so sure that he wanted to.

What, he wondered, lay waiting for them on Vroengard? He was afraid to speculate, lest he raise hopes that were impossible to fulfill.

QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

Eragon searched through *Domia abr Wyrda* until he found the reference to Kuthian in the twelfth chapter. To his disappointment, all it said was that Kuthian had been one of the first Riders to explore Vroengard Island.

Afterward, he closed the book and sat staring at it, thumbing a ridge embossed across the spine. On the cot, Solembum was silent as well.

"Do you think that the Vault of Souls contains spirits?" asked Eragon.

Spirits are not the souls of the dead.

"No, but what else could they be?"

Solembum rose from where he had been sitting and stretched, a wave of motion moving through his body from his head to his tail. *If you find out, I would be interested to hear what you discover.*

"Do you think Saphira and I should go, then?"

I cannot tell you what you should do. If this is a trap, then most of my race has been broken and enslaved without them realizing it, and the Varden might as well surrender now, because they will never outwit Galbatorix. If not, then this may be an opportunity to find assistance where we thought none was to be had. I cannot say. You have to decide on your own whether it is a chance worth taking. As for me, I have had enough of this mystery.

He jumped down from the cot and walked over to the opening of the tent, where he paused and glanced back at Eragon. *There are many strange forces at work in Alagaësia, Shadeslayer. I have seen things that defy belief: whirlwinds of light spinning in caverns deep below the ground, men who age backward, stones that speak, and shadows that creep. Rooms that are bigger on the inside than the outside.… Galbatorix is not the only power in the world to be reckoned with, and he may not even be the strongest. Choose carefully, Shadeslayer, and if you choose to go, walk softly.*

And then the werecat slipped out of the tent and vanished into the darkness.

Eragon released his breath and leaned back. He knew what he had to do; he had to go to Vroengard. But he could not make that decision without consulting Saphira.

With a gentle nudge of his mind, he woke her, and once he had assured her that nothing was amiss, he shared his memories of

Solembum's visit. Her astonishment was as great as his.

When he finished, she said, *I do not like the thought of playing the puppet to whoever has enchanted the werecats.*

Neither do I, but what other choice do we have? If Galbatorix is behind this, then we'll be placing ourselves in his hands. But if we stay, then we'll be doing exactly the same, only when we arrive at Urû'baen.

The difference is, we would have the Varden and the elves with us.

That's true.

Silence fell between them for a time. Then Saphira said, *I agree. I agree; we should go. We need longer claws and sharper teeth if we are to best Galbatorix and Shruikan in addition to Murtagh and Thorn. Besides, Galbatorix expects us to rush straight to Urû'baen in hope of rescuing Nasuada. And if there is one thing that makes my scales itch, it is doing what our enemies expect.*

Eragon nodded. *And if this is a trap?*

A soft growl sounded outside the tent. *Then we will teach whoever set it to fear our names, even if it is Galbatorix.*

He smiled. For the first time since Nasuada's abduction, he felt a sense of purposeful direction. Here was something they could *do*—a means by which they could influence the unfolding of events, instead of just sitting by as passive observers. "Right, then," he muttered.

Arya arrived at his tent mere seconds after he contacted her. Her speed puzzled him until she explained that she had been keeping watch with Blödhgarm and the other elves, lest Murtagh and Thorn return.

With her there, Eragon reached out with his mind to Glaedr and coaxed him into joining their conversation, though the surly dragon was in no mood to talk.

Once the four of them, including Saphira, were all joined by their thoughts, Eragon finally burst out, *I know where the Rock of Kuthian is!*

What rock is this? Glaedr rumbled, his tone sour.

The name seems familiar, said Arya, *but I cannot place it.*

Eragon frowned slightly. Both of them had heard him speak of Solembum's advice before. It was not like either of them to forget.

Nevertheless, Eragon repeated the story of his encounter with Solembum in Teirm, and then he told them about the werecat's most recent revelations and read them the pertinent section from the book *Domia abr Wyrda*.

Arya tucked a strand of hair behind one of her pointed ears. Speaking both with her mind and her voice, she said, "And what is the name of this place again?"

"… Moraeta's Spire, or the Rock of Kuthian," replied Eragon in the same manner. He hesitated for a half second, briefly thrown by her

question. “It’s a long flight, but—”

—if Eragon and I leave forthwith— said Saphira.

“—we can travel there and back—”

—before the Varden arrive at Urû’baen. This—

“—is our only chance to go.”

We’ll not have the time—

“—to make the trip later on.”

Where would you be flying to, though? asked Glaedr.

“What … what do you mean?”

Exactly what I said, the dragon growled, the field of his mind darkening. *For all your yammering, you’ve yet to tell us where this mysterious … thing is located.*

“I have, though!” said Eragon, bewildered. “It’s on Vroengard Island!”

At last, a straightforward answer …

A frown creased Arya’s brow. “But what would you *do* on Vroengard?”

“I don’t know!” said Eragon, his temper rising. He debated whether it was worth confronting Glaedr about his remarks; the dragon seemed to be needling Eragon on purpose. “It depends on what we find. Once we’re there, we’ll try to open the Rock of Kuthian and discover whatever secrets it contains. If it’s a trap …” He shrugged. “Then we’ll fight.”

Arya’s expression grew increasingly troubled. “The Rock of Kuthian … The name seems weighted with significance, but I cannot say why; it echoes in my mind, like a song I once knew but have since forgotten.” She shook her head and put her hands to her temples. “Ah, now it is gone.…” She looked up. “Forgive me, what were we speaking of?”

“Going to Vroengard,” Eragon said slowly.

“Ah, yes … but for what purpose? You’re needed here, Eragon. In any case, nothing of value remains on Vroengard.”

Aye, said Glaedr. *It is a dead and abandoned place. After the destruction of Doru Araeba, the few of us who had escaped returned to search for anything that might be of use, but the Forsworn had already picked the ruins clean.*

Arya nodded. “Whatever put this idea in your head in the first place? I don’t understand how you could believe deserting the Varden now, when they’re at their most vulnerable, could possibly be wise. And for what? To fly to the far ends of Alagaësia without cause or reason? I had thought better of you.… You cannot leave just because you are uncomfortable with your new station, Eragon.”

Eragon decoupled his mind from Arya and Glaedr, and signaled to Saphira to do the same. *They don’t remember! … They* can’t *remember!*

It is magic. Deep magic, like the spell that hides the names of the dragons who betrayed the Riders.

But you haven't forgotten about the Rock of Kuthian, have you?

Of course not, she said, her mind flashing green with pique. *How could I when we are so closely joined?*

A sense of vertigo gripped Eragon as he considered the implications. *In order to be effective, the spell would have to erase the memories of everyone who knew about the rock in the first place and also the memories of anyone who heard or read about it thereafter. Which means … the whole of Alagaësia is in the thrall of this enchantment. No one can escape its reach.*

Except for us.

Except for us, he agreed. *And the werecats.*

And, perhaps, Galbatorix.

Eragon shivered; it felt as if spiders made of ice crystals were crawling up and down his spine. The size of the deception astounded him and left him feeling small, vulnerable. To cloud the minds of elves, dwarves, humans, and dragons alike, and without arousing the slightest hint of suspicion, was a feat so difficult, he doubted it could have been accomplished by a deliberate application of craft; rather, he believed it could only have been done by instinct, for such a spell would be far too complicated to put into words.

He *had* to know who was responsible for manipulating the minds of everyone in Alagaësia, and why. If it was Galbatorix, then Eragon feared that Solembum was right and the Varden's defeat was inevitable.

Do you think this was the work of dragons, as was the Banishing of the Names? he asked.

Saphira was slow to answer. *Perhaps. But then, as Solembum said to you, there are many powers in Alagaësia. Until we go to Vroengard, we won't know for certain one way or another.*

If ever we do.

Aye.

Eragon ran his fingers through his hair. He suddenly felt exceptionally tired. *Why does everything have to be so hard?* he wondered.

Because, said Saphira, *everyone wants to eat, but no one wants to be eaten.*

He snorted, grimly amused.

Despite the speed with which he and Saphira could exchange thoughts, their conversation had lasted long enough for Arya and Glaedr to notice.

"Why have you closed your minds to us?" asked Arya. Her gaze flicked toward one wall of the tent—the wall nearest to where Saphira

lay curled in the darkness beyond. “Is something wrong?”

You seem perturbed, Glaedr added.

Eragon stifled a humorless chuckle. “Perhaps because I am.” Arya watched with concern as he went over to the cot and sat on the edge. He let his arms hang limp and heavy between his legs. He was silent for a moment as he made the shift from the language of his birth to that of the elves and magic, whereupon he said, “Do you trust Saphira and me?”

The resulting pause was gratifyingly brief.

“I do,” replied Arya, also in the ancient language.

As do I, Glaedr likewise said.

Shall I, or shall you? Eragon quickly asked Saphira.

You want to tell them, so tell them.

Eragon looked up at Arya. Then, still in the ancient language, he said to both her and Glaedr, “Solembum has told me the name of a place, a place on Vroengard, where Saphira and I may find someone or some*thing* to help us defeat Galbatorix. However, the name is enchanted. Every time I say the name, you soon forget it.” A faint expression of shock appeared on Arya’s face. “Do you believe me?”

“I believe you,” Arya slowly said.

I believe that you *believe what you are saying*, Glaedr growled. *But that does not necessarily make it so*.

“How else can I prove it? You won’t remember if I tell you the name or share my memories with you. You could question Solembum, but again, what good would it do?”

What good? For one, we can prove that you haven’t been tricked or deceived by something that only appeared to be Solembum. And as for the spell, there may be a way to demonstrate its existence. Summon the werecat, and then we shall see what can be done.

Will you? Eragon asked Saphira. He thought that the werecat would be more likely to come if Saphira asked him.

A moment later, he felt her searching with her mind through the camp, and then he sensed the touch of Solembum’s consciousness against Saphira’s. After she and the werecat exchanged a brief, wordless communication, Saphira announced, *He is on his way*.

They waited in silence, Eragon staring down at his hands as he compiled a list of supplies he would need for the trip to Vroengard.

When Solembum pushed aside the flaps to the tent and entered, Eragon was surprised to see that he was now in his human form: that of a young boy, dark-eyed and insolent. In his left hand, the werecat held a leg of roast goose, on which he was gnawing. A ring of grease coated his lips and chin, and drops of melted fat had splattered his bare chest.

As he chewed on a strip of flesh, Solembum motioned with his

sharp, pointed chin toward the patch of dirt where Glaedr's heart of hearts lay buried. *What is it you want, firebreather?* he asked.

To know if you are who you seem to be! said Glaedr, and the dragon's consciousness seemed to surround Solembum's, pressing inward like piles of black clouds around a brightly burning but wind-battered flame. The dragon's strength was immense, and from personal experience, Eragon knew that few could hope to withstand him.

With a gargled yowl, Solembum spat out his mouthful of meat and sprang backward, as if he had stepped on a viper. He stood where he was, then, trembling with effort, his sharp teeth bared, and a look of such fury in his tawny eyes, Eragon placed his hand on the hilt of Brisingr as a precaution. The flame dimmed but held: a white-hot point of light amid a sea of churning thunderheads.

After a minute, the storm diminished and the clouds withdrew, although they did not disappear entirely.

My apologies, werecat, said Glaedr, *but I had to know for certain*.

Solembum hissed, and the hair on his head fluffed and spiked so that it resembled the blossom of a thistle. *If you still had your body, old one, I would cut off your tail for that*.

You, little cat? You could not have done more than scratch me.

Again Solembum hissed, and then he turned on his heel and stalked toward the entrance, his shoulders hunched close to his ears.

Wait, said Glaedr. *Did you tell Eragon about this place on Vroengard, this place of secrets that none can remember?*

The werecat paused, and without turning around, he growled and brandished the goose leg over his head in an impatient, dismissive gesture. *I did.*

And did you tell him the page in Domia abr Wyrda *wherein he found the location of this place?*

So it seems, but I have no memory of it, and I hope that whatever is on Vroengard singes your whiskers and burns your paws.

The entrance to the tent made a loud flapping sound as Solembum swatted it aside; then his small form melted into the shadows, as if he had never existed.

Eragon stood and, with the toe of his boot, pushed the scrap of half-eaten meat out of the tent.

"You should not have been so rough with him," said Arya.

I had no other choice, said Glaedr.

"Didn't you? You could have asked his permission first."

And given him the opportunity to prepare? No. It is done; let it be, Arya.

"I cannot. His pride is wounded. You should attempt to placate him. It would be dangerous to have a werecat as your enemy."

It is even more dangerous to have a dragon as your enemy. Let it be, elfling.

Troubled, Eragon exchanged looks with Arya. Glaedr's tone bothered him—and her as well, he could see—but Eragon could not decide what to do about it.

Now, Eragon, the golden dragon said, *will you allow me to examine the memories of your conversation with Solembum?*

"If you want, but … why? You'll only end up forgetting."

Perhaps. And then again, perhaps not. We shall see. Addressing Arya, Glaedr said, *Separate your mind from ours, and do not allow Eragon's memories to taint your consciousness*.

"As you wish, Glaedr-elda." As Arya spoke, the music of her thoughts grew ever more distant. A moment later, the eerie singing faded to silence.

Then Glaedr returned his attention to Eragon. *Show me*, he commanded.

Ignoring his trepidation, Eragon cast his mind back to when Solembum had first arrived at the tent, and he carefully recalled everything that had transpired between the two of them thereafter. Glaedr's consciousness melded with Eragon's so that the dragon could relive the experiences along with him. It was an unsettling sensation; it felt as if he and the dragon were two images stamped onto the same side of a coin.

When he finished, Glaedr withdrew somewhat from Eragon's mind and then, to Arya, said, *When I have forgotten, if I do, repeat to me the words "Andumë and Fírónmas at the hill of sorrows, and their flesh like glass." This place on Vroengard … I know of it. Or I once did. It was something of importance, something …* The dragon's thoughts grayed for a second, as if a layer of mist had been blown over the hills and valleys of his being, obscuring them. *Well?* he demanded, regaining his former brusque attitude. *Why do we tarry? Eragon, show me your memories*.

"I already have."

Even as Glaedr's mood turned to disbelief, Arya said, "Glaedr, remember: 'Andumë and Fírónmas at the hill of sorrows, and their flesh like glass.' "

How—Glaedr started, and then he growled with such force, Eragon almost expected to hear the sound out loud. *Argh. I hate spells that interfere with one's memory. They're the worst form of magic, always leading to chaos and confusion. Half the time they seem to end with family members killing one another without realizing it.*

What does the phrase you used mean? Saphira asked.

Nothing, except to me and Oromis. But that was the point; no one would know of it unless I told them.

Arya sighed. "So the spell is real. I suppose you have to go to Vroengard, then. To ignore something of this importance would be

folly. If nothing else, we need to know who the spider is at the center of this web."

I shall go as well, said Glaedr. *If someone means to harm you, they may not expect to fight two dragons instead of one. In any event, you will need a guide. Vroengard has become a dangerous place since the destruction of the Riders, and I would not have you fall prey to some forgotten evil*.

Eragon hesitated as he noticed a strange yearning in Arya's gaze, and he realized that she wanted to accompany them as well. "Saphira will fly faster if she only has to carry one person," he said in a quiet voice.

"I know.… Only, I always wanted to visit the home of the Riders."

"I'm sure you will. Someday."

She nodded. "Someday."

Eragon took a moment to marshal his energy and reflect on everything that needed to be done before he, Saphira, and Glaedr could leave. Then he drew a deep breath and rose from the cot.

"Captain Garven!" he called. "Will you please join us?"

DEPARTURE

First, Eragon had Garven, with all secrecy, send one of the Nighthawks to collect provisions for the trip to Vroengard. Saphira had eaten after the capture of Dras-Leona, but she had not gorged herself, else she would have been too slow and too heavy to fight if the need arose, as indeed it had. She was well enough fed, then, to fly to Vroengard without stopping, but once there, Eragon knew she would have to find food on or around the island, which worried him.

I can always fly back on an empty stomach, she assured him, but he was not so certain.

Next Eragon sent a runner to bring Jörmundur and Blödhgarm to his tent. Once they arrived, it took Eragon, Arya, and Saphira another hour to explain the situation to them and—harder still—to convince them that the trip was necessary. Blödhgarm was the easiest to win over to their point of view, whereas Jörmundur objected vociferously. Not because he doubted the veracity of the information from Solembum, nor even because he doubted its importance—on both those points he accepted Eragon's word without question—but, as he argued with increasing vehemence, because it would destroy the Varden if they woke to find not only that Nasuada had been kidnapped but that Eragon and Saphira had vanished to parts unknown.

"Furthermore, we don't dare let Galbatorix think that you've left us," Jörmundur said. "Not when we're so close to Urû'baen. He might send Murtagh and Thorn to intercept you. Or he might take the opportunity to crush the Varden once and for all. We can't risk it."

His concerns, Eragon was forced to acknowledge, were valid.

After much discussion, they finally arrived at a solution: Blödhgarm and the other elves would create apparitions of both Eragon and Saphira, even as they had created one of Eragon when he had gone to the Beor Mountains to participate in the election and coronation of Hrothgar's successor.

The images would appear to be perfect living, breathing, thinking replicas of Eragon and Saphira, but their minds would be empty, and if anyone peered into them, the ruse would be discovered. As a result, the image of Saphira would be unable to speak, and although the elves could feign speech on the part of Eragon, that too would be better to avoid, lest some oddity of diction alert those listening that all was not as it seemed. The limitations of the illusions meant that they

would work best at a distance and that the people who had reason to interact with Eragon and Saphira on a more personal basis—such as the kings Orrin and Orik—would soon realize that something was amiss.

So Eragon ordered Garven to wake all the Nighthawks and bring them to him as discreetly as possible. When the whole company was gathered before his tent, Eragon explained to the motley group of men, dwarves, and Urgals why he and Saphira were leaving, although he was purposefully vague about the details and he kept their destination a secret. Then he explained how the elves were going to conceal their absence, and he had the men swear oaths of secrecy in the ancient language. He trusted them, but one could never be too careful where Galbatorix and his spies were concerned.

Afterward, Eragon and Arya visited Orrin, Orik, Roran, and the sorceress Trianna. As with the Nighthawks, they explained the situation and from each of them extracted oaths of secrecy.

King Orrin, as Eragon expected, proved to be the most intransigent. He expressed outrage at the prospect of either Eragon or Saphira traveling to Vroengard and railed at length against the idea. He questioned Eragon's bravery, questioned the value of Solembum's information, and threatened to withdraw his forces from the Varden if Eragon continued to pursue such a foolish, misguided course. It took over an hour of threats, flattery, and coaxing to bring him around, and even then, Eragon feared Orrin might go back on his word.

The visits to Orik, Roran, and Trianna went faster, but Eragon and Arya still had to spend what seemed to Eragon an unreasonable amount of time talking with them. Impatience made him curt and restless; he wanted to be off, and every minute that passed only increased his sense of urgency.

As he and Arya went from person to person, Eragon was also aware, through his link with Saphira, of the elves' faint, lilting chanting, which underlay everything he heard, like a strip of cunningly woven fabric hidden beneath the surface of the world.

Saphira had remained at his tent, and the elves were ringed about her, their arms outstretched and the tips of their fingers touching while they sang. The purpose of their long, complicated spell was to collect the visual information they would need in order to create an accurate representation of Saphira. It was difficult enough to imitate the shape of an elf or a human; a dragon was harder still, especially given the refractive nature of her scales. Even so, the most complicated part of the illusion, as Blödhgarm had told Eragon, would be reproducing the effects of Saphira's weight on her surroundings every time her apparition took off or landed.

When at last Eragon and Arya had finished making their rounds, night had already given way to day, and the morning sun hung a handsbreadth above the horizon. By its light, the damage wrought upon the camp during the attack seemed even greater.

Eragon would have been happy to depart with Saphira and Glaedr then, but Jörmundur insisted that he address the Varden at least once, properly, as their new leader.

Therefore, soon afterward, once the army was assembled, Eragon found himself standing in the back of an empty wagon, looking out over a field of upturned faces—some human and some not—and wishing he were anywhere but there.

Eragon had asked Roran for advice beforehand, and Roran had told him, "Remember, they're not your enemies. You have nothing to fear from them. They *want* to like you. Speak clearly, speak honestly, and whatever you do, keep your doubts to yourself. That's the way to win them over. They're going to be frightened and dismayed once you tell them about Nasuada. Give them the reassurance they need, and they'll follow you through the very gates of Urû'baen."

Despite Roran's encouragement, Eragon still felt apprehensive before his speech. He had rarely spoken to large groups before, and never for more than a few lines. As he gazed at the sun-darkened, battle-worn warriors before him, he decided that he would rather fight a hundred enemies by himself than have to stand up in public and risk the disapproval of others.

Until the moment he opened his mouth, Eragon was not sure what he was going to say. Once he started, the words seemed to pour out of their own accord, but he was so tense, he could not remember much of what he said. The speech passed in a blur; his main impressions were of heat and sweat, the groans of the warriors when they learned of Nasuada's fate, the ragged cheers when he exhorted them to victory, and the general roar from the crowd when he finished. With relief, he jumped down from the back of the wagon to where Arya and Orik were waiting next to Saphira.

As he did, his guards formed a circle around the four of them, shielding them from the crowd and holding back those who wished to speak with him.

"Well done, Eragon!" said Orik, clapping him on the arm.

"Was it?" Eragon asked, feeling dazed.

"You were most eloquent," said Arya.

Eragon shrugged, embarrassed. It intimidated him to remember that Arya had known most of the leaders of the Varden, and he could not help but think that Ajihad or his predecessor, Deynor, would have done a better job with the speech.

Orik pulled on his sleeve. Eragon bent toward the dwarf. In a voice

barely loud enough to be heard over the crowd, Orik said, “I hope that whatever you find is worth the trip, my friend. Take care you don’t get yourselves killed, eh?”

“I’ll try not to.”

To Eragon’s surprise, Orik grabbed him by the forearm and pulled him into a rough embrace. “May Gûntera watch over you.” As they separated, Orik reached over and slapped the palm of his hand against Saphira’s side. “And you as well, Saphira. Safe journeys to the both of you.”

Saphira responded with a low hum.

Eragon looked over at Arya. He suddenly felt awkward, unable to think of anything but the most obvious things to say. The beauty of her eyes still captivated him; the effect she had on him never seemed to lessen.

Then she took his head in her hands, and she kissed him once, formally, on the brow.

Eragon stared at her, dumbstruck.

“Guliä waíse medh ono, Argetlam.” Luck be with you, Silverhand.

As she released him, he caught her hands in his own. “Nothing bad is going to happen to us. I won’t let it. Not even if Galbatorix is waiting for us. If I have to, I’ll tear apart mountains with my bare hands, but I promise, we’re going to make it back safely.”

Before she could respond, he let go of her hands and climbed onto Saphira’s back. The crowd began to cheer again as they saw him settle into the saddle. He waved to them, and they redoubled their efforts, stamping their feet and pounding their shields with the pommels of their swords.

Eragon saw Blödhgarm and the other elves gathered in a close-knit group, half hidden behind a nearby pavilion. He nodded to them, and they nodded in return. The plan was simple: He and Saphira would set off as if they intended to patrol the skies and scout the land ahead—as they normally did when the army was on the march—but after circling the camp a few times, Saphira would fly into a cloud, and Eragon would cast a spell that would render her invisible to those watching from below. Then the elves would create the hollow wraiths that would take Eragon and Saphira’s place while they continued on with their journey, and it would be the wraiths that onlookers would see emerge from the cloud. Hopefully, none would notice the difference.

With practiced ease, Eragon tightened the straps around his legs and checked that the saddlebags behind him were properly secured. He took special care with the one on his left, for packed within it—well swaddled with clothes and blankets—was the velvet-lined chest that contained Glaedr’s precious heart of hearts, his Eldunarí.

Let us be off, the old dragon said.

To Vroengard! Saphira exclaimed, and the world pitched and plunged around Eragon as she leaped off the ground, and a rush of air buffeted him as she flapped her massive, batlike wings, driving them higher and higher into the sky.

Eragon tightened his grip on the neck spike in front of him, lowered his head against the speed-induced wind, and stared at the polished leather of his saddle. He took a deep breath and tried to stop worrying about what lay behind them and what lay before them. There was nothing he could do now but wait—wait and hope that Saphira could fly to Vroengard and back before the Empire attacked the Varden again; hope that Roran and Arya would be safe; hope that he might somehow still be able to rescue Nasuada; and hope that going to Vroengard was the right decision, for the time was fast approaching when he would finally have to face Galbatorix.

The Torment of Uncertainty

Nasuada opened her eyes.

Tiles covered the dark, vaulted ceiling, and upon the tiles were painted angular patterns of red, blue, and gold: a complex matrix of lines that trapped her gaze for a mindless while.

At last she mustered the will to look away.

A steady orange glow emanated from a source somewhere behind her. The glow was just strong enough to reveal the shape of the octagonal room, but not so bold as to dispel the shadows that clung like gauze to the corners above and below.

She swallowed and found her throat was dry.

The surface she lay on was cold, smooth, and uncomfortably hard; it felt like stone against her heels and the pads of her fingers. A chill had crept into her bones, and it was that which caused her to realize the only thing she wore was the thin white shift she slept in.

Where am I?

The memories returned all at once, without sense or order: an unwelcome cavalcade that thundered into her mind with a force almost physical in its intensity.

She gasped and tried to sit upright—to bolt, to flee, to fight if she had to—but found she was unable to move more than a fraction of an inch in any direction. There were padded manacles around her wrists and ankles, and a thick leather belt held her head firmly against the slab, preventing her from lifting or turning it.

She strained against her bonds, but they were too strong for her to break.

Letting out her breath, she went limp and stared at the ceiling again. Her pulse hammered in her ears, like a maddened drumbeat. Heat suffused her body; her cheeks burned, and her hands and feet felt as if they were filled with molten tallow.

So this is how I die.

For a moment, despair and self-pity bedeviled her. She had barely begun her life, yet now it was about to end, and in the vilest, most miserable manner possible. What was worse, she had accomplished none of the things she had hoped to. Not war, not love, not birth, not life. Her only offspring were battles and corpses and trundling supply trains; stratagems too numerous to remember; oaths of friendship and fealty now worth less than a mummer's promise; and a halting, fractious, all-too-vulnerable army led by a Rider younger than she was

herself. It seemed a poor legacy for the memory of her name. And a memory would be all that remained. She was the last of her line. When she died, there would be no one left to continue her family.

The thought pained her, and she berated herself for not having borne children when she could.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, seeing the face of her father before her.

Then she disciplined herself and put aside her despair. The only control she had over the situation was self-control, and she was not about to relinquish it for the dubious pleasure of indulging her doubts, fears, and regrets. As long as she was the master of her thoughts and feelings, she was not entirely helpless. It was the smallest of freedoms —that of one's own mind—but she was grateful for it, and knowing that it might soon be torn away made her all the more determined to exercise it.

In any event, she still had one final duty to perform: to resist her interrogation. To that end, she would need to be in full command of herself. Otherwise, she would break quickly.

She slowed her breathing and concentrated on the regular flow of air through her throat and nostrils, letting that sensation crowd out all others. When she felt appropriately calm, she set about deciding what was safe to think about. So many subjects were dangerous—dangerous to her, dangerous to the Varden, dangerous to their allies, or dangerous to Eragon and Saphira. She did not review the things she ought to avoid, which might have given her jailers the information they wanted then and there. Instead, she picked a handful of thoughts and memories that seemed benign and strove to ignore the rest—strove to convince herself that everything she was, and had ever been, consisted of only those few elements.

In essence, she attempted to create a new and simpler identity for herself so that, when asked questions about this or that, she could, with complete honesty, plead ignorance. It was a dangerous technique; for it to work, she had to believe her own deception, and if she was ever freed, it might be difficult to reclaim her true personality.

But then, she had no hope of rescue or release. All she dared hope for was to frustrate the designs of her captors.

Gokukara, give me the strength to endure the trials before me. Watch over your little owlet, and should I die, carry me safely from this place … carry me safely to the fields of my father.

Her gaze wandered about the tile-covered room as she studied it in greater detail. She guessed she was in Urû'baen. It was only logical that Murtagh and Thorn would have taken her there, and it would explain the elvish look of the room; the elves had built much of Urû'baen, the city they called Ilirea, either before their war with the

dragons—long, long ago—or after the city had become the capital of the Broddring Kingdom and the Riders had established a formal presence therein.

Or so her father had told her. She remembered nothing of the city herself.

Still, she might be somewhere else entirely: one of Galbatorix's private estates, perhaps. And the room might not even exist as she perceived it. A skilled magician could manipulate everything she saw, felt, heard, and smelled, could distort the world around her in ways she would never notice.

Whatever happened to her—whatever *seemed* to happen to her—she would not allow herself to be tricked. Even if Eragon broke down the door and cut her loose, she would still believe that it was a ruse of her captors. She dared not trust the evidence of her senses.

The moment Murtagh had taken her from the camp, the world had become a lie, and there was no telling when the lie would end, if ever it did. The only thing she could be certain of was that she existed. All else was suspect, even her own thoughts.

After her initial shock subsided, the tedium of waiting began to wear on her. She had no way to tell time other than her hunger and thirst, and her hunger waxed and waned at seemingly irregular intervals. She tried marking off the hours by counting numbers, but the practice bored her, and she always seemed to forget her place once she reached the tens of thousands.

Despite the horrors she was sure awaited her, she wished her captors would hurry up and show themselves. She shouted for minutes on end, but heard only plaintive echoes in response.

The dull light behind her never wavered, never dimmed; she assumed it was a flameless lantern similar to those the dwarves made. The glow made it hard to sleep, but eventually exhaustion overcame her and she dozed off.

The prospect of dreaming terrified her. She was most vulnerable when asleep, and she feared that her unconscious mind would conjure up the very information she was trying to keep hidden. She had little choice in the matter, however. Sooner or later, she had to sleep, and forcing herself to stay awake would only end up making her feel worse.

So she slept. But her rest was fitful and unsatisfying, and she still felt tired when she woke.

A boom startled her.

Somewhere above and behind her, she heard a latch being lifted, and then the creak of a door swinging open.

Her pulse quickened. As best she could tell, over a day had passed

since she had first regained consciousness. She was painfully thirsty, her tongue felt swollen and sticky, and her entire body ached from being confined in one position for so long.

Footsteps descending stairs. Soft-soled boots shuffling against stone. … A pause. Metal clinked. Keys? Knives? Something worse? … Then the footsteps resumed. Now they were approaching her. Drawing closer … closer …

A portly man dressed in a gray woolen tunic entered her field of vision, carrying a silver platter with an assortment of food: cheese, bread, meat, wine, and water. He stooped and placed the platter by the base of the wall, then turned and walked over to her, his stride short, quick, and precise. Dainty, almost.

Wheezing slightly, he leaned against the edge of the slab and stared down at her. His head was like a gourd: bulbous at the top, bulbous at the bottom, and narrow in the middle. He was clean-shaven and mostly bald, except for a fringe of dark, close-cropped hair that ran about his skull. The upper part of his forehead was shiny, his fleshy cheeks were ruddy, and his lips were as gray as his tunic. His eyes were unremarkable: brown and close-set.

He smacked his tongue, and she saw that his teeth met on end, like the jaws of a clamp, and that they protruded farther than normal from the rest of his face, giving him a slight but noticeable muzzle.

On his warm, moist breath hung the smell of liver and onions. In her famished condition, she found the odor nauseating.

She was acutely aware of her state of undress as the man's gaze roamed over her body. It made her feel vulnerable, as if she were a toy or a pet laid out for his enjoyment. Anger and humiliation brought a hot flush to her cheeks.

Determined not to wait for him to make his intentions known, she tried to speak, to ask him for water, but her throat was too parched; all she could do was croak.

The gray-suited man tutted and, to her astonishment, began to undo her restraints.

The moment she was free, she sat up on the slab, formed a blade with her right hand, and swung it toward the side of the man's neck.

He caught her wrist in midair, seemingly without effort. She growled and jabbed at his eyes with the fingers of her other hand.

Again he caught her wrist. She wrenched back and forth, but his grip was too strong to break; her wrists might as well have been encased in stone.

Frustrated, she lunged forward and sank her teeth into the man's right forearm. Hot blood gushed into her mouth, salty and coppery. She choked but kept biting down even as blood leaked out from under her lips. Between her teeth and against her tongue, she could feel the

muscles of the man's forearm flexing like so many trapped snakes trying to escape.

Other than that, he failed to react.

At last she released his arm, drew back her head, and spat his blood onto his face.

Even then the man continued to regard her with the same flat expression, neither blinking nor showing any sign of pain or anger.

She wrenched at his hands once more, then swung her hips and legs around on the slab to kick him in the stomach.

Before she could land the blow, he let go of her left wrist and slapped her across the face, hard.

A white light flashed behind her eyes, and a soundless explosion seemed to erupt around her. Her head snapped to one side, her teeth clacked together, and pain lanced down her spine from the base of her skull.

When her sight cleared, she sat glaring at the man, but she made no move to attack him again. She understood she was at his mercy.… She understood she needed to find something to cut his throat or stab him through the eye if she was going to overpower him.

He let go of her other wrist and reached into his tunic to retrieve a dull white kerchief. He dabbed at his face, wiping off every drop of blood and spittle. Then he tied the kerchief around his injured forearm, using his clamplike teeth to hold one end of the cloth.

She flinched as he reached out and grasped her by the upper arm, his large, thick fingers encircling her limb. He pulled her off the ash-colored slab, and her legs gave way as she struck the floor. She hung like a doll from the man's grip, her arm twisted at an awkward angle above her head.

He hoisted her onto her feet. This time her legs held. Half supporting her, he guided her around to a small side door she had been unable to see from where she lay on her back. Next to it was a short flight of stairs that led to a second, larger door—the same door through which her jailer had entered. It was closed, but there was a small metal grate in the middle, and through it she glimpsed a well-lit tapestry hanging against a smooth stone wall.

The man pushed open the side door and escorted her into a narrow privy chamber. To her relief, he left her there alone. She searched the bare room for anything she could use as a weapon or a means to escape but, to her disappointment, found only dust, wood shavings, and, more ominously, dried bloodstains.

So she did what she was expected to do, and when she emerged from the privy chamber, the sweating, gray-suited man took her arm again and walked her back to the slab.

As they neared it, she began to kick and struggle; she would rather

be hit than allow him to restrain her as before. For all her efforts, however, she could not stop or slow the man. His limbs were like iron beneath her blows, and even his seemingly soft paunch gave but little when she struck it.

Handling her as easily as if she were a small child, he lifted her onto the slab, pressed her shoulders flat against the stone, and then locked the manacles around her wrists and ankles. Lastly, he pulled the leather belt over her forehead and cinched it down, hard enough to hold her head in place but not so hard as to cause her pain.

She expected him to go and eat his lunch—or supper, or whatever meal it was—but instead he picked up the platter, carried it over to her, and offered her a drink of watered wine.

It was difficult to swallow while lying on her back, so she had to quickly sip the liquid from the silver chalice he pressed to her mouth. The feeling of the diluted wine coursing down her dry throat was one of cool, soothing relief.

When the chalice was empty, the man put it aside, cut slices of bread and cheese, and held them out toward her.

"What …," she said, her voice finally responding to her commands. "What is your name?"

The man gazed at her without emotion. His bulbous forehead gleamed like polished ivory in the light of the flameless lantern.

He pushed the bread and cheese toward her.

"Who are you? … Is this Urû'baen? Are you a prisoner like me? We could help each other, you and I. Galbatorix isn't all-knowing. Together we could find a way to escape. It may seem impossible, but it isn't, I promise." She continued to speak in a low, calm voice, hoping to say something that would either gain the man's sympathy or appeal to his self-interest.

She knew she could be persuasive—long hours of negotiating on the Varden's behalf had proven that to her satisfaction—but her words seemed to have no effect on the man. Save for his breathing, he might as well have been dead as he stood there, bread and cheese extended. That he was deaf occurred to her, but he had noticed when she tried to ask for water, so she dismissed the possibility.

She talked until she exhausted every argument and appeal she could think of, and when she stopped—pausing to find a different approach—the man placed the cheese and bread against her lips and held it there. Furious, she willed him to take it away, but his hand never budged, and he continued to stare at her with the same blank, disinterested look.

The nape of her neck prickled as she realized his manner was not an affectation; she really did mean nothing to him. She would have understood if he hated her, or if he had taken a perverse pleasure in

tormenting her, or if he had been a slave reluctantly carrying out Galbatorix's orders, but none of those things seemed true. Rather, he was indifferent, devoid of even the slightest shred of empathy. He would, she had no doubt, kill her just as readily as he would tend to her, and with no more concern than one might have for crushing an ant.

Silently cursing the necessity of it, she opened her mouth and allowed him to place the pieces of bread and cheese on her tongue, despite the urge she felt to bite his fingers.

He fed her. Like a child. By hand, putting each morsel of food into her mouth as carefully as if it were a hollow orb of glass that might shatter at any sudden movement.

A deep sense of loathing gathered within her. To go from being the leader of the greatest alliance in the history of Alagaësia to—No, no, none of that existed. She was her father's daughter. She had lived in Surda in the dust and the heat, among the echoing calls of the merchants in the bustling marketplace streets. That was all. She had no reason to be haughty, no reason to resent her fall.

Nevertheless, she hated the man looming over her. She hated that he insisted on feeding her when she could have done so herself. She hated that Galbatorix, or whoever was overseeing her captivity, was trying to strip her of her pride and dignity. And she hated that, to a degree, they were succeeding.

She was, she decided, going to kill the man. If she could accomplish only one more thing in her life, she wanted it to be the death of her jailer. Short of escape, nothing else would give her as much satisfaction. *Whatever it takes, I'll find a way*.

The idea pleased her, and she ate the rest of the meal with relish, all the while plotting how she might arrange the man's demise.

When she was finished, the man took the tray and left.

She listened to his footsteps recede, to the door opening and closing behind her, to the *snick* of the latch snapping shut, and then to the heavy, doom-laden sound of a beam falling into place across the outside of the door.

Then once again she was alone, with nothing to do but wait and dwell upon the ways of murder.

For a while, she amused herself by tracing one of the lines painted on the ceiling and attempting to determine whether it had a beginning or an end. The line she chose was blue; the color appealed to her because of its associations with the one person whom, above all else, she dared not think of.

In time, she grew bored with the lines and with her fantasies of revenge, and she closed her eyes and slipped into an uneasy half sleep,

where the hours seemed, with the paradoxical logic of nightmares, to pass both faster and slower than normal.

When the man in the gray tunic returned, she was almost glad to see him, a reaction for which she despised herself, considering it a weakness.

She was not sure how long she had been waiting—could not be sure unless someone told her—but she knew it had been a shorter period than before. Still, the wait had felt interminable, and she had feared that she was to be left strapped down and isolated—though not ignored, surely not that—for the same drawn-out stretch. To her disgust, she found herself grateful that the man was going to visit her more often than she had originally thought. Lying motionless on a flat piece of stone for so many hours was painful enough, but to be denied contact with any other living creature—even one as lumpish and abhorrent as her jailer—was a torture in and of itself and was by far the harder trial to bear.

As the man unlocked her from her restraints, she noted that the wound on his forearm had been healed; the skin was as smooth and pink as a suckling pig's.

She refrained from fighting, but on the way to the privy room, she pretended to stumble and fall, hoping to get near enough to the platter that she might steal the small paring knife the man used to cut the food. However, the platter proved too far away, and the man was too heavy for her to drag toward it without alerting him to her intentions. Her ploy having failed, she forced herself to submit calmly to the rest of the man's ministrations; she needed to convince him that she had given up so he would grow complacent and, if she was lucky, careless.

While he fed her, she studied his fingernails. Previously, she had been too angry to pay them heed, but now that she was calmer, the oddity of them fascinated her.

His nails were thick and highly arched. They were set deep within the flesh, and the white moons by the cuticles were large and broad. In all, no different from the nails of many of the men and dwarves she had dealt with.

When had she dealt with them? … She did not remember.

What set his nails apart was the care with which they had been cultivated. And *cultivated* seemed the right description to her, as if the nails were rare flowers a gardener had devoted long hours to tending. The cuticles were neat and trim, with no sign of tears, while the nails themselves had been cut straight across—not too long, not too short—and the edges smoothly beveled. The tops of the nails had been polished until they shone like glazed pottery, and the skin surrounding them looked as if oil or butter had been rubbed into it.

Except for elves, she had never seen a man with such perfect nails.

Elves? She shook off the thought, irritated with herself. She knew no elves.

The nails were an enigma; a strangeness in an otherwise understandable setting; a mystery that she wanted to solve, even though it was probably futile to try.

She wondered who was responsible for the nails' exemplary condition. Was it the man himself? He seemed overly fastidious, and she could not imagine he had a wife or daughter or servant or anyone else close to him who would lavish so much attention on the caps of his fingers. Of course, she realized she might be mistaken. Many a battle-scarred veteran—grim, close-mouthed men whose only loves seemed to be wine, women, and war—had surprised her with some facet of their character that was at odds with their outward guise: a knack for wood carving, a tendency to memorize romantic poems, a fondness for hounds, or a fierce devotion to a family that they kept hidden from the rest of the world. It had been years before she had learned that Jör—

She cut off the thought before it went any further.

In any event, the question she kept turning over in her mind was a simple one: why? Motivation was telling, even when such small things as fingernails were concerned.

If the nails were the work of someone else, then they were a labor of either great love or great fear. But she doubted that was the case; somehow it felt wrong.

If, instead, they were the work of the man himself, then any number of explanations were possible. Perhaps his nails were a way for him to exert a modicum of control over a life that was no longer his own. Or perhaps he felt they were the only part of himself that was or could be attractive. Or perhaps caring for them was merely a nervous tic, a habit that served no other purpose except to while away the hours.

Whatever the truth might be, the fact remained that *someone* had cleaned and trimmed and buffed and oiled his fingernails, and it had not been a casual or inattentive effort.

She continued to ponder the matter while she ate, barely tasting her food. Occasionally, she glanced up to search the man's heavy face for one clue or another, but always without success.

Upon feeding her the last piece of bread, the man pushed himself off the edge of the slab, picked up the platter, and turned away.

She chewed and swallowed the bread as fast as she could without choking; then, her voice hoarse and creaky from disuse, she said, "You have nice fingernails. They're very … shiny."

The man paused in midstep, and his large, ponderous head swiveled toward her. For a moment, she thought he might strike her again, but

then his gray lips slowly split and he smiled at her, showing both his upper and lower rows of teeth.

She suppressed a shudder; he looked as if he were about to bite the head off a chicken.

Still with the same unsettling expression, the man continued out of her range of sight, and a few seconds later, she heard the door to her cell open and close.

Her own smile crept across her lips. Pride and vanity were weaknesses that she could exploit. If there was one thing she was skilled at, it was the ability to bend others to her will. The man had given her the tiniest of handholds—no more than a fingerhold, really, or rather a finger*nail*-hold, as it were—but it was all she needed. Now she could begin to climb.

THE HALL OF THE SOOTHSAYER

The third time the man visited her, Nasuada was sleeping. The sound of the door banging open caused her to jolt awake, heart pounding.

It took her a few seconds to remember where she was. When she did, she frowned and blinked, trying to clear her eyes. She wished she could rub them.

Her frown deepened as she looked down her body and saw that there was still a small damp spot on her shift where a drop of watered wine had fallen during her meal.

Why has he returned so soon?

Her heart sank as the man walked past her carrying a large copper brazier full of charcoal, which he set upon its legs a few feet away from the slab. Resting in the charcoal were three long irons.

The time she had dreaded had finally arrived.

She tried to catch his eye, but the man refused to look at her as he took flint and steel from a pouch on his belt and lit a nest of shredded tinder in the center of the brazier. As sparks smoldered and spread, the tinder glowed like a ball of red-hot wires. The man bent, puckered his lips, and blew on the incipient fire, gentle as a mother kissing her child, and the sparks sprang into lambent flames.

For several minutes, he tended the fire, building a bed of coals several inches thick, the smoke rising to a grate far above. She watched with morbid fascination, unable to tear her gaze away, despite what she knew awaited her. Neither he nor she spoke; it was as if they were both too ashamed of what was about to take place for either to acknowledge it.

He blew on the coals again, then turned as if to approach her.

Don't give in, she told herself, stiffening.

She clenched her fists and held her breath as the man walked toward her … closer … closer …

A feather-like touch of wind brushed her face as he strode past her, and she listened to his footsteps dwindle into silence as he climbed the stairs and left the room.

A faint gasp escaped her as she relaxed slightly. Like lodestones, the bright coals drew her gaze back toward them. A dull, rust-colored glow was creeping up the iron rods that stuck out of the brazier.

She wet her mouth and thought how nice a drink of water would be.

One of the coals jumped and split in two, but otherwise the

chamber was quiet.

As she lay there, unable to fight or escape, she strove not to think. Thinking would only weaken her resolve. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen, and no amount of fear or anxiety could change that.

New footsteps sounded in the hallway outside the chamber: a group of them this time, some marching in rhythm, some not. Together they created a host of raucous echoes that made it impossible to determine the number of people approaching. The procession stopped by the doorway, and she heard voices murmuring, and then two sets of clacking footsteps—the product of hard-soled riding boots, she guessed—entered the room.

The door closed with a hollow thud.

Down the stairs the footsteps came, steady and deliberate. She saw someone's arm place a carved wooden chair at the very edge of her vision.

A man sat in it.

He was large: not fat, but broad-shouldered. A long black cape hung draped around him. It looked heavy, as if backed with mail. Light from the coals and from the flameless lantern gilded the edges of his form, but his features remained too dark to make out. Still, the shadows did nothing to hide the outline of the sharp, pointed crown that rested upon his brow.

Her heart skipped a beat. With a struggle, it resumed its previous rapid tempo.

A second man, this one dressed in a maroon jerkin and leggings—both trimmed with gold thread—walked over to the brazier and stood with his back to her while he stirred the coals with one of the iron rods.

One by one, the man in the chair tugged on the fingers of his gauntlets. Then he pulled off the gloves. Underneath, his hands were the color of tarnished bronze.

When he spoke, his voice was low, rich, and commanding. Any bard who possessed such a mellifluous instrument would have his name praised throughout the land as a master of masters. The sound of it caused her skin to prickle; his words seemed to wash over her like warm waves of water, caressing her, beguiling her, binding her. Listening to him, she realized, was as perilous as listening to Elva.

"Welcome to Urû'baen, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad," said the man in the chair. "Welcome to this, my home, 'neath these ancient, piled rocks. Long has it been since a guest as distinguished as yourself has graced us with their presence. My energies have been occupied elsewhere, but I assure you, from now on, I shall not neglect my duties as host." At the last, a note of menace crept into his voice, like a claw

emerging from its sheath.

She had never seen Galbatorix in person, only heard descriptions and studied drawings, but the effect the man's speech had on her was so visceral, so powerful, she had no doubt that he indeed was the king.

In both his accent as well as his diction, there was something of the *other*, as if the language he spoke was not the language he had been raised with. It was a subtle difference, but impossible to ignore once she noticed. Perhaps, she decided, it was because the language had changed in the years since he had been born. That seemed the most reasonable explanation, as his way of speaking reminded her—No, no, it reminded her of nothing.

He leaned forward, and she could feel his gaze boring into her.

"You are younger than I expected. I knew you had but recently come of age, but still, you are no more than a child. Most seem as children to me these days: prancing, preening, foolhardy children who know not what is best for them—children who need the guidance of those who are older and wiser."

"Such as yourself?" she said in a scornful tone.

She heard him chuckle. "Would you rather the elves ruled over us? I am the only one of our race who can hold them at bay. By their reckoning, even our oldest graybeards would be considered untested youths, unfit for the responsibilities of adulthood."

"By their reckoning, so would you." She did not know where her courage came from, but she felt strong and defiant. Whether or not the king would punish her for it, she was determined to speak her mind.

"Ah, but I contain more than my share of years. The memories of hundreds are mine. Life piled upon life: loves, hates, battles, victories, defeats, lessons learned, mistakes made—all lie within my mind, whispering their wisdom into my ears. I remember *eons*. In the whole of recorded history, there has never been one such as I, not even among the elves."

"How is that possible?" she whispered.

He shifted in the chair. "Do not think to pretend with me, Nasuada. I know that Glaedr gave his heart of hearts to Eragon and Saphira, and that he is there, with the Varden, even now. You understand whereof I speak."

She suppressed a thrill of fear. The fact that Galbatorix was willing to discuss such things with her—that he was willing to refer, even obliquely, to the source of his power—eliminated what little hope she still had that he ever intended to release her.

Then he gestured at the room with his gauntlets. "Before we proceed, you should know something of the history of this place.

When the elves first ventured to this part of the world, they discovered a crevice buried deep within the escarpment that looms over the plains hereabout. The escarpment they prized as defense against the attacks of dragons, but the crevice they prized for an entirely different reason. By happenstance, they discovered that the vapors rising out of the crack in the stone increased the chances that those who slept near it might catch a glimpse, if however confused, of future events. So, over two and a half thousand years ago, the elves built this room atop the fissure, and an oracle came to live here for many hundreds of years, even after the elves abandoned the rest of Ilirea. She sat where you now lie, and she whiled away the centuries dreaming of all that had been and all that might be.

"In time, the air lost its potency and the oracle and her attendants departed. Who she was and where she went, none can say for sure. She had no name other than the title Soothsayer, and certain stories lead me to believe she was neither elf nor dwarf but something else entirely. Be that as it may, during her residency, this chamber came to be called, as you might expect, the Hall of the Soothsayer, and so it still is today—only now *you* are the soothsayer, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad."

Galbatorix spread his arms. "This is a place for truths to be told … and heard. I will tolerate no lies within these walls, not even the simplest of falsehoods. Whosoever rests upon that hard block of stone becomes the latest soothsayer, and though many have found that role difficult to accept, in the end, none have refused. You will be no different."

The legs of the chair scraped over the floor, and then she felt Galbatorix's breath warm against her ear. "I know this will be painful for you, Nasuada, painful beyond belief. You will have to unmake yourself before your pride will allow you to submit. In all the world, nothing is harder than changing one's own self. I understand this, for I have reshaped myself on more than one occasion. However, I will be here to hold your hand and help you through this transition. You need not take the journey alone. And you may console yourself with the knowledge that I will never lie to you. None of us shall. Not within this room. Doubt me if you wish, but in time you will come to believe me. I consider this a hallowed place, and I would no more desecrate the idea it represents than cut off my own hand. You may ask whatever you want, and I promise you, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad, that we shall answer truthfully. As king of these lands, I give you my sworn word."

She worked her jaw back and forth, trying to decide how to answer. Then, from between clenched teeth, she said, "I'll never tell you what you want to know!"

A slow, deep chuckle filled the room. “You misunderstand; I didn’t have you brought here because I seek information. There’s nothing you could say that I don’t already know. The number and disposition of your troops; the state of your provisions; the locations of your supply trains; the manner in which you plan to lay siege to this citadel; Eragon and Saphira’s duties, habits, and abilities; the Dauthdaert you acquired in Belatona; even the powers of the witch-child, Elva, whom you have kept by your side until but recently—all this I know, and more. Shall I quote the figures to you? … No? Well then. My spies are more numerous and more highly placed than you imagine, and I have other means of gathering intelligence withal. You have no secrets from me, Nasuada, none whatsoever; therefore, it is pointless to insist upon holding your tongue.”

His words struck her like hammerblows, but she strove not to let them dishearten her. “Why, then?”

“Why did I have you brought here? Because, my dear, you have the gift of command, and that is far deadlier than any spell. Eragon is no threat to me, nor are the elves, but you … you are dangerous in a way they are not. Without you, the Varden will be like a blinded bull; they will snort and rage, and they will charge straight ahead, heedless of what lies in their way. Then I will catch them and, with their folly, destroy them.

“But the destruction of the Varden is not the reason I had you abducted. No, you are here because you have proven yourself worthy of my attention. You are fierce, tenacious, ambitious, and intelligent—the very qualities I prize most in my servants. I wish to have you by my side, Nasuada, as my foremost adviser and as the general of my army as I move to implement the final stages of the great plan I have been laboring upon for nigh on a century. A new order is about to descend upon Alagaësia, and I would have you be a part of it. Ever since the last of the Thirteen died, I have searched for those who were fit to take their place. Until recently, my efforts have been in vain. Durza was a useful tool, but being a Shade, he had certain limitations: a lack of concern for his own preservation to name but one. Of all the candidates I have examined, Murtagh was the first I considered eligible and the first to survive the tests I set before him. You shall be the next, I am sure. And Eragon, the third.”

Horror crept through her as she listened to him. What he was proposing was far worse than she had envisioned.

The maroon-clad man at the brazier startled her by shoving one of the iron rods into the coals with such force, the tip banged against the copper bowl underneath.

Galbatorix continued speaking: “Should you live, you shall have a chance to accomplish more than you ever could with the Varden.

Think of it! In my service, you could help bring peace to the whole of Alagaësia, and you would be my chief architect for accomplishing these changes."

"I would rather let a thousand vipers bite me before I would agree to serve you." And she spat into the air.

His chuckle echoed throughout the room once more: the sound of a man who feared nothing, not even death. "We shall see."

She flinched as she felt a finger touch the inside of her elbow. It slowly traced a circle, then slid down to the first of her scars on her forearm and paused atop the ridge of flesh, warm against her skin. The finger tapped three times before proceeding to the next few scars, then back again, running over them like a washboard.

"You have defeated an opponent in the Trial of the Long Knives," said Galbatorix, "and with more cuts than any have endured in recent memory. That means both that you are exceptionally strong-willed and that you are able to suspend the functioning of your imagination —for it is an overactive imagination that turns men into cowards, not a surfeit of fear, as most believe. However, neither of these traits will be of help to you now. On the contrary, they are a hindrance. Everyone has a limit, whether physical or mental. The only question is how long it takes to reach that point. And you will reach it, I promise you. Your strength may delay the moment, but it cannot avert it. Nor will your wards avail you while you are within my power. Why, then, should you suffer needlessly? No one questions your courage; you have already demonstrated it to all the world. Give in now. There is no shame in accepting the inevitable. To continue would be to subject yourself to an array of torments for no other reason but to appease your sense of duty. Let your duty be appeased now, and give me your oath of fealty in the ancient language, and ere the hour is out, you will have a dozen servants to command, robes of silk and damask to wear, a set of chambers to live in, and a place at my table when we dine."

He paused then, waiting for her answer, but she stared at the lines painted on the ceiling and refused to speak.

On her arm, the finger continued its exploration, moving from her scars to the hollow of her wrist, where it rested heavily upon a vein.

"Very well. As you wish." The pressure on her wrist vanished. "Murtagh, come, show yourself. You're being impolite to our guest."

Ah, not him too, she thought, suddenly feeling a great sadness.

At the brazier, the man in red slowly turned, and though he wore a silver mask over the upper half of his face, she saw it was indeed Murtagh. His eyes were nearly lost in shadows, and his mouth and jaw were fixed in a grim expression.

"Murtagh was somewhat reluctant when he first entered my service,

but he has since proven to be a most apt student. He has his father's talents. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, sir," said Murtagh, his voice rough.

"He surprised me when he killed old King Hrothgar on the Burning Plains. I didn't expect him to turn on his former friends with such eagerness, but then, our Murtagh is full of rage and bloodlust, he is. He would tear out the throat of a Kull with his bare hands if I gave him the chance, and I have. Nothing pleases you so much as killing, now does it?"

The muscles in Murtagh's neck tensed. "No, sir."

Galbatorix laughed softly. "Murtagh Kingkiller … 'Tis a fine name, a name fit for a legend, but not one you should seek to earn again, except at my direction." Then to her: "Until now I have neglected his instruction in the subtle arts of persuasion, which is why I brought him here with me today. He has some experience as the object of such arts, but never as the practitioner, and it is high time he learns to master them. And what better way to learn than here, with you? It was Murtagh, after all, who convinced me that you were worthy of joining my newest generation of disciples."

A strange sense of betrayal crept over her. Despite what had transpired, she had thought better of Murtagh. She searched his face for an explanation, but he stood stiff as a guard on watch and kept his gaze averted; she could glean nothing from his expression.

Then the king motioned toward the brazier and, in a conversational tone of voice, said, "Take up an iron."

Murtagh's hands curled into fists. Other than that, he did not move.

A word rang in Nasuada's ears, like the clap of a great bell. The very warp and weft of the world seemed to vibrate at the sound, as if a giant had plucked the threads of reality and set them a-quivering. For a moment, she felt as if she were falling, and the air before her shimmered like water. Despite its power, she could not remember the letters that made up the word nor even what language it belonged to, for the word passed clean through her mind, leaving behind only the memory of its effects.

Murtagh shuddered; then he twisted, grasped one of the iron rods, and pulled it from the brazier with a halting motion. Sparks sprayed into the air as the iron came free of the coals, and several glittering embers fell spiraling toward the floor like pine seeds from their cones.

The end of the rod glowed a bright, pale yellow that, even as she watched, darkened to a ruddy orange. The light from the hot metal reflected off Murtagh's polished half mask, giving him a grotesque, inhuman appearance. She saw herself reflected in the mask as well, her form distorted into a crabbed torso with spindly legs that dwindled away into thin black lines along the curve of Murtagh's

cheek.

Futile as it was, she could not help but pull against her restraints as he advanced toward her.

“I don’t understand,” she said to Galbatorix with feigned calm. “Aren’t you going to use your mind against me?” Not that she wanted him to, but she would rather defend herself from an attack on her consciousness than withstand the pain of the iron.

“There will be time for that later, if need be,” said Galbatorix. “For now, I am curious to discover how brave you really are, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad. Besides, I would prefer not to seize control of your mind and force you to swear fealty to me. Instead, I want you to make this decision of your own free will and while still in possession of your faculties.”

“Why?” she croaked.

“Because it pleases me. Now, for the last time, will you submit?”

“Never.”

“So be it. Murtagh?”

The rod descended toward her, the tip like a giant, sparkling ruby.

They had given her nothing to bite on, so she had no choice but to scream, and the eight-sided chamber reverberated with the sounds of her agony until her voice gave out and an all-consuming darkness enveloped her in its folds.

On the Wings of a Dragon

Eragon lifted his head, took a deep breath, and felt a portion of his worries recede.

Riding a dragon was far from restful, but being so close to Saphira was calming for both him and her. The simple pleasure of physical contact comforted them in a way few things did. Also, the constant sound and motion of her flight helped distract him from the black thoughts that had been dogging him.

Despite the urgency of their trip and the precarious nature of their circumstances in general, Eragon was glad to be away from the Varden. The recent bloodshed had left him feeling as if he was no longer quite himself.

Ever since he had rejoined the Varden at Feinster, he had spent the bulk of his time fighting or waiting to fight, and the strain was beginning to wear on him, especially after the violence and horror of Dras-Leona. On the Varden's behalf, he had killed hundreds of soldiers—few of whom had stood even the slightest chance of harming him—and though his actions had been justified, the memories troubled him. He did not want every fight to be desperate and every opponent to be his equal or his better—far from it—but at the same time, the easy slaughter of so many made him feel more like a butcher than a warrior. Death, he had come to believe, was a corrosive thing, and the more he was around it, the more it gnawed away at who he was.

However, being alone with Saphira—and Glaedr, although the golden dragon had kept to himself since their departure—helped Eragon regain a sense of normalcy. He felt most comfortable alone or in small groups, and he preferred not to spend time in a town or a city or even a camp like the Varden's. Unlike the majority of people, he did not hate or fear the wilderness; as harsh as the empty lands were, they possessed a grace and a beauty that no artifice could compete with and that he found restorative.

So he let Saphira's flying distract him, and for the better part of the day, he did nothing more important than watch the landscape slide past.

From the Varden's camp by the banks of Leona Lake, Saphira set out across the broad expanse of water, angling northwest and climbing so high that Eragon had to use a spell to shield himself from the cold.

The lake appeared patchy: shining and sparkling in areas where the angle of the waves reflected the sunlight toward Saphira, dull and

gray where it did not. Eragon never tired of staring at the constantly changing patterns of light; nothing else in the world was quite like it.

Fisher hawks, cranes, geese, ducks, starlings, and other birds often flew by underneath them. Most ignored Saphira, but a few of the hawks spiraled upward and accompanied her for a short while, seeming more curious than frightened. Two were even so bold as to swerve in front of her, mere feet from her long, sharp teeth.

In many ways, the fierce, hook-clawed, yellow-beaked raptors reminded Eragon of Saphira herself, an observation that pleased her, for she admired the hawks as well, though not so much for their appearance as for their hunting prowess.

The shore behind them gradually faded to a hazy purple line, then vanished altogether. For over half an hour, they saw only birds and clouds in the sky and the vast sheet of wind-hammered water that covered the surface of the earth.

Then, ahead and to their left, the jagged gray outline of the Spine began to appear along the horizon, a welcome sight to Eragon. Although these were not the mountains of his childhood, they still belonged to the same range, and seeing them, he felt not quite so far from his old home.

The mountains grew in size until the stony, snowcapped peaks loomed before them like the broken battlements of a castle wall. Down their dark, green-covered flanks, dozens of white streams tumbled, wending their way through the creases in the land until they joined with the great lake that lay pressed against their foothills. A half-dozen villages sat upon the shore or close thereby, but on account of Eragon's magic, the people below remained oblivious to Saphira's presence as she sailed overhead.

As he looked at the villages, it struck Eragon just how small and isolated they were and, in hindsight, how small and isolated Carvahall had been as well. Compared to the great cities he had visited, the villages were little more than clusters of hovels, barely fit for even the meanest of paupers. Many of the men and women within them, he knew, had never traveled more than a few miles from their birthplace and would live their whole lives in a world bound by the limits of their sight.

What a blinkered existence, he thought.

And yet, he wondered if it was perhaps better to remain in one place and learn all you could about it rather than to constantly roam across the land. Was a broad but shallow education superior to one that was narrow but deep?

He was not sure. He remembered Oromis once telling him that the whole of the world could be deduced from the smallest grain of sand, if one studied it closely enough.

The Spine was only a fraction of the height of the Beor Mountains, yet the slab-sided peaks still towered a thousand feet or more above Saphira as she threaded her way between them, following the shadow-filled gorges and valleys that split the range. Now and then, she had to soar upward to clear a bare, snowy pass, and when she did and Eragon's range of view widened, he thought the mountains looked like so many molars erupting from the brown gums of the earth.

As Saphira glided over a particularly deep valley, he saw at the bottom a glade with a ribbony stream wandering across the field of grass. And along the edges of the glade, he glimpsed what he thought might have been houses—or perhaps tents; it was hard to tell—hidden under the eaves of the heavy-boughed spruce trees that populated the flanks of the neighboring mountains. A single spot of firelight shone through a gap in the branches, like a tiny chip of gold embedded within the layers of black needles, and he thought he spied a lone figure lumbering away from the stream. The figure appeared strangely bulky, and its head seemed too large for its body.

I think that was an Urgal.

Where? Saphira asked, and he sensed her curiosity.

In the clearing behind us. He shared the memory with her. *I wish we had the time to go back and find out. I'd like to see how they live*.

She snorted. Hot smoke streamed out of her nostrils, then rolled down her neck and over him. *They might not take kindly to a dragon and Rider landing among them without warning.*

He coughed and blinked as his eyes watered. *Do you mind?*

She did not answer, but the line of smoke trailing from her nostrils ceased, and the air around him soon cleared.

Not long afterward, the shape of the mountains began to look familiar to Eragon, and then a large rift opened up before Saphira and he realized they were flying across the pass that led to Teirm—the same pass he and Brom had twice ridden through on horseback. It was much as he remembered it: the western branch of the Toark River still flowed fast and strong toward the distant sea, the surface of the water streaked with white mare's tails where boulders interrupted its course. The crude road he and Brom had followed by the side of the river was still a pale, dusty line barely wider than a deer trail. He even thought he recognized a clump of trees where they had stopped to eat.

Saphira turned westward and proceeded down the river until the mountains dropped away to lush, rain-soaked fields, whereupon she adjusted her course to a more northerly direction. Eragon did not question her decision; she never seemed to lose her bearing, not even on a starless night or when deep underground in Farthen Dûr.

The sun was close to the horizon when they flew out of the Spine.

As dusk settled over the land, Eragon occupied himself by trying to devise ways to trap, kill, or fool Galbatorix. After a time, Glaedr emerged from his self-imposed isolation and joined him in his efforts. They spent an hour or so discussing various strategies, and then they practiced attacking and defending each other with their minds. Saphira participated in the exercise as well, but with limited success, as flying made it difficult for her to concentrate on anything else.

Later, Eragon stared at the cold white stars for a while. Then he asked Glaedr, *Could the Vault of Souls contain Eldunarí that the Riders hid from Galbatorix?*

No, said Glaedr without hesitation. *It's impossible. Oromis and I would have known if Vrael had sanctioned such a plan. And if any Eldunarí had been left on Vroengard, we would have found them when we returned to search the island. It's not so easy to hide a living creature as you seem to think.*

Why not?

If a hedgehog rolls into a ball, that doesn't mean that he becomes invisible, now does it? Minds are no different. You can shield your thoughts from others, but your existence is still apparent to anyone who searches the area.

Surely with a spell you could—

If a spell had tampered with our senses, we would have known, for we had wards to prevent that from happening.

So, no Eldunarí, Eragon concluded glumly.

Unfortunately not.

They flew on in silence as the waxing three-quarter moon rose above the jagged peaks of the Spine. By its light, the land looked as if it were made out of pewter, and Eragon amused himself by imagining that it was an immense sculpture the dwarves had carved and stored within a cave as large as Alagaësia itself.

Eragon could feel the pleasure Glaedr took in their flight. Like Eragon and Saphira, the old dragon seemed to welcome the opportunity to leave behind their concerns on the ground, if even only for a short while, and to soar freely through the sky.

It was Saphira who spoke next. Between the slow, heavy flaps of her wings, she said to Glaedr, *Tell us a story, Ebrithil.*

What manner of story would you hear?

The tale of how you and Oromis were captured by the Forsworn, and how you then escaped.

At this, Eragon's interest increased. He had always been curious about the matter himself, but he had never worked up the courage to ask Oromis.

Glaedr was quiet for a span, then said, *When Galbatorix and Morzan*

returned from the wilds and began their campaign against our order, we did not at first realize the severity of the threat. We were concerned, of course, but no more than if we had discovered that a Shade was stalking the land. Galbatorix was not the first Rider to go mad, although he was the first to have acquired a disciple such as Morzan. That alone should have warned us of the danger we faced, but the truth was only apparent in hindsight.

At the time, we failed to consider that Galbatorix might have gathered other followers or that he would even attempt such a thing. It seemed absurd that any of our brethren could prove susceptible to Galbatorix's poisonous whisperings. Morzan was still a novice; his weakness was understandable. But those who were already Riders in full? We never questioned their loyalties. For only when they were tempted did they reveal the extent to which their spite and weaknesses had corrupted them. Some wanted revenge for old hurts; others believed that, by virtue of our power, dragons and Riders deserved to rule over the whole of Alagaësia; and others, I am afraid to say, simply enjoyed the chance to tear down what was and indulge themselves however they wanted.

The old dragon paused, and Eragon sensed ancient hates and sorrows shading his mind. Then Glaedr continued: *Events at that point were … confusing. Little was known, and what reports we received were so larded with rumors and speculation as to be useless. Oromis and I began to suspect that something far worse was afoot than most realized. We tried to convince several of the older dragons and Riders, but they disagreed and dismissed our concerns. Fools they were not, but centuries of peace had clouded their vision, and they were unable to see that the world was shifting around us.*

Frustrated with the lack of information, Oromis and I left Ilirea to discover what we could for ourselves. We brought two younger Riders with us, both elves and accomplished warriors, who had recently returned from scouting the northern reaches of the Spine. It was partly at their urging that we ventured forth on our expedition. Their names you might recognize, for they were Kialandí and Formora.

"Ah," said Eragon, suddenly understanding.

Yes. After a day and a half of traveling, we stopped at Edur Naroch, a watchtower built of old to stand guard over Silverwood Forest. Unbeknownst to us, Kialandí and Formora had visited the tower beforehand and slain the three elven rangers stationed there. Then they had placed a trap upon the stones that ringed the tower, a trap that caught us the moment my claws touched the grass upon the knoll. It was a clever spell; Galbatorix had taught it to them himself. We had no defense against it, for it caused us no harm, only held us and slowed us, like honey poured over our bodies and minds. While we were thus snared, minutes passed as seconds. Kialandí, Formora, and their dragons flitted around us faster than

hummingbirds; they appeared as no more than dark blurs at the edges of our vision.

When they were ready, they released us. They had cast dozens of spells —spells to bind us in place, spells to blind us, and spells to prevent Oromis from speaking, so as to make it more difficult for him to cast spells. Again, their magic did not hurt us, and thus we had no defense against it.… The moment we could, we attacked Kialandí, Formora, and their dragons with our minds, and they us, and for hours thereafter, we strove against them. The experience was … not pleasant. They were weaker and less skilled than Oromis and I, but there were two of them for each of us, and they had with them the heart of hearts of a dragon named Agaravel—whose Rider they had slain—and her strength added to their own. As a result, we were hard-pressed to defend ourselves. Their intent, we discovered, was to force us to help Galbatorix and the Forsworn enter Ilirea unnoticed, so that they might catch the Riders by surprise and capture the Eldunarí who were then living in the city.

"How did you escape?" asked Eragon.

In time, it became clear that we would not be able to defeat them. So, Oromis decided to risk using magic in an attempt to free us, even though he knew it would provoke Kialandí and Formora into attacking us with magic in return. It was a desperate ploy, but it was the only choice we had.

At a certain point, without knowing of Oromis's plans, I struck back at our attackers, seeking to hurt them. Oromis had been waiting for just such a moment. He had long known the Rider who had instructed Kialandí and Formora in the ways of magic, and he was well familiar with Galbatorix's twisted reasoning. From that knowledge, he was able to guess at how Kialandí and Formora had worded their spells, and where the flaws in their enchantments were likely to lie.

Oromis had only seconds to act; the moment he began to use magic, Kialandí and Formora realized what he was about, panicked, and began to cast their own spells. It took Oromis three tries to break our bonds. How exactly he did it, I cannot say. I doubt whether he really understood it himself. Most simply, he shifted *us a finger's-breadth away from where we had been standing.*

Like how Arya sent my egg from Du Weldenvarden to the Spine? asked Saphira.

Yes, and no, Glaedr replied. *Yes, he transported us from one place to another without moving us through the intervening space. But he did not just shift our position, he also shifted the very substance of our flesh, rearranged it so that we were no longer what we once were. Many of the smallest parts of our bodies can be exchanged for one another without ill effect, and so he did with every muscle, bone, and organ.*

Eragon frowned. Such a spell was a feat of the highest order, a wonder of magical dexterity that few in history could have hoped to

carry out. Still, as impressed as Eragon was, he could not help but ask, "How could that have worked, though? You would still be the same person as before."

You would, and yet you would not. The difference between who we had been and who we then were was slight, but it was enough to render useless the enchantments Kialandí and Formora had woven about us.

What of the spells they cast once they noticed what Oromis was doing? asked Saphira.

An image came to Eragon of Glaedr ruffling his wings, as if he were tired of sitting in one position for so long. *The first spell, Formora's, was meant to kill us, but our wards stopped it. The second, which was from Kialandí … that was a different matter. It was a spell Kialandí had learned from Galbatorix, and he from the spirits who possessed Durza. This I know, for I was in contact with Kialandí's mind even when he wrought his enchantment. It was a clever, fiendish spell, the purpose of which was to prevent Oromis from touching and manipulating the flow of energy around him, and thereby to prevent him from using magic*.

"Did Kialandí do the same to you?"

He would have, but he feared it would either kill me or sever my connection with my heart of hearts and thus create two independent versions of me that they would then have to subdue. Even more than elves, dragons depend on magic for our existence; without it, we would soon die.

Eragon could sense Saphira's curiosity was aroused. *Has that ever happened? Has the connection between a dragon and the dragon's Eldunarí ever been severed while the dragon's body was still alive?*

It has, but that is a tale for another time.

Saphira subsided, but Eragon could tell that she intended to raise the question again at the soonest opportunity.

"But Kialandí's spell didn't stop Oromis from being able to use magic, did it?"

Not entirely. It was supposed to, but Kialandí cast the spell even as Oromis shifted us from place to place, and so its effect was somewhat lessened. Still, it kept him from working all but the smallest of magics, and as you know, the spell remained with him for the rest of his life, despite the efforts of our wisest healers.

"Why didn't his wards protect him?"

Glaedr seemed to sigh. *That is a mystery. No one had done such a thing before, Eragon, and of those still living, only Galbatorix now knows the secret of it. The spell was bound to Oromis's mind, but it may not have affected him directly. Instead, it may have worked upon the energy around him or upon his link to the same. The elves have long studied magic, but even they do not fully understand how the material and immaterial worlds interact. It is a riddle that will likely never be solved. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the spirits know more than we about both the*

material and the immaterial, considering that they are the embodiment of the second and that they occupy the first when in the form of a Shade.

Whatever the truth may be, the outcome was this: Oromis cast his spell, and he freed us, but the effort was too much for him, and a fit came over him, the first of many. Never again was he able to cast such a powerful spell, and ever after, he suffered a weakness of the flesh that would have killed him if not for his skill with magic. The weakness was already in him when Kialandí and Formora captured us, but when he shifted *us and reshuffled the parts of our bodies, he brought it to the fore. Otherwise, the malady might have lain dormant for many more years.*

Oromis fell to the ground, as helpless as a hatchling, even as Formora and her dragon, an ugly brown thing, ran at us, the others close behind. I leaped over Oromis, and I attacked. If they had realized he was crippled, they would have taken advantage of his condition to slip into his mind and make it their own. I had to distract them until Oromis recovered.… I have never fought harder than I did that day. There were four of them arrayed against me, five if you include Agaravel in the tally. Both of my kin, the brown and Kialandí's purple, were smaller than me, but their teeth were sharp and their claws were fast. Still, my rage gave me a strength greater than normal, and I dealt grave wounds to them both. Kialandí was foolish enough to come within my reach, and I grasped him with my talons and threw him at his own dragon. Glaedr made a sound of amusement. *His magic did not protect him against that. One of the spikes on the purple's back impaled him, and I might have killed him then and there had not the brown forced me to retreat.*

We must have fought for almost five minutes before I heard Oromis shout that we must flee. I kicked up dirt in the faces of my enemies, then returned to Oromis and grasped him in my right forepaw and took flight from Edur Naroch. Kialandí and his dragon could not follow, but Formora and the brown could and did.

They caught us less than a mile from the watchtower. We closed several times, and then the brown flew underneath me, and I saw Formora about to strike at my right leg with her sword. She was trying to force me to drop Oromis, I think, or perhaps she wanted to kill him. I twisted to evade the blow, and instead of my right leg, her sword struck my left, cutting it off.

The memory that passed through Glaedr's mind was that of a hard, cold, pinching sensation, as if Formora's blade had been forged of ice, not steel. The feeling made Eragon queasy. He swallowed and tightened his grip on the front of the saddle, grateful that Saphira was safe.

It hurt less than you might imagine, but I knew that I could not continue to fight, so I turned and raced toward Ilirea as fast as my wings could carry me. In a way, Formora's victory worked against her, for without the burden of my leg, I was able to outdistance the brown and thus escape.

Oromis was able to stop the bleeding, but no more, and he was too weak to contact Vrael or the other elder Riders and warn them of Galbatorix's plans. Once Kialandí and Formora reported to him, we knew that Galbatorix would attack Ilirea soon thereafter. If he waited, it would only give us time to fortify, and strong as he was, surprise was still Galbatorix's greatest weapon in those days.

When we arrived at Ilirea, we were dismayed to find that few of our order were still there; in our absence, more had left to search for Galbatorix or to consult with Vrael in person on Vroengard. We convinced those who remained of the danger, and we had them warn Vrael and the other elder dragons and Riders. They were loath to believe that Galbatorix had the forces needed to attack Ilirea—or that he would dare do such a thing—but in the end, we were able to make them see the truth of the matter. As a result, they decided that all of the Eldunarí in Alagaësia should be taken to Vroengard for safekeeping.

It seemed a prudent measure, but we should have sent them to Ellesméra instead. If nothing else, we should have left the Eldunarí that were already in Du Weldenvarden where they were. At least then some of them would have remained free of Galbatorix. Alas, none of us thought that they would be safer among the elves than on Vroengard, at the very center of our order.

Vrael ordered every dragon and Rider who was within a few days journey of Ilirea to hurry to the aid of the city, but Oromis and I feared they would be too late. Nor were we in any state to help defend Ilirea. So we gathered what supplies we needed, and with our two remaining students —Brom and the dragon who is your namesake, Saphira—we left the city that very night. You have seen, I think, the fairth Oromis made as we departed.

Eragon nodded absently as he remembered the image of the beautiful, tower-filled city clustered about the base of an escarpment and lit by a rising harvest moon.

And that is how it came to be that we were not in Ilirea when Galbatorix and the Forsworn attacked a few hours later. And it is also why we were not at Vroengard when the oath-breakers defeated the combined might of all our forces and sacked Doru Araeba. From Ilirea, we went to Du Weldenvarden in the hope that the elven healers might be able to cure Oromis's ailment and restore his ability to use magic. When they could not, we decided to remain where we were, for it seemed safer than flying all the way to Vroengard when both of us were hampered by our injuries and we might be ambushed at any point along the journey.

Brom and Saphira did not stay with us, though. Despite our advice to the contrary, they went to join the fight, and it was in that fighting that your namesake died, Saphira.… And now you know how the Forsworn captured us and how we escaped.

After a moment, Saphira said, *Thank you for the story, Ebrithil.*

You are welcome, Bjartskular, but never ask it of me again.

When the moon was nearing its zenith, Eragon saw a nest of dim orange lights floating in the darkness. It took him a moment to realize they were the torches and lanterns of Teirm, many miles away. And, high above the other lights, a bright yellow spot appeared for a second, like a great eye glaring at him; then it vanished and reappeared, flashing on and off in a never-changing cycle, as if the eye were blinking.

The lighthouse at Teirm is lit, he said to both Saphira and Glaedr.

Then a storm is brewing, said Glaedr.

Saphira's flapping ceased, and Eragon felt her tip forward and begin a long, slow glide toward the ground.

A half hour elapsed before she landed. By then, Teirm was a faint glow to the south, and the beam from the lighthouse was no brighter than a star.

Saphira alit on an empty beach strewn with twisted driftwood. By the light of the moon, the hard, flat strand appeared almost white, while the waves that crashed into it were gray and black and seemed angry, as if the ocean were trying to devour the land with each breaker it sent forth.

Eragon unbuckled the straps around his legs, then slid off Saphira, grateful for the opportunity to stretch his muscles. He noted the smell of brine as he sprinted down the strand toward a large chunk of driftwood, his cloak flapping behind him. At the piece of wood, he spun around and sprinted back to Saphira.

She sat where he had left her, staring out to sea. He paused, wondering if she was going to speak—for he could feel a great strain within her—but when she remained silent, he turned on his heel and again sprinted to the driftwood. She would talk when she was ready.

Back and forth Eragon ran, until he was warm all over and his legs felt wobbly.

And yet the whole time Saphira kept her gaze fixed on some point in the distance.

As Eragon threw himself down on a patch of sedge next to her, Glaedr said, *It would be foolish to try.*

Eragon cocked his head, unsure to whom the dragon was speaking.

I know I can do it, said Saphira.

You have never before been to Vroengard, said Glaedr. *And if there is a storm, it might drive you far out to sea, or worse. More than one dragon has perished because of overweening confidence. The wind is not your friend, Saphira. It can help you, but it can also destroy you.*

I am not a hatchling to be instructed about the wind!

No, but you are still young, and I do not think you are ready for this.

The other way would take too long!

Perhaps, but better to get there safely than not at all.

"What are you talking about?" Eragon asked.

The sand under Saphira's front feet made a gritty, rustling sound as she flexed her claws, sinking them deep into the earth.

We have a choice to make, said Glaedr. *From here, Saphira can either fly straight to Vroengard or follow the coastline north until she reaches the point on the mainland closest to the island and then—only then—turn west and cross the sea.*

Which path would be faster? Eragon asked, although he had already guessed the answer.

Flying straight there, said Saphira.

But if she does, then she would be over the water the whole time.

Saphira bristled. *It's no farther than it was from the Varden to here. Or am I wrong?*

You're more tired now, and if there is a storm—

Then I'll fly around it! she said, and huffed, releasing a spike of blue and yellow flame from her nostrils.

The flame branded itself into Eragon's vision, leaving behind a flashing afterimage. "Ah! Now I can't see." He rubbed his eyes as he tried to help the afterimage fade away. *Would flying straight there really be all that dangerous?*

It could be, rumbled Glaedr.

How much longer would it take to go along the coastline?

Half a day, maybe a bit more.

Eragon scratched the stubble on his chin as he stared at the forbidding mass of water. Then he looked up at Saphira and, in a low voice, said, "Are you sure you can do this?"

She twisted her neck and returned his gaze with one huge eye. Her pupil had expanded until it was nearly circular; it was so large and black, Eragon felt as if he could crawl into it and disappear altogether.

As sure as I can be, she said.

He nodded and ran his hands through his hair as he accustomed himself to the idea. *Then we have to chance it.… Glaedr, if need be, you can guide her? You can help her?*

The old dragon was quiet for a while; then he surprised Eragon by humming in his mind, even as Saphira hummed when she was pleased or amused. *Very well. If we are to tempt fate, then let us not be cowards about it. Across the sea it is.*

The matter settled, Eragon climbed back onto Saphira, and with a single bound, she left behind the safety of solid land and took flight over the trackless waves.

The Sound of His Voice, the Touch of His Hand

"Aggghhh!"

"Will you swear your fealty to me in the ancient language?"

"Never!"

His question and her answer had become a ritual between them, a call-and-response such as children might use in a game, except that in this game she lost even when she won.

Rituals were all that allowed Nasuada to maintain her sanity. By them, she ordered her world—by them, she was able to endure from one moment to the next, for they gave her something to hold on to when all else had been stripped from her. Rituals of thought, rituals of action, rituals of pain and relief: these had become the framework upon which her life depended. Without them, she would have been lost, a sheep without a shepherd, a devotee bereft of faith … a Rider separated from her dragon.

Unfortunately, this particular ritual always ended in the same way: with another touch of the iron.

She screamed and bit her tongue, and blood filled her mouth. She coughed, trying to clear her throat, but there was too much blood and she began to choke. Her lungs burned from a lack of air, and the lines on the ceiling wavered and grew dim, and then her memory ceased and there was nothing, not even darkness.

Afterward, Galbatorix spoke to her while the irons heated.

This too had become one of their rituals.

He had healed her tongue—at least, she thought it had been him and not Murtagh—for as he said, "It wouldn't do if you were unable to speak, now would it? How else will I know when you are ready to serve me?"

As before, the king sat to her right, at the very edge of her vision, where all she could see of him was a gold-edged shadow, his form partially hidden beneath the long, heavy cape he wore.

"I met your father, you know, when he was steward of Enduriel's chief estate," said Galbatorix. "Did he tell you of that?"

She shuddered and closed her eyes and felt tears seep from the corners. She hated listening to him. His voice was too powerful, too seductive; it left her wanting to do whatever he desired just so she could hear him utter a tiny morsel of praise.

"Yes," she murmured.

"I took little notice of him at the time. Why would I? He was a servant, no one of significance. Enduriel allowed him a fair bit of freedom, the better to manage the affairs of the estate—too much freedom, as it turned out." The king made a dismissive gesture, and the light caught his lean, clawlike hand. "Enduriel always was overly permissive. It was his dragon who was the cunning one; Enduriel merely did as he was told.… What a strange, amusing series of events fate has arranged. To think, the man who saw to it that my boots were brightly polished went on to become my foremost enemy after Brom, and now here you are, his daughter, returned to Urû'baen and about to enter my service, even as did your father. How very ironic, would you not agree?"

"My father escaped, and he nearly killed Durza when he did," she said. "All your spells and oaths could not hold him any more than you'll be able to hold me."

She thought Galbatorix might have frowned. "Yes, that was unfortunate. Durza was quite put out about it at the time. Families seem to make it easier for people to change who they are and thus their true names, which is why I now choose my household servants only from those who are barren and unwed. However, you are sorely mistaken if you think to slip your bonds. The only ways to leave the Hall of the Soothsayer are by swearing loyalty to me or by dying."

"Then I will die."

"How very shortsighted." The gilded shadow of the king leaned toward her. "Have you never entertained the thought, Nasuada, that the world would have been worse off had I not overthrown the Riders?"

"The Riders kept the peace," she said. "They protected the whole of Alagaësia from war, from plague … from the threat of Shades. In times of famine, they brought food to the starving. How is this land a better place without them?"

"Because there was a price attached to their service. You of all people should know that everything in this world must be paid for, whether in gold, time, or blood. Nothing is without its price, not even the Riders. *Especially* not the Riders.

"Aye, they kept the peace, but they also stifled the races of this land, the elves and dwarves just as much as us humans. What is always said in praise of the Riders when the bards bemoan their passing? That their reign extended for thousands of years, and that during this much-vaunted *'golden age,'* little changed besides the names of the kings and queens who sat smug and secure upon their thrones. Oh, there were little alarms: a Shade here, an incursion by Urgals there, a skirmish between two dwarf clans over a mine no one

but they cared about. But on the whole, the order of things remained exactly the same as it had been when the Riders first rose to prominence."

She heard the *clink* of metal against metal as Murtagh stirred the coals in the brazier. She wished she could see his face so that she could gauge his reaction to Galbatorix's words, but as was his habit, he stood with his back to her, staring down at the coals. The only time he looked at her was when he had to apply the white-hot metal to her flesh. That was his particular ritual, and she suspected he needed it as much as she needed hers.

And still Galbatorix kept talking: "Does that not seem the most evil thing to you, Nasuada? Life is change, and yet the Riders suppressed it so that the land lay in an uneasy slumber, unable to shake off the chains that bound it, unable to advance or retreat as nature intended … unable to become something new. I saw with my own eyes scrolls in the vaults at Vroengard and here, in the vaults of Ilirea, that detailed discoveries—magical, mechanical, and from every sphere of natural philosophy—discoveries that the Riders kept hidden because they feared what might happen if those things became generally known. The Riders were cowards wedded to an old way of life and an old way of thinking, determined to defend it unto their dying breath. Theirs was a gentle tyranny, but a tyranny nevertheless."

"Were murder and betrayal really the solution, though?" she asked, not caring if he punished her for it.

He laughed, seeming genuinely amused. "Such hypocrisy! You condemn me for the very thing you seek to do. If you could, you would kill me where I sit, and with no more hesitation than were I a rabid dog."

"You're a traitor; I'm not."

"I am the victor. In the end, nothing else matters. We are not so different as you think, Nasuada. You wish to kill me because you believe my death would be an improvement for Alagaësia, and because you—who are still almost a child—believe you can do a better job of ruling the Empire than I. Your arrogance would cause others to despise you. But not me, for I understand. I took up arms against the Riders for those very same reasons, and I was right to do so."

"Did vengeance have nothing to do with it?"

She thought he smiled. "It might have provided the initial inspiration, but neither hate nor revenge was my guiding motive. I was concerned by what the Riders had become and convinced, as I still am, that only when they were gone could we flourish as a race."

For a moment, the pain from her wounds made it impossible for her

to talk. Then she managed to whisper: “If what you say is true—and I have no cause to believe you, but if it is—then you are no better than the Riders. You pillaged their libraries and gathered up their stores of knowledge, and as of yet, you have shared none of that lore with anyone else.”

He moved nearer to her, and she felt his breath upon her ear. “That is because, scattered throughout their hoard of secrets, I found hints of a greater truth, a truth that could provide an answer to one of the most perplexing questions in history.”

A shiver ran down her spine. “What … question?”

He leaned back in his chair and tugged at the edge of his cape. “The question of how a king or a queen can enforce the laws they enact when there are those among their subjects who can use magic. When I realized what the hints alluded to, I put aside all else and committed myself to hunting down this truth, this answer, for I knew it was of paramount importance. That is why I have kept the Riders’ secrets to myself; I have been busy with my search. The answer to this problem must be set into place before I make known any of those other discoveries. The world is already a troubled place, and it is better to soothe the waters before disturbing them once more.… It took me nearly a hundred years to find the information I needed, and now that I have, I shall use it to reshape the whole of Alagaësia.

“Magic is the great injustice in the world. It would not be so unfair if the ability only occurred among those who were weak—for then it would be a compensation for what chance or circumstance had robbed them of—but it doesn’t. The strong are just as likely to be able to use magic, and they gain more from it besides. One need only look to the elves to see this is true. The problem is not confined to individuals; it also plagues the relationships between the races. The elves find it easier than us to maintain order within their society, for most every elf can use magic, and, therefore, few of them are ever at the mercy of another. In this regard, they are fortunate, but it is not so fortunate for us, for the dwarves, or even for the accursed Urgals. We have only been able to live here in Alagaësia because the elves permitted it. If they wanted, they could have swept us from the face of the earth as easily as a flood might sweep away an anthill. But no more, not while I am here to oppose their might.”

“The Riders would never have let them kill us or drive us away.”

“No, but while the Riders existed, we were dependent upon their goodwill, and it is not right that we should have to rely on others for our safekeeping. The Riders began as a means to keep the peace between elves and dragons, but in the end, their main purpose became upholding the rule of law throughout the land. They were, however, insufficient to the task, as are my own spellcasters, the Black Hand.

The problem is too far-reaching for any one group to combat. My own life is proof enough of that. Even if there were a trustworthy band of spellcasters adept enough to watch over all the other magicians in Alagaësia—ready to intervene at the slightest hint of malfeasance—we would still be reliant upon the very ones whose powers we sought to restrain. Ultimately, the land would be no safer than it is now. No, in order to solve this problem, it must be addressed on a deeper, more fundamental level. The ancients knew how that might be done, and now so do I."

Galbatorix shifted in the chair, and she caught a sharp gleam from his eye, as from a lantern set deep within a cave. "I shall make it so that no magician will be able to harm another person, whether human, dwarf, or elf. None shall be able to cast a spell unless they have permission, and only magics that are benign and beneficial shall be allowed. Even the elves will be bound by this precept, and they shall learn to measure their words carefully or speak not at all."

"And who will grant permission?" she asked. "Who will decide what is allowed and what is not? You?"

"Someone must. It was I who recognized what was needed, I who discovered the means, and I who shall implement them. You sneer at the thought? Well then, ask yourself this, Nasuada: have I been a bad king? Be honest now. By the standards of my forebears, I have not been excessive."

"You have been cruel."

"That is not the same thing.… You have led the Varden; you understand the burdens of command. Surely you have realized the threat that magic poses to the stability of any kingdom? To give but one example, I have spent more time laboring over the enchantments that protect the coin of the realm from being forged than I have upon most any other aspect of my duties. And yet, no doubt, there is a clever-minded conjurer somewhere who has found a way to circumvent my wards and who is busy making bags of lead coins with which he can fool nobles and commoners alike. Why else do you think I have been so careful to restrict the use of magic throughout the Empire?"

"Because it is a threat to you."

"No! There you are exactly wrong. It is no threat to me. No one and nothing is. However, spellcasters *are* a threat to the proper functioning of this realm, and that I shall not tolerate. Once I have bound every magician in the world to the laws of the land, imagine the peace and prosperity that shall reign. No more shall men or dwarves have to fear elves. No more shall Riders be able to impose their will on others. No more shall those who cannot use magic be prey for those who can.… Alagaësia will be transformed, and with our newfound safety, we will

build a more wondrous tomorrow, one you could be a part of.

"Enter into my service, Nasuada, and you will have the opportunity to oversee the creation of a world such as has never existed before—a world where a man will stand or fall based upon the strength of his limbs and the keenness of his mind, and not whether chance has granted him skill with magic. Man may build up his limbs and man may improve his mind, but never can he learn to use magic if he was born lacking the ability. As I said, magic is the great injustice, and for the good of all, I will impose limits upon every magician there is."

She stared at the lines on the ceiling and tried to ignore him. So much of what he said *was* similar to what she had thought herself. He was right: magic was the most destructive force in the world, and if it could be regulated, Alagaësia would be a better place for it. She hated that there had been nothing to stop Eragon from—

Blue. Red. Patterns of interwoven color. The throbbing of her burns. She strove desperately to concentrate upon anything other than … than nothing. Whatever she had been about to think of was nothing, did not exist.

"You call me evil. You curse my name and seek to overthrow me. But remember this, Nasuada: it was not I who started this war, and I am not responsible for those who have lost their lives as a result. I did not seek this out. *You* did. I would have been content to devote myself to my studies, but the Varden insisted upon stealing Saphira's egg from my treasure house, and you and your kind are responsible for all of the blood and sorrow that have followed. *You* are the ones, after all, who have been rampaging across the countryside, burning and pillaging as you please, not I. And yet you have the audacity to claim that *I* am in the wrong! Were you to go into the homes of the peasants, they would tell you that it is the Varden they fear most. They would talk about how they look to my soldiers for protection and how they hope the Empire will defeat the Varden and all shall be as it was."

Nasuada wet her lips. Even though she knew her boldness might cost her, she said, "It seems to me you protest too much.… If the welfare of your subjects were your main concern, you would have flown out to confront the Varden weeks ago, instead of letting an army roam loose within your borders. That is, unless you are not so sure of your might as you pretend. Or is it you fear the elves will take Urû'baen while you are gone?" As had become her habit, she spoke of the Varden as if she knew no more about them than any random person in the Empire.

Galbatorix shifted, and she could tell he was about to respond, but she was not yet finished.

"And what of the Urgals? You cannot convince me your cause is just

when you would exterminate an entire race in order to ease your pain at the death of your first dragon. Have you no answer for that, Oathbreaker? … Speak to me of the dragons, then. Explain why you slew so many that you doomed their kind to a slow and inevitable extinction. And finally, explain your mistreatment of the Eldunarí you captured." In her anger, she allowed herself that one slip. "You have bent and broken them and chained them to your will. There is no rightness in what you do, only selfishness and a never-ending hunger for power."

Galbatorix regarded her in silence for a long, uncomfortable while. Then she saw his outline move as he crossed his arms. "I think the irons ought to be sufficiently hot by now. Murtagh, if you would …"

She clenched her fists, digging her nails into her skin, and her muscles began to tremble, despite her best efforts to hold them still. One of the iron rods scraped against the lip of the brazier as Murtagh pulled it free. He turned to face her, and she could not help but stare at the tip of the glowing metal. Then she looked into Murtagh's eyes, and she saw the guilt and self-loathing they contained, and a sense of profound sorrow overcame her.

What fools we are, she thought. *What sorry, miserable fools*.

After that, she had no more energy for thinking, and so she fell back to her well-worn rituals, clinging to them for survival even as a drowning man might cling to a piece of wood.

When Murtagh and Galbatorix departed, she was in too much pain to do more than gaze mindlessly at the patterns on the ceiling while she struggled not to cry. She was sweating and shivering at the same time, as if she had a fever, and she found it impossible to concentrate upon any one thing for more than a few seconds. The pain from her burns did not subside as it would have if she had been cut or bruised; indeed, the throbbing from her wounds seemed to grow worse with time.

She closed her eyes and concentrated upon slowing her breathing as she tried to calm her body.

The first time Galbatorix and Murtagh had visited her, she had been far more courageous. She had cursed and taunted them and done all she could to hurt them with her words. However, through Murtagh, Galbatorix had made her suffer for her insolence, and she had soon lost her taste for open rebellion. The iron made her timid; even the memory of it made her want to curl into a tight little ball. During their second, most recent visit, she had said as little as possible until her final, imprudent outburst.

She had tried to test Galbatorix's claim that neither he nor Murtagh would lie to her. She did this by asking them questions about the

Empire's inner workings, facts that her spies had informed her of but that Galbatorix had no reason to believe she knew. So far as she could determine, Galbatorix and Murtagh had told her the truth, but she was not about to trust anything the king said when there was no way to verify his claims.

As for Murtagh, she was not quite so sure. When he was with the king, she gave no credence to his words, but when he was by himself …

Several hours after her first, agonizing audience with King Galbatorix—when she had at long last fallen into a shallow, troubled sleep—Murtagh had come alone to the Hall of the Soothsayer, bleary-eyed and smelling of drink. He had stood by the monolith upon which she lay, and he had stared at her with such a strange, tormented expression, she had not been sure what he was going to do.

At last he had turned away, walked to the nearest wall, and slid down it to the floor. There he sat, with his knees pulled up against his chest, his long, shaggy hair obscuring most of his face, and blood oozing from the torn skin on the knuckles of his right hand. After what felt like minutes, he had reached into his maroon jerkin—for he was wearing the same clothes as earlier, although without the mask—and drawn forth a small stone bottle. He drank several times and then began to talk.

He talked, and she listened. She had no choice, but she did not allow herself to believe what he said. Not at first. For all she knew, everything he said or did was a sham designed to win her confidence.

Murtagh had started by telling her a rather garbled story about a man named Tornac, which involved a riding mishap and some sort of advice Tornac had given him regarding how an honorable man ought to live. She had been unable to make out whether Tornac was a friend, a servant, a distant relative, or some combination thereof, but whatever he was, it was obvious that he had meant a great deal to Murtagh.

When he concluded his story, Murtagh had said, "Galbatorix was going to have you killed.… He knew Elva wasn't guarding you as she used to, so he decided it was the perfect time to have you assassinated. I only found out about his plan by chance; I happened to be with him when he gave the orders to the Black Hand." Murtagh shook his head. "It's my fault. I convinced him to have you brought here instead. He liked that; he knew you would lure Eragon here that much faster.… It was the only way I could keep him from killing you. … I'm sorry.… I'm sorry." And he buried his head in his arms.

"I would rather have died."

"I know," he said in a hoarse voice. "Will you forgive me?"

That she had not answered. His revelation only made her more

uneasy. Why should he care to save her life, and what did he expect in return?

Murtagh had said nothing more for a while. Then, sometimes weeping and sometimes raging, he told her of his upbringing in Galbatorix's court, of the distrust and jealousy he had faced as the son of Morzan, of the nobles who had sought to use him to win favor with the king, and of his longing for the mother he barely remembered. Twice he mentioned Eragon and cursed him for a fool favored by fortune. "He would not have done so well if our places had been reversed. But our mother chose to take *him* to Carvahall, not me." He spat on the floor.

She found the whole episode maudlin and self-pitying, and his weakness did nothing but inspire contempt in her until he recounted how the Twins had abducted him from Farthen Dûr, how they had mistreated him on the way to Urû'baen, and how Galbatorix had broken him once they arrived. Some of the tortures he described were worse than her own and, if true, gave her a slight measure of sympathy for his own plight.

"Thorn was my undoing," Murtagh finally confessed. "When he hatched for me and we bonded …" He shook his head. "I love him. How could I not? I love him even as Eragon loves Saphira. The moment I touched him, I was lost. Galbatorix used him against me. Thorn was stronger than me. He never gave up. But I could not bear to see him suffer, so I swore my loyalty to the king, and after that …" Murtagh's lips curled with revulsion. "After that, Galbatorix went into my mind. He learned everything about me, and then he taught me my true name. And now I am his.… His forever."

Then he leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes, and she watched the tears roll down his cheeks.

Eventually, he stood, and as he walked toward the door, he paused next to her and touched her on the shoulder. His nails, she noted, were clean and trimmed, but nowhere near as well cared for as her jailer's. He murmured a few words in the ancient language, and a moment later, her pain melted away, although her wounds looked the same as ever.

As he took his hand away, she said, "I cannot forgive … but I understand."

Whereupon he nodded and stumbled away, leaving her to wonder if she had found a new ally.

SMALL REBELLIONS

As Nasuada lay on the slab, sweating and shivering, every part of her body aching with pain, she found herself wishing that Murtagh would return, if only so he could again free her from her agony.

When at last the door to the eight-sided chamber swung open, she was unable to suppress her relief, but her relief turned to bitter disappointment when she heard the shuffling footsteps of her jailer descending the stairs that led into the room.

As he had once before, the stocky, narrow-shouldered man bathed her wounds with a wet cloth, then bound them with strips of linen. When he released her from the restraints so that she could visit the privy room, she found she was too weak to make any attempt to grab the knife on the tray of food. Instead, she contented herself with thanking the man for his help and, for the second time, complimenting him on his nails, which were even shinier than before and which he quite obviously wanted her to see, for he kept holding his hands where she could not help but look at them.

After he fed her and departed, she tried to sleep, but the constant pain of her wounds made it impossible for her to do more than doze.

Her eyes snapped open as she heard the bar to the door of the chamber being thrown open.

Not again! she thought, panic welling up inside her. *Not so soon! I can't bear it.… I'm not strong enough*. Then she reined in her fear and told herself, *Don't. Don't say such things or else you'll start to believe them*. Still, although she was able to master her conscious reactions, she could not stop her heart from pounding at twice its normal speed.

A single pair of footsteps echoed in the room, and then Murtagh appeared at the corner of her vision. He wore no mask, and his expression was somber.

This time he healed her first, without waiting. The relief she felt as her pain abated was so intense, it bordered on ecstasy. In all her life, she had never experienced a sensation quite so pleasurable as the draining away of the agony.

She gasped slightly at the feeling. "Thank you."

Murtagh nodded; then he went over to the wall and sat in the same spot as before.

She studied him for a minute. The skin on his knuckles was smooth and whole again, and he appeared sober, if grim and close-mouthed.

His clothes had once been fine, but they were now torn, frayed, and patched, and she spotted what looked like several cuts in the undersides of his sleeves. She wondered if he had been fighting.

"Does Galbatorix know where you are?" she finally asked.

"He might, but I doubt it. He's busy playing with his favorite concubines. That, or he's asleep. It's the middle of the night right now. Besides, I cast a spell to keep anyone from listening to us. He could break it if he wants, but I would know."

"What if he finds out?"

Murtagh shrugged.

"He will find out, you know, if he wears down my defenses."

"Then don't let him. You're stronger than me; you have no one he can threaten. You can resist him, unlike me.… The Varden are fast approaching, as are the elves from the north. If you can hold out for another few days, there's a chance … there's a chance maybe they can free you."

"You don't believe they can, do you?"

He shrugged again.

"… Then help me escape."

A bark of hard laughter erupted from his throat. "How? I can't do much more than put on my boots without Galbatorix's permission."

"You could loosen my cuffs, and when you leave, perhaps you could forget to secure the door."

His upper lip curled in a sneer. "There are two men stationed outside, there are wards set upon this room to warn Galbatorix if a prisoner steps outside it, and there are hundreds of guards between here and the nearest gate. You'd be lucky to make it to the end of the hallway, if that."

"Perhaps, but I'd like to try."

"You'd only get yourself killed."

"Then help me. If you wanted, you could find a way to fool his wards."

"I can't. My oaths won't let me use magic against him."

"What of the guards, though? If you held them off long enough for me to reach the gate, I could hide myself in the city, and it wouldn't matter if Galbatorix knew—"

"The city is his. Besides, wherever you went, he could find you with a spell. The only way you would be safe from him would be to get far away from here before the alarm roused him, and that you could not do even on dragonback."

"There must be a way!"

"If there were …" He smiled sourly and looked down. "It's pointless to consider."

Frustrated, she shifted her gaze to the ceiling for a few moments.

Then, “At least let me out of these cuffs.”

He released his breath in a sound of exasperation.

“Just so I can stand up,” she said. “I hate lying on this stone, and it’s making my eyes ache having to look at you down there.”

He hesitated, and then he rose to his feet in a single graceful movement, came over to the slab, and began to unfasten the padded restraints around her wrists and ankles. “Don’t think you can kill me,” he said in a low voice. “You can’t.”

As soon as she was free, he retreated to his former position and again lowered himself onto the floor, where he sat staring into the distance. It was, she thought, his attempt to give her some privacy as she sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the slab. Her shift was in tatters—burned through in dozens of locations—and it did a poor job of concealing her form, not that it had covered much to begin with.

The marble floor was cool against the soles of her feet as she made her way over to Murtagh and sat next to him. She wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to preserve her modesty.

“Was Tornac really your only friend growing up?” she asked.

Murtagh still did not look at her. “No, but he was as close to a father as I’ve ever had. He taught me, comforted me … berated me when I was too arrogant, and saved me from making a fool of myself more times than I can remember. If he were still alive, he would have beaten me silly for getting as drunk as I did the other day.”

“You said he died during your escape from Urû’baen?”

He snorted. “I thought I was being clever. I bribed one of the watchmen to leave a side gate open for us. We were going to slip out of the city under the cover of darkness, and Galbatorix was only supposed to find out what had happened once it was too late to catch us. He knew from the very start, though. How, I’m not sure, but I guess he was scrying me the whole while. When Tornac and I went through the gate, we found soldiers waiting for us on the other side.… Their orders were to bring us back unharmed, but we fought, and one of them killed Tornac. The finest swordsman in all the Empire brought down by a knife in the back.”

“But Galbatorix let you escape.”

“I don’t think he expected us to fight. Besides, his attention was directed elsewhere that night.”

She frowned as she saw the oddest half smile appear on Murtagh’s face.

“I counted the days,” he said. “That was when the Ra’zac were in Palancar Valley, searching for Saphira’s egg. So you see, Eragon lost his foster father almost at the same time I lost mine. Fate has a cruel sense of humor, don’t you think?”

"Yes, it does.… But if Galbatorix could scry you, why didn't he track you down and bring you back to Urû'baen later on?"

"He was playing with me, I think. I went to stay at the estate of a man I believed I could trust. As usual, I was mistaken, though I only found that out later, once the Twins brought me back here. Galbatorix knew where I was, and he knew I was still angry over Tornac's death, so he was content to leave me at the estate while he hunted for Eragon and Brom.… I surprised him, though; I left, and by the time he learned of my disappearance, I was already on my way to Dras-Leona. That's why Galbatorix went to Dras-Leona, you know. It wasn't to chastise Lord Tábor over his behavior—although he certainly did—it was to find me. But he was too late. By the time he arrived at the city, I had already met up with Eragon and Saphira, and we had set off for Gil'ead."

"Why did you leave?" she asked.

"Didn't Eragon tell you? Because—"

"No, not Dras-Leona. Why did you leave the estate? You were safe there, or so you thought. So why did you leave?"

Murtagh was quiet for a while. "I wanted to strike back at Galbatorix, and I wanted to make a name for myself apart from my father's. My whole life, people have looked at me differently because I am the son of Morzan. I wanted them to respect me for *my* deeds, not his." He finally looked at her, a quick glance out of the corner of one eye. "I suppose I got what I wanted, but again, fate has a cruel sense of humor."

She wondered if there had been anyone else in Galbatorix's court whom he had cared for, but she decided it would be a dangerous topic to broach. So, instead, she asked, "How much does Galbatorix really know about the Varden?"

"Everything, so far as I can tell. He has more spies than you think."

She pressed her arms against her belly as her gut twisted. "Do you know of any way to kill him?"

"A knife. A sword. An arrow. Poison. Magic. The usual ways. The problem is, he has too many spells wound about himself for anyone or anything to have a chance of harming him. Eragon is luckier than most; Galbatorix doesn't want to kill him, so he may get to attack the king more than once. But even if Eragon could attack him a hundred times, he wouldn't find a way past Galbatorix's wards."

"Every puzzle has a solution, and every man has a weakness," Nasuada insisted. "Does he love any of his concubines?"

The look on Murtagh's face answered her well enough. Then he said, "Would it be so bad if Galbatorix remains king? The world he envisions is a good world. If he defeats the Varden, the whole of Alagaësia will finally be at peace. He'll put an end to the misuse of

magic; elves, dwarves, and humans will no longer have cause to hate each other. What's more, if the Varden lose, Eragon and I can be together as brothers ought to be. But if they win, it'll mean the death of Thorn and me. It'll have to."

"Oh? And what of me?" she asked. "If Galbatorix wins, shall I become his slave, to order about as he wills?" Murtagh refused to answer, but she saw the tendons on the back of his hands tighten. "You can't give up, Murtagh."

"What other choice do I have!" he shouted, filling the room with echoes.

She stood and stared down at him. "You can fight! Look at me.… Look at me!"

He reluctantly lifted his gaze.

"You can find ways to work against him. That's what you can do! Even if your oaths will allow only the smallest of rebellions, the smallest of rebellions might still prove to be his undoing." She restated his question for effect. "What other choice do you have? You can go around feeling helpless and miserable for the rest of your life. You can let Galbatorix turn you into a monster. Or you can fight!" She spread her arms so that he could see all of the burn marks on her. "Do you enjoy hurting me?"

"No!" he exclaimed.

"Then fight, blast you! You have to fight or you *will* lose everything you are. As will Thorn."

She held her ground as he sprang to his feet, lithe as a cat, and moved toward her until he was only a few inches away. The muscles in his jaw bunched and knotted while he glowered at her, breathing heavily through his nostrils. She recognized his expression, for it was one she had seen many times before. His was the look of a man whose pride had been offended and who wanted to lash out at the person who had insulted him. It was dangerous to keep pushing him, but she knew she had to, for she might never get the chance again.

"If I can keep fighting," she said, "then so can you."

"Back to the stone," he said in a harsh voice.

"I know you're not a coward, Murtagh. Better to die than to live as a slave to one such as Galbatorix. At least then you might accomplish some good, and your name might be remembered with a measure of kindness after you're gone."

"Back to the stone," he growled, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her over to the slab.

She allowed him to push her onto the ash-colored block, fasten the restraints around her wrists and ankles, and then tighten the strap around her head. When he finished, he stood looking at her, his eyes dark and wild, the lines of his body like cords stretched taut.

“You have to decide whether you are willing to risk your life in order to save yourself,” she said. “You and Thorn both. And you have to decide now, while there is still time. Ask yourself: what would Tornac have wanted you to do?”

Without answering, Murtagh extended his right arm and placed his hand upon the upper part of her chest, his palm hot against her skin. Her breath hitched at the shock of the contact.

Then, hardly louder than a whisper, he began to speak in the ancient language. As the strange words tumbled from his lips, her fear grew ever stronger.

He spoke for what seemed like minutes. She felt no different when he stopped, but that was neither a favorable nor an unfavorable sign where magic was concerned.

Cool air washed over the patch on her chest, chilling it as Murtagh lifted his hand away. He stepped back then and started to walk past her, toward the entrance of the chamber. She was about to call out to him—to ask what he had done to her—when he paused and said, “That should shield you from the pain of most any wound, but you’ll have to pretend otherwise, or Galbatorix will discover what I’ve done.”

And then he left.

“Thank you,” she whispered to the empty room.

She spent a long time pondering their conversation. It seemed unlikely that Galbatorix had sent Murtagh to talk with her, but unlikely or not, it remained a possibility. Also, she found herself torn as to whether Murtagh was, at heart, a good person or a bad one. She thought back to King Hrothgar—who had been like an uncle to her when she was growing up—and how Murtagh had killed him on the Burning Plains. Then she thought of Murtagh’s childhood and the many hardships he had faced, and how he had allowed Eragon and Saphira to go free when he could have just as easily brought them to Urû’baen.

Yet even if Murtagh had once been honorable and trustworthy, she knew that his enforced servitude might have corrupted him.

In the end, she decided she would ignore Murtagh’s past and judge him on his actions in the present and those alone. Good, bad, or some combination thereof, he was a potential ally, and she needed his help if she could get it. If he proved false, then she would be no worse off than she already was. But if he proved true, then she might be able to escape from Urû’baen, and that was well worth the risk.

In the absence of pain, she slept long and deep for the first time since her arrival at the capital. She awoke feeling more hopeful than before, and again fell to tracing the lines painted on the ceiling. The thin blue line she was following led her to notice a small white shape

on the corner of a tile that she had previously overlooked. It took her a moment to realize that the discoloration was where a chip had fallen free.

The sight amused her, for she found it humorous—and somewhat comforting—to know that Galbatorix's perfect chamber was not quite so perfect after all, and that, despite his pretensions otherwise, he was not omniscient or infallible.

When the door to the chamber next opened, it was her jailer, bringing what she guessed was a midday meal. She asked him if she could eat first, before he let her up, for she said she was more hungry than anything else, which was not entirely untrue.

To her satisfaction, he agreed, though he uttered not a word, only smiled his hideous, clamplike smile and seated himself on the edge of the slab. As he spooned warm gruel into her mouth, her mind raced as she tried to plan for every contingency, for she knew she would have only one chance at success.

Anticipation made it difficult for her to stomach the bland food. Nevertheless, she managed, and when the bowl was empty and she had drunk her fill, she readied herself.

The man had, as always, placed the food tray by the base of the far wall, close to where Murtagh had been sitting and perhaps ten feet from the door to the privy room.

Once she was free of her manacles, she slid off the block of stone. The gourd-headed man reached over to take hold of her left arm, but she raised a hand and, in her sweetest voice, said, "I can stand by myself now, thank you."

Her jailer hesitated, then he smiled again and clacked his teeth together twice, as if to say, "Well then, I'm happy for you!"

They started toward the privy room, she in the front and he slightly to the rear. As she took her third step, she deliberately twisted her right ankle and stumbled diagonally across the room. The man shouted and tried to catch her—she felt his thick fingers close on the air above her neck—but he was too slow, and she eluded his grasp.

She fell lengthwise onto the tray, breaking the pitcher—which still held a fair amount of watered wine—and sending the wooden bowl clattering across the floor. By design, she landed with her right hand underneath her, and as soon as she felt the tray, she began to search with her fingers for the metal spoon.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, as if hurt, then turned to look up at the man, doing her best to appear chagrined. "Maybe I wasn't ready after all," she said, and gave him an apologetic smile. Her thumb touched the handle of the spoon, and she grabbed hold of it even as the man pulled her upright by her other arm.

He looked her over and wrinkled his nose, appearing disgusted by her wine-soaked shift. While he did, she reached behind herself and slid the handle of the spoon through a hole near the hem of her garment. Then she held up her hand, as if to show that she had taken nothing.

The man grunted, grabbed her other arm, and marched her to the privy room. As she entered, he shuffled back toward the tray, muttering under his breath.

The moment she had closed the door, she pulled the spoon out of her shift and placed it between her lips, holding it there as she plucked several strands of hair from the back of her head, where they were longest. Moving as fast as she could, she pinched one end of the gathered hairs between the fingers of her left hand and then rolled the loose strands down her thighs with the palm of her right, twisting them together into a single cord. Her skin grew cold as she realized the cord was too short. Fumbling in her urgency, she tied off the ends, then placed the cord on the ground.

She plucked another group of hairs and rolled them into a second cord, which she tied off like the first.

Knowing that she had only seconds remaining, she dropped to one knee and knotted the two strands together. Then she took the spoon from her mouth and, with the slim length of thread, she bound the spoon to the outside of her left leg, where the edge of her shift would cover it.

It had to go on her left leg because Galbatorix always sat to her right.

She stood and checked that the spoon remained hidden, and then she took a few steps to make sure it would not fall.

It did not.

Relieved, she allowed herself to exhale. Now her challenge was to return to the slab without letting her jailer notice what she had done.

The man was waiting for her when she opened the door to the privy room. He scowled at her, and his sparse eyebrows met, forming a single straight line.

“Spoon,” he said, mashing the word with his tongue as if it were a piece of overcooked parsnip.

She lifted her chin and pointed toward the rear of the privy room.

His scowl deepened. He went into the room and carefully examined the walls, floors, ceiling, and all else before stomping back out. He clacked his teeth together again and scratched his bulbous head, appearing unhappy and, she thought, a little hurt that she would bother to throw away the spoon. She had been kind to him, and she knew an act of such petty defiance would puzzle him and make him angry.

She resisted the urge to pull away when he stepped forward, put his weighty hands on her head, and combed through her hair with his fingers. When he did not find the spoon, his face drooped. He grabbed her arm then and walked her over to the slab and again placed her in the manacles.

Then, his expression sullen, he picked up the tray and shuffled out of the room.

She waited until she was absolutely sure he was gone before she reached out with the fingers of her left hand and, inch by inch, pulled up the edge of her shift.

A broad smile passed across her face as she felt the bowl of the spoon with the tip of her index finger.

Now she had a weapon.

A Crown of Ice and Snow

When the first pale rays of light streaked across the surface of the dimpled sea, illuminating the crests of the translucent waves—which glittered as if carved from crystal—then Eragon roused himself from his waking dreams and looked to the northwest, curious to see what the light revealed of the clouds building in the distance.

What he beheld was disconcerting: the clouds encompassed nearly half the horizon, and the largest of the dense white plumes looked as tall as the peaks of the Beor Mountains, too tall for Saphira to climb over. The only open sky lay behind her, and even that would be lost to them as the arms of the storm closed in.

We shall have to fly through it, Glaedr said, and Eragon felt Saphira's trepidation.

Why not try to go around? she asked.

Through Saphira, Eragon was aware of Glaedr examining the structure of the clouds. At last the golden dragon said, *I do not want you flying too far off course. We still have many leagues to cover, and if your strength fails you—*

Then you can lend me yours to keep us aloft.

Hmph. Even so, it is best to be cautious in our recklessness. I have seen the likes of this storm before. It is larger than you think. To skirt it, you would have to fly so far to the west that you would end up beyond Vroengard, and it would probably take another day to reach land.

The distance to Vroengard isn't that great, she said.

No, but the wind will slow us. Besides, my instincts tell me that the storm extends all the way to the island. One way or another, we shall have to fly through it. However, there's no need to go through its very heart. Do you see the notch between those two small pillars off to the west?

Yes.

Go there, and perhaps we can then find a safe path through the clouds.

Eragon grasped the front of the saddle as Saphira dropped her left shoulder and turned westward, aiming herself toward the notch Glaedr had indicated. He yawned and rubbed his eyes as she leveled out; then he twisted round and dug out an apple and a few strips of dried beef from the bags strapped behind him. It was a meager breakfast, but his hunger was slight, and eating a large meal while riding Saphira often made him queasy.

While he ate, he alternated between watching the clouds and gazing at the sparkling sea. He found it unsettling that there was nothing but

water beneath them and that the nearest solid ground—the mainland—was, by his estimate, over fifty miles away. He shivered as he imagined sinking down and down into the cold, clutching depths of the sea. He wondered what lay at the bottom, and it occurred to him that with his magic, he could likely travel there and find out, but the thought held no appeal. The watery abyss was too dark and too dangerous for his liking. It was not, he felt, a place where his sort of life ought to venture. Better, instead, to leave it to whatever strange creatures already lived there.

As the morning wore on, it became apparent that the clouds were farther away than they had first seemed and that, as Glaedr had said, the storm was larger than either Eragon or Saphira had originally imagined.

A light headwind sprang up, and Saphira's flight became somewhat more labored, but she continued to make good progress.

When they were still some leagues from the leading edge of the storm, Saphira surprised Eragon and Glaedr by slipping into a shallow dive and flying down close to the surface of the water.

As she descended, Glaedr said, *Saphira, what are you about?*

I'm curious, she replied. *And I would like to rest my wings before entering the clouds*.

She skimmed over the waves, her reflection below and her shadow in front mirroring her every move like two ghostly companions, one dark and one light. Then she swiveled her wings on edge and, with three quick flaps, slowed herself and landed upon the water. A fan of spray shot up on either side of her neck as her chest plowed into the waves, sprinkling Eragon with hundreds of droplets.

The water was cold, but after so long aloft, the air felt pleasantly warm—so warm, in fact, that Eragon unwrapped his cloak and pulled off his gloves.

Saphira folded her wings and floated along peacefully, bobbing up and down with the motion of the waves. Eragon spotted several clumps of brown seaweed off to the right. The plants were branched like scrub brush and had berry-sized bladders at joints along the stems.

Far overhead, near the height Saphira had been, Eragon spotted a pair of albatrosses with black-tipped wings flying away from the massive wall of clouds. The sight only deepened his unease; the seabirds reminded him of the time he had seen a pack of wolves running alongside a herd of deer as the animals fled a forest fire in the Spine.

If we had any sense, he said to Saphira, *we would turn around*.

If we had any sense, we would leave Alagaësia and never return, she

rejoined.

Arching her neck, she dipped her muzzle into the seawater, then shook her head and ran her crimson tongue in and out of her mouth several times, as if she had tasted something unpleasant.

Then Eragon felt a sense of panic from Glaedr, and the old dragon roared in his mind: *Take off! Now, now, now! Take off!*

Saphira wasted no time on questions. With a sound like thunder, she opened her wings and began to beat them as she reared out of the water.

Leaning forward, Eragon grabbed the edge of the saddle to keep from being thrown backward. The flapping of Saphira's wings threw up a screen of mist that half blinded him, so he used his mind to search for whatever had alarmed Glaedr.

From deep below, rising toward Saphira's underside faster than Eragon would have believed possible, he felt something that was cold and huge … and filled with a ravenous, insatiable hunger. He tried to frighten it, tried to turn it away, but the creature was alien and implacable and seemed not to notice his efforts. In the strange, lightless caverns of its consciousness, he glimpsed memories of uncounted years spent lurking alone in the icy sea, hunting and being hunted.

His own panic mounting, Eragon groped for the hilt of Brisingr even as Saphira wrenched herself free from the grasp of the water and began to climb into the air. *Saphira! Hurry!* he silently shouted.

She slowly gained speed and altitude, and then a fountain of white water erupted behind her, and Eragon saw a pair of shiny gray jaws emerge from within the plume. The jaws were large enough for a horse and rider to pass through unscathed and were filled with hundreds of glinting white teeth.

Saphira was aware of what he saw, and she twisted violently to the side in an attempt to escape the gaping maw, clipping the water with the tip of her wing. An instant later, Eragon heard and felt the creature's jaws snap shut.

The needle-like teeth missed Saphira's tail by inches.

As the monster fell back into the water, more of its body became visible: The head was long and angular. A bony crest jutted out over the eyes, and from the outer part of each crest grew a ropy tendril that Eragon guessed to be over six feet in length. The neck of the creature reminded him of a giant, rippling snake. What was visible of the creature's torso was smooth and powerfully built and looked incredibly dense. A pair of oar-shaped flippers extended from the sides of its chest, flailing helplessly in the air.

The creature landed upon its side, and a second, even larger burst of spray flew toward the sky.

Just before the waves closed over the monster's shape, Eragon looked into its one upward-facing eye, which was as black as a drop of tar. The malevolence contained therein—the sheer hate and fury and *frustration* that he perceived in the creature's unblinking gaze—was enough to make Eragon shiver and wish he were in the center of the Hadarac Desert. For only there, he felt, would he be safe from the creature's ancient hunger.

Heart pounding, he relaxed his grip on Brisingr and slumped over the front of the saddle. "What was that?"

A Nïdhwal, said Glaedr.

Eragon frowned. He did not remember reading about any such thing in Ellesméra. *And what is a Nïdhwal?!*

They are rare and not often spoken about. They are to the sea what the Fanghur are to the air. Both are cousins to the dragons. Though the differences in our appearance are greater, the Nïdhwal are closer to us than are the screeching Fanghur. They are intelligent, and they even have a structure similar to the Eldunarí within their chest, which we believe enables them to remain submerged for extended periods of time at great depth.

Can they breathe fire?

No, but like the Fanghur, they often use the power of their minds to incapacitate their prey, which more than one dragon has discovered to their dismay.

They would eat their own kind! Saphira said.

To them, we are nothing alike, Glaedr replied. *But they do eat their own, which is one reason there are so few Nïdhwalar. They have no interest in happenings outside their own realm, and every attempt to reason with them has met with failure. It is odd to encounter one so close to shore. There was a time when they were only found several days' flight from land, where the sea is the deepest. It seems they have grown either bold or desperate since the fall of the Riders.*

Eragon shivered again as he remembered the feel of the Nïdhwal's mind. *Why did neither you nor Oromis ever teach us of them?*

There is much we did not teach you, Eragon. We had only so much time, and it was best spent trying to arm you against Galbatorix, not every dark creature that haunts the unexplored regions of Alagaësia.

Then there are other things *like the Nïdhwal that we don't know about?*

A few.

Will you tell us of them, Ebrithil? Saphira asked.

I will make a pact with you, Saphira, and with you, Eragon. Let us wait a week, and if we are still alive and still possessed of our freedom, I will happily spend the next ten years teaching you about every single race I know of, including every variety of beetle, of which there are multitudes. But until then, let us concentrate upon the task before us. Are we agreed?

Eragon and Saphira reluctantly agreed, and they spoke of it no more.

The headwind strengthened into a blustery gale as they neared the front of the storm, slowing Saphira until she was flying at half her normal speed. Now and then, powerful gusts rocked her and sometimes stopped her dead in her course for a few moments. They always knew when the gusts were about to strike, for they could see a silvery, scalelike pattern rushing toward them across the surface of the water.

Since dawn, the clouds had only increased in size, and up close, they were even more intimidating. Near the bottom, they were dark and purplish, with curtains of driving rain connecting the storm with the sea like a gauzy umbilical cord. Higher up, the clouds were the color of tarnished silver, while the very tops were a pure, blinding white and appeared as solid as the flanks of Tronjheim. To the north, over the center of the storm, the clouds had formed a gigantic flat-topped anvil that loomed over all else, as if the gods themselves intended to forge some strange and terrible instrument.

As Saphira soared between two bulging white columns—beside which she was no more than a speck—and the sea vanished beneath a field of pillow-like clouds, the headwind abated and the air grew rough and choppy, swirling about them without an identifiable direction. Eragon clenched his teeth to keep them from clacking, and his stomach lurched as Saphira dropped a half-dozen feet and then, just as quickly, rose more than twenty feet straight up.

Glaedr said, *Have you any experience storm-flying other than the time you were caught in a thunderstorm between Palancar Valley and Yazuac?*

No, said Saphira, short and grim.

Glaedr seemed to have expected her answer, for without hesitation he began to instruct her about the intricacies of navigating the fantastic cloudscape. *Look for patterns of movement and take note of the formations around you*, he said. *By them, you may guess where the wind is strongest and the direction it is blowing.*

Much of what he said Saphira already knew, but as Glaedr kept talking, the old dragon's calm demeanor steadied both her and Eragon. Had they felt alarm or fear in the old dragon's mind, it would have caused them to doubt themselves, and perhaps Glaedr was aware of that.

A stray, wind-torn scrap of cloud lay across Saphira's path. Instead of flying around it, she went straight through, piercing the cloud like a glittering blue spear. As the gray mist enveloped them, the sound of the wind grew muted, and Eragon squinted and held a hand before his face to keep his eyes clear.

When they shot out of the cloud, millions of tiny droplets clung to Saphira's body, and she sparkled as if diamonds had been affixed to her already dazzling scales.

Her flight continued to be unsettled; one moment she would be level, but the next the unruly air might shove her sideways, or an unexpected updraft might lift one wing and send her slewing off in the opposite direction. Just sitting on her back as she fought against the turbulence was tiring, while for Saphira herself, it was a miserable, frustrating struggle made all the more difficult by knowing that it was far from over and that she had no choice but to continue on.

After an hour or two they still had not sighted the far side of the tempest. Glaedr said, *We have to turn. You've gone as far west as is prudent, and if we're to dare the full wrath of the storm, we had best do it now, before you are any more exhausted*.

Without a word, Saphira wheeled north toward the vast, towering cliff of sunlit clouds that occupied the heart of the giant storm. As they neared the ridged face of the cliff—which was the largest single thing Eragon had ever seen, larger even than Farthen Dûr—blue flashes illuminated the folds within as lightning crawled upward, toward the top of the anvil head.

A moment later, a clap of thunder shook the sky, and Eragon covered his ears with his hands. He knew that his wards would protect them from the lightning, but he still felt apprehensive about venturing near the crackling bolts of energy.

If Saphira was frightened, he did not sense it. All he could feel was her determination. She quickened the beat of her wings, and a few minutes later they arrived at the face of the cliff and then plunged through it and into the center of the storm.

Twilight surrounded them, gray and featureless.

It was as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist. The clouds made it impossible for Eragon to judge any distance past the tips of Saphira's nose, tail, and wings. They were effectively blind, and only the constant pull of their weight let them differentiate up from down.

Eragon opened his mind and allowed his consciousness to expand as far as he could, but he felt no other living thing besides Saphira and Glaedr, not even a single stray bird. Fortunately, Saphira retained her sense of direction; they would not get lost. And by continuing to search with his mind for other beings, whether plant or animal, Eragon could ensure that they would not fly straight into the side of a mountain.

He also cast a spell that Oromis had taught him, a spell that informed him and Saphira exactly how close they were to the water—or the ground—at any given moment.

From the moment they entered the cloud, the ever-present moisture

began to accumulate on Eragon's skin and soak into his woolen clothes, weighing them down. It was an annoyance he could have ignored had not the combination of water and wind been so chilling, it would have soon drained the heat from his limbs and killed him. Therefore, he cast another spell, which filtered the air around him of any visible droplets, as well as—at her request—the air around Saphira's eyes, for the moisture kept collecting on their surface, forcing her to blink all too frequently.

The wind inside the anvil head was surprisingly gentle. Eragon made a comment to that effect to Glaedr, but the old dragon stayed as grim as ever. *We have yet to encounter the worst of it.*

The truth of his words soon became evident when a ferocious updraft slammed into Saphira's underside and carried her thousands of feet higher, where the air was too thin for Eragon to breathe properly and the mist froze into countless tiny crystals that stung his nose and cheeks and the webbing of Saphira's wings like so many razor-sharp knives.

Pinning her wings against her sides, Saphira dove forward, trying to escape the updraft. After a few seconds, the pressure underneath her vanished, only to be replaced by an equally powerful downdraft, which shoved her toward the waves at a frightful speed.

As they fell, the ice crystals melted, forming large, globular raindrops that seemed to float weightlessly alongside Saphira. Lightning flared nearby—an eerie blue glow through the veil of clouds—and Eragon shouted with pain as the thunder boomed around them. His ears still ringing, he ripped two small pieces off the edge of his cloak, then rolled up the scraps of cloth and screwed them into his ears, forcing them in as far as he could.

Only near the bottom of the clouds did Saphira manage to break free of the fast-flowing stream of air. As soon as she did, a second updraft seized hold of her and, like a giant hand, pushed her skyward.

Then and for a long while after, Eragon lost all track of time. The raging wind was too strong for Saphira to resist, and she continued to rise and fall in the cycling air, like a piece of flotsam caught in a whirlpool. She made some headway—a few scant miles, dearly won and with great effort retained—but every time she extricated herself from one of the looping currents, she found herself trapped in another.

It was humbling for Eragon to realize that he, Saphira, and Glaedr were helpless before the storm and that, for all their might, they could not hope to match the power of the elements.

Twice, the wind nearly drove Saphira into the crashing waves. On both occasions, the downdrafts cast her out of the underbelly of the storm into the squalls of rain that pummeled the sea below. The second time it happened, Eragon looked over Saphira's shoulder and,

for an instant, he thought he saw the long, dark shape of the Nïdhwal resting upon the heaving water. However, when the next burst of lightning came, the shape was gone, and he wondered whether the shadows had played a trick upon him.

As Saphira's strength waned, she fought the wind less and less and, instead, allowed it to take her where it would. She only made an effort to defy the storm when she got too close to the water. Otherwise, she stilled her wings and exerted herself as little as possible. Eragon felt when Glaedr began to feed her a thread of energy to help sustain her, but even that was not enough to allow her to do more than hold her place.

Eventually, what light there was began to fade, and despair settled upon Eragon. They had spent the better part of the day being tossed about by the storm, and still it showed no sign of subsiding, nor did it seem as if Saphira was anywhere close to its perimeter.

Once the sun had set, Eragon could not even see the tip of his nose, and there was no difference between when his eyes were open and when they were closed. It was as if a huge pile of black wool had been packed around him and Saphira, and indeed, the darkness seemed to have a weight to it, as if it were a palpable substance pressing against them from all sides.

Every few seconds, another flash of lightning split the gloom, sometimes hidden within the clouds, sometimes streaking across their field of vision, glaring with the brightness of a dozen suns and leaving the air tasting like iron. After the searing brightness of the closer discharges, the night seemed twice as dark, and Eragon and Saphira alternated between being blinded by the light and being blinded by the utter black that followed. As close as the bolts came, they never struck Saphira, but the constant roll of thunder left Eragon and Saphira feeling sick from the noise.

How long they continued like that, Eragon could not tell.

Then, at some point in the night, Saphira entered a torrent of rising air that was far larger and far stronger than any they had previously encountered. As soon as it struck them, Saphira began to struggle against it in an attempt to escape, but the force of the wind was so great, she could barely hold her wings level.

At last, frustrated, she roared and loosed a jet of flame from her maw, illuminating a small area of the surrounding ice crystals, which glittered like gems.

Help me, she said to Eragon and Glaedr. *I can't do this by myself*.

So the two of them melded their minds and, with Glaedr supplying the needed energy, Eragon shouted, "Gánga fram!"

The spell propelled Saphira forward, but ever so slowly, for moving at right angles to the wind was like swimming across the Anora River

during the height of the spring snowmelt. Even as Saphira advanced horizontally, the current continued to sweep her upward at a dizzying rate. Soon Eragon began to notice that he was growing short of breath, and yet they remained caught within the torrent of air.

This is taking too long and it's costing us too much energy, said Glaedr. *End the spell.*

But—

End the spell. We can't win free before the two of you faint. We'll have to ride the wind until it weakens enough for Saphira to escape.

How? she asked while Eragon did as Glaedr instructed. The exhaustion and sense of defeat that muddied her thoughts made Eragon feel a pang of concern for her.

Eragon, you must amend the spell you are using to warm yourself to include Saphira and me. It is going to grow cold, colder than even the bitterest winter in the Spine, and without magic, we shall freeze to death.

Even you?

I will crack like a piece of hot glass dropped in snow. Next you must cast a spell to gather the air around you and Saphira and to hold it there, so you may still breathe. But it must also allow the stale air to escape, or else you will suffocate. The wording of the spell is complicated, and you must not make any mistakes, so listen carefully. It goes as such—

Once Glaedr had recited the necessary phrases in the ancient language, Eragon repeated them back to him, and when the dragon was satisfied with his pronunciation, Eragon cast the spell. Then he amended his other piece of magic as Glaedr had instructed, so the three of them were shielded from the cold.

They waited, then, while the wind lifted them higher and higher. Minutes passed, and Eragon began to wonder if they would ever stop, or if they would keep hurtling upward until they were level with the moon and the stars.

It occurred to him that perhaps this was how shooting stars were made: a bird or a dragon or some other earthly creature snatched upward by the inexorable wind and thrown skyward with such speed, they flamed like siege arrows. If so, then he guessed he, Saphira, and Glaedr would make the brightest, most spectacular shooting star in living memory, if anyone was close enough to see their demise so far out to sea.

The howling of the wind gradually grew softer. Even the bone-jarring claps of thunder seemed muted, and when Eragon dug the scraps of cloth out of his ears, he was astonished by the hushed silence that surrounded them. He still heard a faint susurration in the background, like the sound of a small forest brook, but other than that, it was quiet, blessedly quiet.

As the clamor of the angry storm faded, he also noticed that the

strain imposed by his spells was increasing—not so much from the enchantment that prevented their bodily heat from dissipating too quickly, but from the enchantment that collected and compressed the atmosphere in front of him and Saphira so that they could fill their lungs as they normally did. For whatever reason, the energy required to maintain the second spell multiplied out of all proportion to the first, and he soon felt the symptoms that indicated the magic was upon the verge of stealing away what little remained of his life force: a coldness of his hands, an uncertainty in the beating of his heart, and an overwhelming sense of lethargy, which was perhaps the most worrying sign of all.

Then Glaedr began to assist him. With relief, Eragon felt his burden decrease as the dragon's strength flowed into him, a flush of fever-like heat that washed away his lethargy and restored the vigor of his limbs.

And so they continued.

At long last, Saphira detected a slackening of the wind—slight but noticeable—and she began to prepare to fly out of the stream of air.

Before she could, the clouds above them thinned, and Eragon glimpsed a few glittering specks: stars, white and silvery and brighter than any he had seen before.

Look, he said. Then the clouds opened up around them, and Saphira rose out of the storm and hung above it, balancing precariously atop the column of rushing wind.

Laid out below them, Eragon saw the whole of the storm, extending for what must have been a hundred miles in every direction. The center appeared as an arching, mushroom-like dome, smoothed off by the vicious crosswinds that swept west to east and threatened to topple Saphira from her uncertain perch. The clouds both near and far were milky and seemed almost luminous, as if lit from within. They looked beautiful and benign—placid, unchanging formations that betrayed nothing of the violence inside.

Then Eragon noticed the sky, and he gasped, for it contained more stars than he had thought existed. Red, blue, white, gold, they lay strewn upon the firmament like handfuls of sparkling dust. The constellations he was familiar with were still present but now set among thousands of fainter stars, which he beheld for the very first time. And not only did the stars appear brighter, the void between them appeared darker. It was as if, whenever he had looked at the sky before, there had been a haze over his eyes that had kept him from seeing the true glory of the stars.

He stared at the spectacular display for several moments, awestruck by the glorious, random, unknowable nature of the twinkling lights.

Only when he finally lowered his gaze did it occur to him that there was something unusual about the purple-hued horizon. Instead of the sky and the sea meeting in a straight line—as they ought to and always had before—the juncture between them curved, like the edge of an unimaginably big circle.

It was such a strange sight, it took Eragon a half-dozen seconds to understand what he was seeing, and when he did, his scalp tingled and he felt as if the breath had been knocked out of him.

"The world is round," he whispered. "The sky is hollow and the world is round."

So it would appear, Glaedr said, but he seemed equally impressed. *I heard tell of this from a wild dragon, but I never thought to see it myself*.

To the east, a faint yellow glow tinted a section of the horizon, presaging the return of the sun. Eragon guessed that if Saphira held her position for another four or five minutes, they would see it rise, even though it would still be hours before the warm, life-giving rays reached the water below.

Saphira balanced there for a moment more, the three of them suspended between the stars and the earth, floating in the silent twilight like dispossessed spirits. They were in a nowhere place, neither part of the heavens nor part of the world below—a mote passing through the margin separating two immensities.

Then Saphira tipped forward and half flew, half fell northward, for the air was so sparse that her wings could not fully support her weight once she left the stream of rising wind.

As she hurtled downward, Eragon said, *If we had enough jewels, and if we stored enough energy in them, do you think we could fly all the way to the moon?*

Who knows what is possible? said Glaedr.

When Eragon was a child, Carvahall and Palancar Valley had been all he had known. He had heard of the Empire, of course, but it had never seemed quite real until he began to travel within it. Later still, his mental picture of the world had expanded to include the rest of Alagaësia and, vaguely, the other lands he had read of. And now he realized that what he had thought of as so large was actually but a small part of a much greater whole. It was as if his point of view had, within a few seconds, gone from that of an ant to that of an eagle.

For the sky was hollow, and the world was round.

It made him reevaluate and recategorize … everything. The war between the Varden and the Empire seemed inconsequential when compared with the true size of the world, and he thought how petty were most of the hurts and concerns that bedeviled people, when looked at from on high.

To Saphira, he said, *If only everyone could see what we have seen,*

perhaps there would be less fighting in the world.

You cannot expect wolves to become sheep.

No, but neither do the wolves have to be cruel to the sheep.

Saphira soon dropped back into the darkness of the clouds, but she managed to avoid getting caught in another cycle of rising and falling air. Instead, she glided for many miles, skipping off the tops of the other, lower updrafts packed within the storm, using them to help conserve her strength.

An hour or two later, the fog parted, and they flew out of the huge mass of clouds that formed the center of the storm. They descended to skim over the insubstantial foothills piled about its base, which gradually flattened into a quilted blanket that covered everything in sight, with the sole exception of the anvil head itself.

By the time the sun finally appeared above the horizon, neither Eragon nor Saphira had the energy to pay much attention to their surroundings. Nor was there anything in the sameness below to attract their attention.

It was Glaedr, then, who said, *Saphira, there, to your right. Do you see it?*

Eragon lifted his head off his folded arms and squinted as his eyes adjusted to the brightness.

Some miles to the north, a ring of mountains rose out of the clouds. The peaks were clad in snow and ice, and together they looked like an ancient, jagged crown resting atop the layers of mist. The eastward-facing scarps shone brilliantly in the light of the morning sun, while long blue shadows cloaked the western sides and stretched dwindling into the distance, tenebrous daggers upon the billowy, snow-white plain.

Eragon straightened in his seat, hardly daring to believe that their journey might be at an end.

Behold, said Glaedr, *Aras Thelduin, the fire mountains that guard the heart of Vroengard. Fly quickly, Saphira, for we have but a little farther to go.*

Burrow Grubs

They caught her at the intersection of two identical corridors, both lined with pillars and torches and scarlet pennants bearing the twisting gold flame that was Galbatorix's insignia.

Nasuada had not expected to escape, not really, but she could not help but feel disappointed at her failure. If nothing else, she had hoped to cover more distance before they recaptured her.

She fought the whole way as the soldiers dragged her back to the chamber that had been her prison. The men wore chest plates and vambraces, but she still managed to scratch their faces and bite their hands, wounding a pair of the men rather severely.

The soldiers uttered exclamations of dismay when they entered the Hall of the Soothsayer and saw what she had done to her jailer. Careful not to step in the pooling blood, they carried her to the slab of stone, strapped her down, then hurried away, leaving her alone with the corpse.

She shouted at the ceiling and yanked at her restraints, angry with herself for not having done better. Still simmering, she glanced at the body on the floor, then quickly looked away. In death, the man's expression seemed accusatory, and she could not bear to gaze upon it.

After she stole the spoon, she had spent hours grinding the end of the handle against the stone slab. The spoon had been made of soft iron, so it was easy to shape.

She had thought that Galbatorix and Murtagh would visit her next, but instead it was her jailer, bringing her what might have been a late dinner. He had started to undo her manacles in preparation for escorting her to the privy room. The moment he freed her left hand, she stabbed him underneath the chin with the sharpened handle of the spoon, burying the utensil in the folds of his wattle. The man squealed, a horrible, high-pitched sound that reminded her of a pig at slaughter, and spun thrice around, flailing his arms, then fell to the floor, where he lay thrashing and frothing and drumming his heels for what seemed an unreasonably long time.

Killing him had troubled her. She did not think the man had been evil—she was not sure what he had been—but there had been a simpleness to him that made her feel as if she had taken advantage of him. Still, she had done what was necessary, and though she now found it unpleasant to consider, she remained convinced that her actions had been justified.

As the man lay convulsing in his death throes, she had unfastened the rest of the restraints and jumped off the slab. Then, steeling her nerve, she pulled the spoon out of the man's neck, which—like a stopper removed from the bung of a barrel—released a spray of blood that splattered her legs and caused her to jump backward while stifling a curse.

The two guards outside the Hall of the Soothsayer had been easy enough to deal with. She had caught them by surprise and killed the right-hand guard in much the same way she had killed her jailer. Then she had drawn the dagger from the guard's belt and attacked the other man even as he struggled to bring his pike to bear upon her. Up close, a pike was no match for a dagger, and she had unseamed him before he had a chance to escape or raise the alarm.

She had not gotten very far after that. Whether because of Galbatorix's spells or just plain bad luck, she ran headlong into a group of five soldiers, and they had quickly, if not easily, subdued her.

It could not have been more than half an hour later when she heard a large group of men in iron-shod boots march up to the door of the chamber, and then Galbatorix stormed in, followed by several guards.

As always, he stopped at the edge of her line of sight, and there he stood, a tall, dark figure with an angular face, only the outlines of which were visible. She saw his head turn as he took in the scene; then, in a cold voice, he said, "How did this happen?"

A soldier with a plume on his helm scurried in front of Galbatorix, knelt, and held out her sharpened spoon. "Sire, we found this in one of the men outside."

The king took the spoon and turned it over in his hands. "I see." His head swiveled toward her. He gripped the ends of the spoon and, without discernible effort, bent it until it snapped in two. "You knew you could not escape, and yet you insisted upon trying. I'll not have you killing my men merely to spite me. You have not the right to take their lives. You have not the right to do *anything* unless I allow it." He flung the pieces of metal upon the floor. Then he turned and stalked out of the Hall of the Soothsayer, his heavy cape flapping behind him.

Two of the soldiers removed her jailer's body, then scoured the chamber of his blood, cursing her as they scrubbed.

Once they had left and she was again alone, she allowed herself a sigh, and some of the tension in her limbs vanished.

She wished she had had a chance to eat, for now that the excitement was over, she found she was hungry. Worse, she suspected she would have to wait hours before she could hope to have her next meal, assuming that Galbatorix did not decide to punish her by withholding food.

Her musings about bread and roasts and tall glasses of wine were short-lived, as she again heard the sound of many boots in the passageway outside her cell. Startled, she tried to mentally prepare herself for whatever unpleasantness was about to come, for it *would* be unpleasant, she was sure.

The door to the chamber crashed open, and two sets of footsteps echoed in the octagonal room as Murtagh and Galbatorix walked over to her. Murtagh positioned himself where he usually did, but without the brazier to occupy himself, he crossed his arms, leaned against the wall, and glared at the floor. What she could see of his expression beneath his silver half mask did not comfort her; the lines of his face seemed even harder than normal, and there was something about the cast of his mouth that sent a chill of fear into her bones.

Instead of sitting, as was his wont, Galbatorix stood behind and somewhat to the side of her head, where she could feel his presence more than she could see it.

He extended his long, clawlike hands over her. In them, he held a small box decorated with lines of carved horn that might have formed glyphs from the ancient language. Most disconcerting of all, a faint *skree-skree* sound came from within the container, soft as the scratching of a mouse, but no less distinct.

With the pad of his thumb, Galbatorix pushed open the box's sliding lid. Then he reached inside and pulled out what appeared to be a large, ivory-colored maggot. The creature was almost three inches long, and it had a tiny mouth at one end, with which it uttered the *skree-skree* she had heard before, announcing its displeasure to the world. It was plump and pleated, like a caterpillar, but if it had any legs, they were so small as to be invisible.

As the creature wiggled in a vain attempt to free itself from between Galbatorix's fingers, the king said, "This is a burrow grub. It is not what it appears to be. Few things are, but in the case of burrow grubs, that is all the more true. They are found in only one place in Alagaësia and are far more difficult to capture than you might suppose. Take it, then, as a sign of my regard for you, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad, that I deign to use one on you." His voice dropped in tone, becoming even more intimate. "I would not, however, wish to exchange places with you."

The *skree-skree* of the burrow grub increased in volume as Galbatorix dropped it onto the bare skin of her right arm, just below the elbow. She flinched as the disgusting creature landed on her; it was heavier than it looked, and its underside gripped her with what felt like hundreds of little hooks.

The burrow grub squalled for a moment more; then it gathered up its body in a tight bundle and *hopped* several inches up her arm.

She wrenched at her bonds, hoping to dislodge the grub, but it continued to cling to her.

Again it hopped.

And again, and now it was on her shoulder, the hooks pinching and digging into her skin like a strip of minute cockleburs. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the burrow grub lift up its eyeless head and point it toward her face, as if testing the air. Its tiny mouth opened, and she saw that it had sharp cutting mandibles behind its upper and lower lips.

Skree-skree? said the burrow grub. *Skree-skra?*

"Not there," Galbatorix said, and he spoke a word in the ancient language.

On hearing it, the burrow grub swung away from her head, for which she felt a measure of relief. Then it began to worm its way back down her arm.

Few things frightened her. The touch of the hot iron frightened her. The thought that Galbatorix might reign forevermore in Urû'baen frightened her. Death, of course, frightened her, although not so much because she feared the end of her existence as because she feared leaving undone all the things she still hoped to accomplish.

But, for whatever reason, the sight and feel of the burrow grub unnerved her in a way that, until that very moment, nothing else had. Every muscle in her body seemed to burn and tingle, and she felt an overwhelming urge to run, to flee, to put as much distance between herself and the creature as she could, for there seemed to be something profoundly *wrong* about the burrow grub. It did not move as it should, and its obscene little mouth reminded her of a child's, and the sound it made, the horrible, horrible sound, elicited a primal loathing within her.

The burrow grub paused by her elbow.

Skree-skree!

Then its fat, limbless body contracted, and it hopped four, five inches straight up into the air and then dove headfirst toward the inner part of her elbow.

As it landed, the burrow grub divided into a dozen small, bright green centipedes, which swarmed over her arm before each chose a spot to sink its mandibles into her flesh and bore its way through her skin.

The pain was too great for her to bear; she struggled against her restraints and screamed at the ceiling, but she could not escape her torment, not then and not for a seemingly endless span of time thereafter. The iron had hurt more, but she would have preferred its touch, for the hot metal was impersonal, inanimate, and predictable, all things the burrow grub was not. There was a special horror in

knowing that the cause of her pain was a creature *chewing* on her, and worse, that it was inside her.

At the last, she lost her pride and self-control and cried out to the goddess Gokukara for mercy, and then she began to babble as a child might, unable to stop the flow of random words coming from her mouth.

And behind her, she heard Galbatorix laughing, and his enjoyment of her suffering made her hate him all the more.

She blinked, slowly coming back to herself.

After several moments, she realized that Murtagh and Galbatorix were gone. She had no recollection of their departure; she must have lost consciousness.

The pain was less than before, but she still hurt terribly. She glanced down her body, then averted her eyes, feeling her pulse quicken. Where the centipedes had been—she was not sure whether individually they were still considered burrow grubs—her flesh was swollen and lines of purple blood filled the tracks they had left underneath the surface of her skin, and every track burned. It felt as if she had been lashed across the front of her body with a metal whip.

She wondered if perhaps the burrow grubs were still inside of her, lying dormant while they digested their meal. Or perhaps they were metamorphosing, like maggots into flies, and they would turn into something even worse. Or, and this seemed the most terrible possibility, perhaps they were laying eggs within her, and *more* of them would soon hatch and begin to feast on her.

She shuddered and cried out with fear and frustration.

The wounds made it difficult for her to remain coherent. Her vision faded in and out, and she found herself weeping, which disgusted her, but she could not stop, no matter how hard she tried. As a distraction, she fell to talking to herself—nonsense mostly—anything to bolster her resolve or focus her mind on other subjects. It helped, if only a little.

She knew that Galbatorix did not want to kill her, but she feared that in his anger he had gone further than he intended. She was shaking, and her entire body felt inflamed, as if she had been stung by hundreds of bees. Willpower could sustain her for only so long; no matter how determined she was, there was a limit to what her frame could withstand, and she felt that she was well past that point. Something deep inside her seemed to have broken, and she was no longer confident that she could recover from her injuries.

The door to the chamber scraped open.

She forced her eyes to focus as she strained to see who was approaching.

It was Murtagh.

He looked down at her, his lips pinched, his nostrils flared, and a furrow between his brows. At first she thought he was angry, but then she realized he was actually worried and afraid, deathly so. The strength of his concern surprised her; she knew he regarded her with a certain liking—why else would he have convinced Galbatorix to keep her alive?—but she had not suspected that he cared for her quite so much.

She tried to reassure him with a smile. It must not have come out right, for as she did, Murtagh clenched his jaw, as if he was struggling to contain himself.

"Try not to move," he said, and lifted his hands over her and began to murmur in the ancient language.

As if I could, she thought.

His magic soon took effect, and wound by wound, her pain abated, but it did not disappear entirely.

She frowned at him, puzzled, and he said, "I'm sorry. I can do no more. Galbatorix would know how, but it's beyond me."

"What … what about your Eldunarí?" she asked. "Surely they can help."

He shook his head. "Young dragons all, or they were when their bodies died. They knew little of magic then, and Galbatorix has taught them almost nothing since.… I'm sorry."

"Are those *things* still in me?"

"No! No, they're not. Galbatorix removed them once you passed out."

Her relief was profound. "Your spell didn't stop the pain." She tried not to sound accusatory, but she could not prevent a note of anger from creeping into her voice.

He grimaced. "I'm not sure why. It ought to have. Whatever that creature is, it doesn't fit into the normal pattern of the world."

"Do you know where it's from?"

"No. I only learned of it today, when Galbatorix fetched it from his inner chambers."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Let me up."

"Are you s—"

"Let me up."

Without a word, he undid her restraints. Then she got to her feet and stood swaying next to the slab while she waited for an attack of light-headedness to recede.

"Here," said Murtagh, handing her his cape. She wrapped it around her body, covering herself for both modesty and warmth, and also so that she did not have to look at the burns, scabs, blisters, and blood-

filled lines that disfigured her.

Limping—for, among other places, the burrow grub had visited the soles of her feet—she walked to the edge of the chamber. She leaned against the wall and slowly lowered herself to the floor.

Murtagh joined her, and the two of them sat staring at the opposite wall.

Despite herself, she began to cry.

After a while, she felt him touch her shoulder, and she jerked away. She could not help it. He had hurt her more in the past few days than anyone else ever had, and though she knew he had not wanted to do it, she could not forget that it was he who had wielded the hot iron.

Even so, when she saw how her reaction stung him, she relented and reached out and took his hand. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze, then put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. She resisted for a moment, then relaxed into his embrace and laid her head on his chest as she continued to cry, her quiet sobs echoing in the bare stone room.

Some minutes later, she felt him move beneath her as he said, "I'll find a way to free you, I swear. It's too late for Thorn and me. But not for you. As long as you don't pledge fealty to Galbatorix, there's still a chance I can spirit you out of Urû'baen."

She looked up at him and decided he meant what he said. "How?" she whispered.

"I haven't the slightest idea," he admitted with a roguish smile. "But I will. Whatever it takes. You have to promise me, though, that you won't give up—not until I've tried. Agreed?"

"I don't think I can endure that … *thing* again. If he puts it on me again, I'll give him whatever he wants."

"You won't have to; he doesn't intend to use the burrow grubs again."

"… What does he intend?"

Murtagh was silent for a minute more. "He's decided to start manipulating what you see, hear, feel, and taste. If that doesn't work, then he'll attack your mind directly. You won't be able to resist him if he does. No one ever has. Before it comes to that, though, I'm sure I'll be able to rescue you. All you have to do is keep fighting for another few days. That's it—just another few days."

"How can I if I can't trust my senses?"

"There is one sense he cannot feign." Murtagh twisted to look at her more directly. "Will you let me touch your mind? I won't try to read your thoughts. I only want you to know what my mind feels like, so you can recognize it—so you can recognize *me*—in the future."

She hesitated. She knew that this was a turning point. Either she would agree to trust him, or she would refuse and perhaps lose her

only chance to avoid becoming Galbatorix's slave. Still, she remained wary of granting anyone access to her mind. Murtagh could be trying to lull her into lowering her defenses so that he could more easily install himself in her consciousness. Or it might be that he hoped to glean some piece of information by eavesdropping on her thoughts.

Then she thought: *Why should Galbatorix resort to such tricks? He could do either of those things himself. Murtagh is right; I wouldn't be able to resist him.… If I accept Murtagh's offer, it may mean my doom, but if I refuse, my doom is inevitable. One way or another, Galbatorix will break me. It's only a matter of time*.

"Do as you will," she said.

Murtagh nodded and half closed his eyes.

In the silence of her mind, she began to recite the scrap of verse she used whenever she wanted to hide her thoughts or defend her consciousness from an intruder. She concentrated on it with all her might, determined to repel Murtagh if need be and also determined not to think about any of the secrets it was her duty to keep hidden.

In El-harím, there lived a man, a man with yellow eyes.

To me, he said, "Beware the whispers, for they whisper lies.

Do not wrestle with the demons of the dark,

Else upon your mind they'll place a mark;

Do not listen to the shadows of the deep,

Else they haunt you even when you sleep."

When Murtagh's consciousness pressed against hers, she stiffened and began to recite the lines of the verse even faster. To her surprise, his mind felt familiar. The similarities between his consciousness and —No, she could not say whose, but the similarities were striking, as were the equally prominent differences. Foremost among the differences was his anger, which lay at the center of his being like a cold black heart, clenched and unmoving, with veins of hatred snaking out to entangle the rest of his mind. But his concern for her outshone his anger. Seeing it convinced her that his solicitude was genuine, for to dissemble with one's inner self was incredibly difficult, and she did not believe that Murtagh could have deceived her so convincingly.

True to his word, he made no attempt to force himself deeper into her mind, and after a few seconds, he withdrew and she again found herself alone with her thoughts.

Murtagh's eyes opened fully, and he said, "There now. Will you be able to recognize me if I reach out to you again?"

She nodded.

“Good. Galbatorix can do many things, but even he cannot imitate the feeling of another person’s mind. I’ll try to warn you before he starts to alter your senses, and I’ll contact you when he stops. That way, he won’t be able to confuse you as to what is real and what is not.”

“Thank you,” she said, unable to express the full extent of her gratitude in so short a phrase.

“Fortunately, we have some time. The Varden are only three days hence, and the elves are fast approaching from the north. Galbatorix has gone to oversee the final placement of Urû’baen’s defenses and to discuss strategy with Lord Barst, who has command of the army now that it’s garrisoned here in the city.”

She frowned. That boded ill. She had heard of Lord Barst; he had a fearsome reputation among the nobles of Galbatorix’s court. He was said to be both keen-minded and bloody-handed, and those who were foolish enough to oppose him, he crushed without mercy.

“Not you?” she asked.

“Galbatorix has other plans for me, although he’s yet to share them.”

“How long will he be busy with his preparations?”

“The rest of today and all of tomorrow.”

“Do you think you can free me before he returns?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.” A pause fell between them. Then he said, “Now I have a question for you: why did you kill those men? You knew you wouldn’t make it out of the citadel. Was it just to spite Galbatorix, as he said?”

She sighed and pushed herself off Murtagh’s chest so she was sitting upright. With some reluctance, he released his hold around her shoulders. She sniffed, then looked him square in the eyes. “I couldn’t just lie there and let him do whatever he wanted to me. I had to fight back; I had to show him that he hadn’t broken me, and I wanted to hurt him however I could.”

“So it *was* spite!”

“In part. What of it?” She expected him to express disgust or condemnation at her actions, but instead he gave her an appraising look and his lips curved in a small, knowing smile.

“Then I say well done,” he replied.

After a moment, she returned his smile.

“Besides,” she said, “there was always a chance I *might* escape.”

He snorted. “And dragons might start eating grass.”

“Even so, I had to try.”

“I understand. If I could have, I would have done the same when the Twins first brought me here.”

“And now?”

"I still can't, and even if I could, what purpose would it serve?"

To that, she had no answer. Silence followed, and then she said, "Murtagh, if it's not possible to free me from here, then I want your promise that you'll help me escape by … other means. I wouldn't ask … I wouldn't place this burden upon you, but your assistance would make the task easier, and I may not have the opportunity to do it myself." His lips grew thin and hard as she spoke, but he did not interrupt. "Whatever happens, I won't allow myself to become a plaything for Galbatorix to order about as he will. I'll do anything, anything at all to avoid that fate. Can you understand that?"

His chin dipped in a short nod.

"Then do I have your word?"

He looked down and clenched his fists, his breathing ragged. "You do."

Murtagh was taciturn, but eventually she succeeded in drawing him out again, and they passed the time talking about matters of little import. Murtagh told her of the alterations he had made to the saddle Galbatorix had given him for Thorn—changes that Murtagh was justifiably proud of, as they allowed him to mount and dismount faster, as well as to draw his sword with less inconvenience. She told him about the market streets in Aberon, the capital of Surda, and how, as a child, she had often run away from her nurse to explore them. Her favorite of the merchants had been a man of the wandering tribes. His name was Hadamanara-no Dachu Taganna, but he had insisted that she call him by his familiar name, which was Taganna. He sold knives and daggers, and he always seemed to delight in showing her his wares, even though she never bought any.

As she and Murtagh continued to talk, their conversation grew easier and more relaxed. Despite their unpleasant circumstances, she found that she enjoyed speaking with him. He was smart and well educated, and he had a mordant wit that she appreciated, especially given her current predicament.

Murtagh seemed to enjoy their conversation as much as she did. Still, the time came when they both recognized that it would be foolish to keep talking, for fear of being caught. So she returned to the slab, where she lay down and allowed him to strap her to the unforgiving block of stone once again.

As he was about to leave, she said, "Murtagh."

He paused and turned to regard her.

She hesitated for a moment, then mustered her courage and said, "Why?" She thought he understood her meaning: Why her? Why save her, and now why try to rescue her? She had guessed at the answer, but she wanted to hear him say it.

He stared at her for the longest while, and then, in a low, hard voice, he said, “You know why.”

Amid the Ruins

The thick gray clouds parted, and from his place on Saphira's back, Eragon beheld the interior of Vroengard Island.

Before them was a huge bowl-shaped valley, encircled by the steep mountains they had seen poking through the tops of the clouds. A dense forest of spruce, pine, and fir trees blanketed the sides of the mountains as well as the foothills below, like an army of prickly soldiers marching down from the peaks. The trees were tall and mournful, and even from a distance Eragon could see the beards of moss and lichen that hung from their heavy branches. Scraps of white mist clung to the sides of the mountains, and in several places throughout the valley, diffuse curtains of rain drifted from the ceiling of clouds.

High above the valley floor, Eragon could see a number of stone structures among the trees: tumbled, overgrown entrances to caves; the husks of burnt-out towers; grand halls with collapsed roofs; and a few smaller buildings that looked as if they might still be habitable.

A dozen or more rivers flowed out of the mountains and wandered across the verdant ground until they poured into a large, still lake near the center of the valley. Around the lake lay the remnants of the Riders' city, Doru Araeba. The buildings were immense—great empty halls of such enormous proportions that many could have encompassed the whole of Carvahall. Every door was like the mouth to a vast, unexplored cavern. Every window was as tall and wide as a castle gate, and every wall was a sheer cliff.

Thick mats of ivy strangled the blocks of stone, and where there was no ivy there was moss, which meant that the buildings blended into the landscape and looked as if they had grown out of the earth itself. What little of the stone was bare tended to be a pale ocher, although patches of red, brown, and dusky blue were also visible.

As with all elf-made structures, the buildings were graceful and flowing and more attenuated than those of dwarves or humans. But they also possessed a solidity and authority that the treehouses of Ellesméra lacked; in some of them, Eragon descried similarities to houses in Palancar Valley, and he remembered that the earliest human Riders had come from that very part of Alagaësia. The result was a unique style of architecture, neither entirely elvish nor entirely human.

Almost all the buildings were damaged, some more severely than

others. The damage seemed to radiate outward from a single point near the southern edge of the city, where a wide crater sank more than thirty feet into the ground. A copse of birch trees had taken root in the depression, and their silvery leaves shook in the gusts of the directionless breeze.

The open areas within the city were overgrown with weeds and brush, while a fringe of grass surrounded each of the flagstones that formed the streets. Where the buildings had sheltered the Riders' gardens from the blast that had ravaged the city, dull-colored flowers still grew in artful designs, their shapes no doubt governed by the dictates of some long-forgotten spell.

Altogether, the circular valley presented a dismal picture.

Behold the ruins of our pride and glory, said Glaedr. Then: *Eragon, you must cast another spell. The wording of it goes thus*—And he uttered several lines in the ancient language. It was an odd spell; the phrasing was obscure and convoluted, and Eragon was unable to determine what it was supposed to accomplish.

When he asked Glaedr, the old dragon said, *There is an invisible poison here, in the air you breathe, in the ground you walk upon, and in the food you may eat and the water you may drink. The spell will protect us against it.*

What … poison? asked Saphira, her thoughts as slow as the beats of her wings.

Eragon saw from Glaedr an image of the crater by the city, and the dragon said, *During the battle with the Forsworn, one of our own, an elf by the name of Thuviel, killed himself with magic. Whether by design or by accident has never been clear, but the result is what you see and what you cannot see, for the resulting explosion rendered the area unfit to live in. Those who remained here soon developed lesions upon their skin and lost their hair, and many died thereafter.*

Concerned, Eragon cast the spell—which required little energy—before he said, *How could any one person, elf or not, cause so much damage? Even if Thuviel's dragon helped him, I can't think how it would be possible, not unless his dragon was the size of a mountain.*

His dragon did not help him, said Glaedr. *His dragon was dead. No, Thuviel wrought this destruction by himself.*

But how?

The only way he could have: he converted his flesh into energy.

He made himself into a spirit?

No. The energy was without thought or structure, and once unbound, it raced outward until it dispersed.

I had not realized that a single body contained so much force.

It is not well known, but even the smallest speck of matter is equal to a great amount of energy. Matter, it seems, is merely frozen energy. Melt it,

and you release a flood few can withstand.… It was said that the explosion here was heard as far away as Teirm and that the cloud of smoke that followed rose as high as the Beor Mountains.

Was it the blast that killed Glaerun? Eragon asked, referring to the one member of the Forsworn who he knew had died on Vroengard.

It was. Galbatorix and the rest of the Forsworn had a moment of warning, and so were able to shield themselves, but many of our own were not as fortunate and thus perished.

As Saphira glided downward from the underside of the low-slung clouds, Glaedr instructed her where to fly, so she altered her course, turning toward the northwestern part of the valley. Glaedr named each of the mountains that she flew past: Ilthiaros, Fellsverd, and Nammenmast, along with Huildrim and Tírnadrim. He also named many of the holds and fallen towers below, and he gave something of their history to Eragon and Saphira, although only Eragon paid heed to the old dragon's narration.

Within Glaedr's consciousness, Eragon felt an ancient sorrow reawaken. The sorrow was not so much for the destruction of Doru Araeba as for the deaths of the Riders, the near extinction of the dragons, and the loss of thousands of years of knowledge and wisdom. The memory of what had been—of the companionship he had once shared with the other members of his order—exacerbated Glaedr's loneliness. That, along with his sorrow, created a mood of such desolation, Eragon began to feel saddened as well.

He withdrew slightly from Glaedr, but still the valley seemed gloomy and melancholy, as if the land itself were mourning the fall of the Riders.

The lower Saphira flew, the larger the buildings appeared. As their true size became evident, Eragon realized that what he had read in *Domia abr Wyrda* was no exaggeration: the grandest of them were so enormous, Saphira would be able to fly within them.

Near the edge of the abandoned city, he began to notice piles of giant white bones upon the ground: the skeletons of dragons. The sight filled him with revulsion, and yet he could not bring himself to look elsewhere. What struck him most was their size. A few of the dragons had been smaller than Saphira, but most had been far larger. The biggest he saw was a skeleton with ribs that he guessed were at least eighty feet long and perhaps fifteen wide at their thickest. The skull alone—a huge, fierce thing covered with blotches of lichen, like a rough crag of stone—was longer and taller than the main part of Saphira's body. Even Glaedr, when he was still clothed in flesh, would have appeared diminutive next to the slain dragon.

There lies Belgabad, greatest of us all, said Glaedr as he noticed the

object of Eragon's attention.

Eragon vaguely remembered the name from one of the histories he had read in Ellesméra; the author had written only that Belgabad had been present at the battle and that he perished in the fighting, as so many had.

Who was his Rider? he asked.

He had no Rider. He was a wild dragon. For centuries, he lived alone in the icy reaches of the north, but when Galbatorix and the Forsworn began to slaughter our kind, he flew to our aid.

Was he the largest dragon ever?

Ever? No. But at the time, yes.

How did he find enough to eat?

At that age and at that size, dragons spend most of their time in a sleeplike trance, dreaming of whatever happens to capture their fancy, be it the turning of the stars, or the rise and fall of the mountains over the eons, or even something as small as the motion of a butterfly's wings. Already I feel the lure of such repose, but awake I am needed and awake I shall stay.

Did … you … know … Belgabad? asked Saphira, forcing the words through her fatigue.

I met him, but I did not know him. Wild dragons did not, as a rule, consort with those of us who were bonded with Riders. They looked down on us for being too tame and too compliant, while we looked down on them for being too driven by their instincts, although sometimes we admired them for the same. Also, you must remember, they had no language of their own, and that created a greater difference between us than you might think. Language alters your mind in ways that are hard to explain. Wild dragons could communicate as effectively as any dwarf or elf, of course, but they did so by sharing memories, images, and sensations, not words. Only the more cunning of them chose to learn this or any other tongue.

Glaedr paused, and then he added, *If I recall correctly, Belgabad was a distant ancestor of Raugmar the Black, and Raugmar, as I'm sure you remember, Saphira, was the great-great-great-grandsire of your mother, Vervada.*

In her exhaustion, Saphira was slow to react, but at last she twisted her neck to again look at the vast skeleton. *He must have been a good hunter to grow so big.*

He was the very best, said Glaedr.

Then … I am glad to be of his blood.

The number of bones scattered across the ground staggered Eragon. Until then, he had fully comprehended neither the extent of the battle nor how many dragons there had once been. The sight renewed his hate for Galbatorix, and once again Eragon swore that he would see the king dead.

Saphira sank through a band of mist, the white haze rolling off the

tips of her wings like tiny whirlpools set within the sky. Then a field of tangled grass rushed up at her and she landed with a heavy jolt. Her right foreleg gave way beneath her, and she lurched to the side and fell onto her chest and shoulder, plowing into the ground with such force that Eragon would have impaled himself on the neck spike in front of him, had it not been for his wards.

Once her forward slide ceased, Saphira lay motionless, stunned by the impact. Then she slowly rolled onto her feet, folded her wings, and settled into a low crouch. The straps on the saddle creaked as she moved, the sound unnaturally loud in the hushed atmosphere that pervaded the interior of the island.

Eragon pulled loose the bands around his legs, then jumped all the way to the ground. It was wet and soft, and he dropped to one knee as his boots sank into the damp earth.

"We made it," he said, amazed. He walked forward to Saphira's head, and when she lowered her neck so that she could look him in the eye, he placed his hands on either side of her long head and pressed his forehead against her snout.

Thank you, he said.

He heard the *snick* as her eyelids closed, and then her head began to vibrate as she hummed deep in her chest.

After a moment, Eragon released her and turned to look at their surroundings. The field Saphira had landed in was on the northern outskirts of the city. Pieces of cracked masonry—some as large as Saphira herself—lay scattered throughout the grass; Eragon was relieved she had avoided striking any.

The field sloped upward, away from the city, to the base of the nearest foothill, which was covered with forest. Where field and hill met, a large paved square had been cut flat into the ground, and at the far side of the square sat a massive pile of dressed stone that stretched to the north for over half a mile. Intact, the building would have been one of the largest on the island, and certainly one of the most ornate, for among the square blocks of stone that had formed the walls, Eragon spotted dozens of fluted pillars, as well as carved panels depicting vines and flowers, and a whole host of statues, most of which were missing some combination of body parts, as if they too had participated in the battle.

There lies the Great Library, said Glaedr. *Or what remains after Galbatorix plundered it.*

Eragon slowly turned as he inspected the surrounding area. To the south of the library, he saw the faint lines of abandoned footpaths underneath the shaggy pelt of grass. The paths led away from the library to a grove of apple trees that hid the ground from view, but rising behind the trees was a jagged spar of stone well over two

hundred feet tall, upon which grew several gnarled junipers.

A spark of excitement formed within Eragon's chest. He was sure, but still he asked, *Is that it? Is that the Rock of Kuthian?*

He could feel Glaedr using his eyes to look at the formation, and then the dragon said, *It seems oddly familiar, but I cannot remember when I might have seen it before.…*

Eragon needed no other confirmation. "Come on!" he said. He waded through the waist-high grass toward the nearest path.

There the grass was not quite so thick, and he could feel hard cobblestones under his feet instead of rain-soaked earth. With Saphira close behind, he hurried down the path, and together they walked through the shadowed grove of apple trees. Both of them stepped with care, for the trees seemed alert and watchful, and something about the shape of their branches was ominous, as if the trees were waiting to ensnare them with splintered claws.

Without meaning to, Eragon breathed a sigh of relief when they emerged from the grove.

The Rock of Kuthian stood upon the edge of a large clearing wherein grew a tangled pool of roses, thistles, raspberries, and water hemlock. Behind the stone prominence stood row upon row of drooping fir trees, which extended all the way back to the mountain that loomed high above. The angry chatter of squirrels echoed among the boles of the forest, but of the animals themselves, not so much as a whisker was to be seen.

Three stone benches—their shapes half hidden beneath layers of roots, vines, and creepers—were situated at equal distances around the clearing. Off to the side was a willow tree, whose latticework trunk had once served as a bower where the Riders might sit and enjoy the view; but in the past hundred years, the trunk had grown too thick for any man, elf, or dwarf to slip into the space within.

Eragon stopped at the edge of the clearing and stared at the Rock of Kuthian. Beside him, Saphira whuffed and dropped onto her belly, shaking the ground and causing him to bend his knees to keep his balance. He rubbed her on the shoulder, then turned his gaze back to the tower of rock. A sense of nervous anticipation welled up inside him.

Opening his mind, Eragon searched the clearing and the trees beyond for anyone who might be waiting to ambush them. The only living things he sensed were plants, insects, and the moles, mice, and garter snakes that lived among the brush in the clearing.

Then he started to compose the spells that he hoped would allow him to detect any magical traps in the area. Before he had put more than a few words together, Glaedr said, *Stop. You and Saphira are too tired for this now. Rest first; tomorrow we can return and see what we may*

discover.

But—

The two of you are in no condition to defend yourselves if we must fight. Whatever we are supposed to find will still be here in the morn.

Eragon hesitated, then reluctantly abandoned the spell. He knew Glaedr was right, but he hated to wait any longer when the completion of their quest was so close at hand.

Very well, he said, and climbed back onto Saphira.

With a weary *huff*, she rose to her feet, then slowly turned around and trudged once more through the grove of apple trees. The heavy impact of her steps shook loose withered leaves from the canopy, one of which landed in Eragon's lap. He picked it up and was about to throw it away when he noticed that the leaf was shaped differently than it ought to be: the teeth along the edge were longer and wider than those of any apple leaf he had seen before, and the veins formed seemingly random patterns, instead of the regular network of lines he would have expected.

He picked another leaf, this one still green. Like its desiccated cousin, the fresh leaf had larger serrations and a confused map of veins.

Ever since the battle, things here have not been as they once were, said Glaedr.

Eragon frowned and tossed away the leaves. Again he heard the chatter of the squirrels, and again he failed to see any among the trees, nor was he able to feel them with his mind, which concerned him.

If I had scales, this place would make them itch, he said to Saphira.

A small puff of smoke rose from her nostrils as she snorted with amusement.

From the grove, she walked south until she came to one of the many streams that flowed out of the mountains: a thin white brook that burbled softly as it tumbled over its bed of rocks. There Saphira turned and followed the water upstream to a sheltered meadow near the forefront of the evergreen forest.

Here, said Saphira, and she sank to the ground.

It looked a good place to make camp, and Saphira was in no condition to keep searching, so Eragon agreed and dismounted. He paused for a moment to appreciate the view over the valley; then he removed the saddle and the saddlebags from Saphira, whereupon she shook her head, rolled her shoulders, and then twisted her neck to nibble at a spot on the side of her chest where the straps had been chafing.

Without further ado, she curled up in the grass, tucked her head under her wing, and wrapped her tail around herself. *Do not wake me*

unless something is trying to eat us, she said.

Eragon smiled and patted her on the tail, then turned to look at the valley again. He stood there for a long while, barely thinking, content to observe and exist without making any effort to coax meaning from the world around him.

At last he fetched his bedroll, which he laid out beside Saphira.

Will you keep watch for us? he asked Glaedr.

I shall keep watch. Rest, and do not worry.

Eragon nodded, even though Glaedr could not see him, and then he lowered himself onto the blankets and allowed himself to drift off into the embrace of his waking dreams.

SNALGLÍ FOR TWO

It was late afternoon when Eragon opened his eyes. The blanket of clouds had broken in several places, and beams of golden light planked the valley floor, illuminating the tops of the ruined buildings. Though the valley still looked cold and wet and unwelcoming, the light gave it a newfound majesty. For the first time, Eragon understood why the Riders had chosen to settle on the island.

He yawned, then glanced over at Saphira and lightly touched her mind. She was still asleep, lost in a dreamless slumber. Her consciousness was like a flame that had dimmed until it was little more than a smoldering coal, a coal that might just as easily go out as flare up again.

The feeling unsettled him—it reminded him too much of death—so he returned to his own mind and restricted their contact to a narrow thread of thought: just enough so that he could be sure of her safety.

In the forest behind him, a pair of squirrels began to swear at each other with a series of high-pitched shrieks. He frowned as he listened; their voices sounded a bit too sharp, a bit too fast, a bit too warbly. It was as if some other creature was imitating the cries of the squirrels.

The thought made his scalp prickle.

He lay where he was for over an hour, listening to the shrieks and chattering that emanated from the woods and watching the patterns of light as they played across the hills, fields, and mountains of the bowl-shaped valley. Then the gaps in the clouds closed, the sky darkened, and snow began to fall on the upper flanks of the mountains, painting them white.

Eragon rose and said to Glaedr, *I'm going to gather some firewood. I'll be back in a few minutes*.

The dragon acknowledged him, and Eragon carefully made his way across the meadow to the forest, doing his best to be quiet so as not to disturb Saphira. Once he was at the trees, he quickened his pace. Although there were plenty of dead branches along the verge of the forest, he wanted to stretch his legs and, if he could, find the source of the chattering.

Shadows lay heavy under the trees. The air was cool and still, like that of a cave deep underground, and it smelled of fungus, rotting wood, and oozing sap. The moss and lichen that trailed from the branches were like lengths of tattered lace, stained and sodden but still possessed of a certain delicate beauty. They partitioned the

interior of the woods into cells of varying size, which made it difficult to see more than fifty feet in any direction.

Eragon used the burbling of the brook to determine his bearings as he worked his way deeper into the forest. Now that he was close to them, he saw that the evergreens were unlike those from the Spine or even from Du Weldenvarden; they had clusters of seven needles instead of three, and though it might have been a trick of the fading light, it seemed to him as if darkness clung to the trees, like a cloak wrapped around their trunks and branches. Also, everything about the trees, from the cracks in the bark to their protruding roots to their scaled cones—everything about them had a peculiar angularity and a fierceness of line that made them appear as if they were about to pull themselves free of the earth and stride down to the city below.

Eragon shivered and loosened Brisingr in its scabbard. He had never before been in a forest that felt so menacing. It was as if the trees were *angry* and—as with the apple grove earlier—as if they wanted to reach out and rend his flesh from his bones.

With the back of his hand, he brushed aside a swath of yellow lichen as he cautiously made his way forward.

So far he had seen no sign of game, nor had he found any evidence of wolves or bears, which puzzled him. That close to the stream, there should have been trails leading to the water.

Maybe the animals avoid this part of the woods, he thought. *But why?*

A fallen log lay across his path. He stepped over it, and his boot sank ankle-deep into a carpet of moss. An instant later, the gedwëy ignasia on his palm began to itch, and he heard a tiny chorus of *skree-skree!* and *skree-skra!* as a half-dozen white, wormlike grubs—each the size of one of his thumbs—burst out of the moss and began to hop away from him.

Old instincts took hold, and he stopped as he would if he had chanced upon a snake. He did not blink. He did not even breathe as he watched the fat, obscene-looking grubs flee. At the same time, he racked his memory for any mention of them during his training in Ellesméra, but he could recall no such thing.

Glaedr! What are these? And he showed the dragon the grubs. *What is their name in the ancient language?*

To Eragon's dismay, Glaedr said, *They are unknown to me. I have not seen their like before, nor have I ever heard tell of them. They are new to Vroengard, and new to Alagaësia. Do not let them touch you; they may be more dangerous than they appear*.

Once they had put several feet between them and Eragon, the nameless grubs hopped higher than usual and with a *skree-skro!* dove back into the moss. As they landed, they split, dividing into a swarm of green centipedes, which quickly disappeared within the tangled

strands of moss.

Only then did Eragon allow himself to breathe.

They should not be, said Glaedr. He sounded troubled.

Eragon slowly lifted his boot off the moss and retreated behind the log. Examining the moss with greater care, he saw that what he had originally taken as the tips of old branches poking out of the blanket of vegetation were actually pieces of broken ribs and antlers—the remains, he thought, of one or more deer.

After a moment's consideration, Eragon turned around and began to retrace his steps, this time making sure to avoid every scrap of moss along the way, which was no easy task.

Whatever had been chattering in the forest was not worth risking his life to find—especially since he suspected that there was worse than the grubs lurking among the trees. His palm kept itching, and from experience, he knew that meant there was still *something* dangerous close by.

When he could see the meadow and the blue of Saphira's scales between the trunks of the evergreens, he turned aside and walked to the brook. Moss covered the bank of the stream, so he stepped from log to stone until he was standing on a flat-topped rock in the midst of the water.

There he squatted, removed his gloves, and washed his hands, face, and neck. The touch of the icy water was bracing, and within moments his ears flushed and his whole body began to feel warm.

A loud chattering rang forth over the stream as he wiped the last few droplets from his neck.

Moving as little as possible, he looked toward the top of the trees on the opposite bank.

Thirty feet up, four shadows sat on a branch. The shadows had large barbed plumes that extended in every direction from the black ovals of their heads. A pair of white eyes, slanted and slit-like, glowed within the middle of each oval, and the blankness of their gaze made it impossible to determine where they were looking. Most disconcerting yet, the shadows, like all shadows, had no depth. When they turned to the side, they disappeared.

Without taking his eyes off them, Eragon reached across his body and grasped Brisingr's hilt.

The leftmost shadow ruffled its plumes and then uttered the same shrieking chatter he had mistaken for a squirrel. Two more of the wraiths did likewise, and the forest echoed with the strident clamor of their cries.

Eragon considered trying to touch their minds, but remembering the Fanghur on his way to Ellesméra, he discarded the idea as foolhardy.

In a low voice, he said, "Eka aí fricai un Shur'tugal." I am a Rider

and a friend.

The shadows seemed to fix their glowing eyes upon him, and for a moment, all was silent, save the gentle murmuring of the brook. Then they began to chatter again, and their eyes increased in brightness until they were like pieces of white-hot iron.

When, after several minutes, the shadows had made no move to attack him and, moreover, showed no indication of departing, Eragon rose to his feet and carefully reached out with one foot toward the stone behind him.

The motion seemed to alarm the wraiths; they shrieked in unison. Then they shrugged and shook themselves, and in their place appeared four large owls, with the same barbed plumes surrounding their mottled faces. They opened their yellow beaks and chattered at him, scolding him even as squirrels might; then they took wing and flew silently off into the trees and soon vanished behind a screen of heavy boughs.

"Barzûl," said Eragon. He jumped back the way he had come and hurried to the meadow, stopping only to pick up an armful of fallen branches.

As soon as he reached Saphira, he placed the wood on the ground, knelt, and began to cast wards, as many as he could think of. Glaedr recommended a spell that he had overlooked, then said, *None of these creatures were here when Oromis and I returned after the battle. They are not as they should be. The magic that was cast here has twisted the land and those who live on it. This is an evil place now*.

What creatures? asked Saphira. She opened her eyes and yawned, an intimidating sight. Eragon shared his memories with her, and she said, *You should have brought me with you. I could have eaten the grubs and the shadow birds, and then you would have had nothing to fear from them*.

Saphira!

She rolled an eye at him. *I'm hungry. Magic or not, is there any reason I should not eat these strange things?*

Because they might eat you *instead, Saphira Bjartskular*, said Glaedr. *You know the first law of hunting as well as I: do not stalk your prey until you are sure that it* is *prey. Otherwise, you might well end up as a meal for something else*.

"I wouldn't bother looking for deer either," said Eragon. "I doubt there are many left. Besides, it's almost dark, and even if it weren't, I'm not sure hunting here would be safe."

She growled softly. *Very well. Then I shall keep sleeping. But in the morning, I shall hunt, no matter the danger. My belly is empty, and I must eat before crossing the sea again*.

True to her word, Saphira closed her eyes and promptly returned to sleep.

Eragon built a small fire, then ate a meager supper and watched the valley grow black. He and Glaedr talked about their plans for the following day, and Glaedr told him more about the history of the island, going back to the time before the elves had arrived in Alagaësia, when Vroengard had been the province of the dragons alone.

Before the last of the light had faded from the sky, the old dragon said, *Would you like to see Vroengard as it was during the age of the Riders?*

I would, said Eragon.

Then look, said Glaedr, and Eragon felt the dragon take hold of his mind and into it pour a stream of images and sensations. Eragon's vision shifted, and atop the landscape, he beheld a ghostly twin of the valley. The memory was of the valley in twilight, even as it was at the present, but the sky was free of clouds, and a multitude of stars shone twinkling and gleaming over the great ring of fire mountains, Aras Thelduin. The trees of long ago appeared taller, straighter, and less foreboding, and throughout the valley, the Riders' buildings stood intact, glowing like pale beacons in the dusk with the soft light from the elves' flameless lanterns. Less ivy and moss covered the ocher stone then, and the halls and towers seemed noble in a way that the ruins did not. And along the cobblestone pathways and high overhead, Eragon discerned the glittering shapes of numerous dragons: graceful giants with the treasure of a thousand kings upon their hides.

The apparition lasted for a moment longer; then Glaedr released Eragon's mind, and the valley once more appeared as it was.

It was beautiful, said Eragon.

That it was, but no more.

Eragon continued to study the valley, comparing it to what Glaedr had shown him, and he frowned when he saw a line of bobbing lights —lanterns, he thought—within the abandoned city. He whispered a spell to sharpen his sight and was able to make out a line of hooded figures in dark robes walking slowly through the ruins. They seemed solemn and unearthly, and there was a ritualistic quality to the measured beats of their strides and to the patterned sway of their lanterns.

Who are they? he asked Glaedr. He felt as if he was witnessing something not meant for others to see.

I do not know. Perhaps they are the descendants of those who hid during the battle. Perhaps they are men of your race who thought to settle here after the fall of the Riders. Or perhaps they are those who worship dragons and Riders as gods.

Are there really such?

There were. We discouraged the practice, but even so, it was common in

many of the more isolated parts of Alagaësia.… It is good, I think, that you placed the wards you did.

Eragon watched as the hooded figures wound their way across the city, which took almost an hour. Once they arrived at the far side, the lanterns winked out one by one, and where the lantern holders had gone, Eragon could not see, even with the assistance of magic.

Then Eragon banked the fire with handfuls of dirt and crawled under his blankets to rest.

* * *

Eragon! Saphira! Rouse yourselves!

Eragon's eyes snapped open. He sat upright and grabbed Brisingr.

All was dark, save for the dull red glow of the bed of coals to his right and a ragged patch of starry sky off to the east. Though the light was faint, Eragon was able to make out the general shape of the forest and the meadow … and the monstrously large snail that was sliding across the grass toward him.

Eragon yelped and scrambled backward. The snail—whose shell was over five and a half feet tall—hesitated, then slimed toward him as fast as a man could run. A snakelike hiss came from the black slit of its mouth, and its waving eyeballs were each the size of his fist.

Eragon realized that he would not have time to get to his feet, and on his back he did not have the space he needed to draw Brisingr. He prepared to cast a spell, but before he could, Saphira's head arrowed past him and she caught the snail about the middle with her jaws. The snail's shell cracked between her fangs with a sound like breaking slate, and the creature uttered a faint, quavering shriek.

With a twist of her neck, Saphira tossed the snail into the air, opened her mouth as wide as it would go, and swallowed the creature whole, bobbing her head twice as she did, like a robin eating an earthworm.

Lowering his gaze, Eragon saw four more giant snails farther down upon the rise. One of the creatures had retreated within its shell; the others were hurrying away upon their undulating, skirtlike bellies.

"Over there!" shouted Eragon.

Saphira leaped forward. Her entire body left the ground for a moment, and then she landed upon all fours and snapped up first one, then two, then three of the snails. She did not eat the last snail, the one hiding in its shell, but drew back her head and bathed it in a stream of blue and yellow flame that lit up the land for hundreds of feet in every direction.

She maintained the flame for no more than a second or two; then she picked up the smoking, steaming snail between her jaws—as gently as a mother cat picking up a kitten—carried it over to Eragon,

and dropped it at his feet. He eyed it with distrust, but it appeared well and truly dead.

Now you can have a proper breakfast, said Saphira.

He stared at her, then began to laugh—and he kept laughing until he was doubled over, resting his hands on his knees and heaving for breath.

What is so amusing? she asked, and sniffed the soot-blackened shell.

Yes, why do you laugh, Eragon? asked Glaedr.

He shook his head and continued to wheeze. At last he was able to say, "Because—" And then he shifted to speaking with his mind so that Glaedr would hear as well. *Because … snail and eggs!* And he began to giggle again, feeling very silly. *Because, snail steaks! … Hungry? Have a stalk! Feeling tired? Eat an eyeball! Who needs mead when you have slime?! I could put the stalks in a cup, like a bunch of flowers, and they would …* He was laughing so hard, he found it impossible to continue, and he dropped to one knee while he gasped for air, tears of mirth streaming from his eyes.

Saphira parted her jaws in a toothy approximation of a smile, and she made a soft choking sound in her throat. *You are very odd sometimes, Eragon*. He could feel his merriment infecting her. She sniffed the shell again. *Some mead would be nice*.

"At least you ate," he said, both with his mind and his tongue.

Not enough, but enough to return to the Varden.

As his laughter subsided, Eragon poked at the snail with the tip of his boot. *It's been so long since there were dragons on Vroengard, it must not have realized what you were and thought to make an easy meal of me. … That would have been a sorry death indeed, to end up as dinner for a snail.*

But memorable, said Saphira.

But memorable, he agreed, feeling his mirth return.

And what did I say is the first law of hunting, younglings? asked Glaedr.

Together Eragon and Saphira replied, *Do not stalk your prey until you are sure that it* is *prey*.

Very good, said Glaedr.

Then Eragon said, *Hopping grubs, shadow birds, and now giant snails … How could the spells cast within the battle have created them?*

The Riders, the dragons, and the Forsworn loosed an enormous amount of energy during the conflict. Much of it was bound in spells, but much of it was not. Those who lived to tell of it said that, for a time, the world went mad and nothing they saw or heard could be trusted. Some of that energy must have settled on the ancestors of the grubs and the birds you saw today and altered them. However, you are mistaken to include the snails among their ranks. The snalglí, as they are known, have always lived here on Vroengard. They were a favorite food of ours, of the dragons, for reasons

I'm sure, Saphira, you understand.

She hummed and licked her chops.

And not only is their flesh soft and tasty, but the shells are good for the digestion.

If they're just ordinary animals, then why didn't my wards stop them? asked Eragon. *At the very least, I should have been warned of approaching danger.*

That, replied Glaedr, *may be a result of the battle. Magic did not create the snalglí, but that does not mean they have remained unaffected by the forces that have wracked this place. We should not linger here any longer than necessary. Better we leave before whatever else is lurking on the island decides to test our mettle.*

With Saphira's help, Eragon cracked open the shell of the burnt snail and, by the glow of a red werelight, cleaned the spineless carcass within, which was a messy, slimy exercise that left him covered in gore up to his elbows. Then Eragon had Saphira bury the meat close to the bed of coals.

Afterward, Saphira returned to the spot in the grass where she had been lying, curled up once again, and went to sleep. This time Eragon joined her. Carrying his blankets and the saddlebags, one of which contained Glaedr's heart of hearts, he crawled under her wing and settled in the warm, dark nook between her neck and her body. And there he spent the rest of the night, thinking and dreaming.

The following day was as gray and gloomy as the previous one. A light dusting of snow covered the sides of the mountains and the tops of the foothills, and the air had a chill that led Eragon to believe it would snow again later that day.

Tired as she was, Saphira did not stir until the sun was already a handsbreadth above the mountains. Eragon was impatient, but he let her sleep. It was more important for her to recover from the flight to Vroengard than for them to get an early start.

Once she was awake, Saphira dug up the snail carcass for him, and he cooked a large breakfast of snail … he was not sure what to call it: snail bacon? Whatever the name for it, the strips of meat were delicious, and he ate more than he usually would. Saphira devoured what was left, and then they waited an hour, for it would not be wise to enter a fight with food in their stomachs.

Finally, Eragon rolled up his blankets and strapped the saddle back onto Saphira, and together with Glaedr they set off for the Rock of Kuthian.

The Rock of Kuthian

The walk to the apple grove seemed shorter than it had the previous day. The gnarled trees were as ominous as ever, and Eragon kept his hand on Brisingr the whole time they were in the thicket.

As before, he and Saphira stopped at the edge of the tangled clearing that fronted the Rock of Kuthian. A flock of crows was perched upon the rough crag of stone, and at the sight of Saphira, they rose cawing into the air—as ill an omen as Eragon could imagine.

For half an hour, Eragon stood fixed in place as he cast spell after spell, searching for any magic that could cause him, Saphira, or Glaedr harm. Woven throughout the clearing, the Rock of Kuthian, and—so far as he could tell—the rest of the island, he found a daunting array of enchantments. Some of the spells embedded in the depths of the earth had such power that it felt as if a great river of energy was flowing beneath his feet. Others were small and seemingly innocuous, sometimes affecting only a single flower or a single branch of a tree. More than half of the enchantments were dormant—because they lacked energy, no longer had an object upon which to act, or were waiting for a certain set of circumstances that had yet to arrive—and a number of the spells seemed to conflict, as if the Riders, or whoever had cast them, had sought to modify or negate earlier pieces of magic.

Eragon was unable to determine the purpose of most of the spells. No record remained of the words used to cast them, only the structures of energy that the long-dead magicians had so carefully created, and those structures were difficult, if not impossible, to interpret. Glaedr was of some help, as he was familiar with many of the older, larger pieces of magic that had been placed on Vroengard, but otherwise Eragon was forced to guess. Fortunately, even though he could not always figure out what a spell was supposed to do, he was often able to establish whether it would affect him, Saphira, or Glaedr. It was a complicated process that required complicated incantations, though, and it took him another hour to examine all the spells.

What most worried him—and Glaedr as well—were the spells that they might not have been able to detect. Ferreting out other magicians' enchantments grew vastly more difficult if they had tried to hide their work.

At last, when Eragon was as confident as he could be that there were no traps on or around the Rock of Kuthian, he and Saphira

walked across the clearing to the base of the jagged, lichen-covered spire.

Eragon tilted his head back and looked toward the top of the formation. It seemed incredibly far away. He saw nothing unusual about the stone, nor did Saphira.

Let us say our names and be done with it, she said.

Eragon sent a questioning thought to Glaedr, and the dragon responded: *She is right. There is no reason to delay. Speak your name, and Saphira and I shall do likewise*.

Feeling nervous, Eragon clenched his hands twice, then unslung his shield from his back, drew Brisingr, and dropped into a crouch.

"My name," he said in a loud, clear voice, "is Eragon Shadeslayer, son of Brom."

My name is Saphira Bjartskular, daughter of Vervada.

And mine Glaedr Eldunarí, son of Nithring, she of the long tail.

They waited.

Off in the distance, the crows cawed, as if mocking them. Unease stirred within Eragon, but he ignored it. He had not really expected opening the vault to be quite so simple.

Try again, but this time say your piece in the ancient language, advised Glaedr.

So Eragon said, "Nam iet er Eragon Sundavar-Vergandí, sönr abr Brom."

And then Saphira repeated her name and lineage in the ancient language, as did Glaedr.

Again nothing happened.

Eragon's unease deepened. If their trip had been in vain … No, it did not bear thinking about. Not yet. *Maybe all of our names have to be uttered out loud*, he said.

How? asked Saphira. *Am I supposed to roar at the stone? And what of Glaedr?*

I can say your names for you, said Eragon.

It seems unlikely that is what is required, but we may as well attempt it, said Glaedr.

In this or the ancient language?

The ancient language, I would think, but try both to be certain.

Two times then Eragon recited their names, yet the stone remained as stolid and unchanging as ever. Finally, frustrated, he said, *Maybe we're in the wrong place; maybe the entrance to the Vault of Souls is on the other side of the stone. Or maybe it's on the very top*.

If that were the case, wouldn't the directions contained within Domia abr Wyrda *have mentioned it?* asked Glaedr.

Eragon lowered his shield. *When are riddles ever easy to understand?*

What if only you are supposed to give your name? Saphira said to

Eragon. *Did not Solembum say, "… when all seems lost and your power is insufficient, go to the Rock of Kuthian and speak your name to open the Vault of Souls."* Your *name, Eragon, not mine or Glaedr's*.

Eragon frowned. *It's possible, I suppose. But if only my name is needed, then perhaps I have to be by myself when I say it*.

With a growl, Saphira leaped into the air, ruffling Eragon's hair and battering the plants in the clearing with the wind from her wings. *Then try, and be quick about it!* she said as she flew east, away from the rock.

When she was a quarter mile away, Eragon looked back at the uneven surface of the rock, once more raised his shield, and once more pronounced his name, first in his own tongue and then in that of the elves.

No door or passageway revealed itself. No cracks or fissures appeared within the stone. No symbols traced themselves upon its surface. In every respect, the towering spire seemed to be nothing more than a solid piece of granite, devoid of any secrets.

Saphira! Eragon shouted with his mind. Then he swore and stalked back and forth within the clearing, kicking at loose stones and branches.

He returned to the base of the rock as Saphira swooped down to the clearing. The talons on her hind legs cut deep gouges in the soft earth as she landed, back-flapping to slow herself to a halt. Leaves and blades of grass swirled about her, as if caught in a whirlwind.

Once she had dropped to all fours and folded her wings, Glaedr said, *I take it you did not meet with success?*

No, snapped Eragon, and he glared at the spire.

The old dragon seemed to sigh. *I was afraid this would be the case. There is only one explanation—*

That Solembum lied to us? That he sent us off on a wild chase so that Galbatorix could destroy the Varden while we're gone?

No. That in order to open this … this …

Vault of Souls, said Saphira.

Yes, this vault he told you about—that in order to open it, we must speak our true names.

The words fell between them like weighty stones. For a time, none of them spoke. The thought intimidated Eragon, and he was reluctant to address it, as if doing so would somehow make the situation worse.

But if it's a trap— said Saphira.

Then it is a most devilish trap, said Glaedr. *The question you must decide is this: do you trust Solembum? For to proceed is to risk more than our lives; it is to risk our freedom. If you do trust him, can you be honest enough with yourselves to discover your true names, and quickly too? And are you willing to live with that knowledge, however unpleasant it might*

be? Because if not, then we should leave this very moment. I have changed since Oromis's death, but I know who I am. But do you, Saphira? Do you, Eragon? Can you really tell me what it is that makes you the dragon and Rider you are?

Dismay crept through Eragon as he gazed up at the Rock of Kuthian.

Who am *I?* he wondered.

And All the World a Dream

Nasuada laughed as the starry sky spun around her and she fell tumbling toward a crevice of brilliant white light miles below.

Wind tore at her hair, and her shift flapped wildly, the ragged ends of the sleeves snapping like whips. Great big bats, black and dripping, flocked about her, nipping at her wounds with teeth that cut and stabbed and burned like ice.

And still she laughed.

The crevice widened and the light engulfed her, blinding her for a minute. When her eyes cleared, she found herself standing in the Hall of the Soothsayer, looking at herself lying strapped to the ash-colored slab. Next to her limp body stood Galbatorix: tall, broad-shouldered, with a shadow where his face ought to be and a crown of crimson fire upon his head.

He turned toward where she was standing and extended a gloved hand. "Come, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad. Unbend your pride and pledge your fealty to me, and I shall give you everything you have ever wanted."

She uttered a derisive noise and lunged toward him with her hands outstretched. Before she could tear out his throat, the king vanished in a cloud of black mist.

"What I want is to kill you!" she shouted toward the ceiling.

The chamber rang with Galbatorix's voice as it emanated from every direction at once: "Then here you shall stay until you realize the error of your ways."

* * *

Nasuada opened her eyes. She was still on the slab, her wrists and ankles chained down and the wounds from the burrow grub throbbing as if they had never stopped.

She frowned. Had she been unconscious, or had she just been talking with the king? It was so difficult to tell when—

In one corner of the chamber, she saw the tip of a thick green vine force its way between the painted tiles, cracking them. More vines appeared next to the first; they poked through the wall from the outside and spread across the floor, covering it in a sea of writhing, snakelike appendages.

Watching them crawl toward her, Nasuada began to chuckle. *Is this*

all he can think of? I have stranger dreams nearly every night.

As if in response to her scorn, the slab beneath her melted into the floor and the thrashing tendrils closed over her, wrapping around her limbs and holding them more securely than any chains. Her sight grew dark as the vines atop her multiplied, and the only thing she could hear was the sound of them sliding against one another: a dry, shifting sound, like that of falling sand.

The air around her grew thick and hot, and she felt as if she was having trouble breathing. Had she not known that the vines were only an illusion, she might have panicked then. Instead, she spat into the darkness and cursed Galbatorix's name. Not for the first time. Nor for the last, she was sure. But she refused to allow him the pleasure of knowing he had unbalanced her.

Light … Golden sunbeams streaming across a series of rolling hills patched with fields and vineyards. She was standing by the edge of a small courtyard, underneath a trellis laden with blooming morning glories, the vines of which seemed uncomfortably familiar. She was wearing a beautiful yellow dress. There was a crystal goblet of wine in her right hand and the musky, cherry taste of wine upon her tongue. A slight breeze was blowing from the west. The air smelled of warmth and comfort and freshly tilled land.

"Ah, there you are," said a voice behind her, and she turned to see Murtagh striding toward her from a grand estate. Like her, he held a goblet of wine. He was dressed in black hose and a doublet of maroon satin trimmed with gold piping. A gem-encrusted dagger hung from his studded belt. His hair was longer than she remembered, and he appeared relaxed and confident in a way she had not seen before. That, and the light upon his face, made him appear strikingly handsome—noble, even.

He joined her under the trellis and placed a hand on her bare arm. The gesture seemed casual and intimate. "You minx, abandoning me to Lord Ferros and his interminable stories. It took me half an hour to escape." Then he paused and looked at her closer, and his expression became one of concern. "Are you feeling ill? Your cheeks look gray."

She opened her mouth, but no words came to her. She could not think how to react.

Murtagh's brow furrowed. "You had another one of your attacks, didn't you?"

"I—I don't know.… I can't remember how I got here, or …" She trailed off as she saw the pain that appeared in Murtagh's eyes, and which he quickly hid.

He slid his hand down to the small of her back as he moved around her to stare out at the hilly landscape. With a swift motion, he drained

his goblet. Then, in a low voice, he said, “I know how confusing this is for you.… It isn’t the first time this has happened, but—” He took a deep breath and shook his head slightly. “What is the last thing you remember? Teirm? Aberon? The siege of Cithrí? … The gift I gave you that night in Eoam?”

A terrible sense of uncertainty overcame her. “Urû’baen,” she whispered. “The Hall of the Soothsayer. That is my last memory.”

For an instant, she felt his hand tremble against her back, but his face betrayed no reaction.

“Urû’baen,” he repeated hoarsely. He looked at her. “Nasuada … it’s been eight years since Urû’baen.”

No, she thought. *It can’t be*. And yet everything she saw and felt seemed so real. The motion of Murtagh’s hair as the wind tousled it, the scent of the fields, the touch of her dress against her skin—it all seemed exactly as it should. But if she was actually there, then why hadn’t Murtagh reassured her of it by reaching out to her mind, as he had done before? Had he forgotten? If eight years had elapsed, he might not remember the promise he made to her so long ago in the Hall of the Soothsayer.

“I—” she started to say, and then she heard a woman call out:

“My Lady!”

She looked over her shoulder and saw a portly maid hurrying down from the estate, the front of her white apron flapping. “My Lady,” said the maid, and curtsied. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but the children hoped that you would watch them put on their play for the guests.”

“Children,” she whispered. She looked back at Murtagh to see his eyes shining with tears.

“Aye,” he said. “Children. Four of them, all strong and healthy and full of high spirits.”

She shuddered, overcome with emotion. She could not help it. Then she lifted her chin. “Show me what I have forgotten. Show me *why* I have forgotten.”

Murtagh smiled at her with what seemed like pride. “It would be my pleasure,” he said, and kissed her on the forehead. He took her goblet and gave both glasses to the maid. Then he grasped her hands in his, closed his eyes, and bowed his head.

An instant later, she felt a *presence* pressing against her mind, and then she knew: it was not him. It could never have been him.

Angered by the deception and by the loss of what could never be, she pulled her right hand free of Murtagh’s, grabbed his dagger, and shoved the blade into his side. And she shouted:

In El-harím, there lived a man, a man with yellow eyes!

To me, he said, “Beware the whispers, for they whisper lies!”

Murtagh regarded her with a curiously blank expression, and then he faded away before her. Everything around her—the trellis, the courtyard, the estate, the hills with the vineyards—vanished, and she found herself floating in a void without light or sound. She tried to continue her litany, but no sound came from her throat. She could not even hear the pounding of her pulse in her veins.

Then she felt the darkness *twist*, and—

She stumbled and fell onto her hands and knees. Sharp rocks scraped her palms. Blinking as her eyes adjusted to the light, she rose to her feet and looked around.

Haze. Ribbons of smoke drifting across a barren field similar to the Burning Plains.

She was once more clothed in her tattered shift, and her feet were bare.

Something roared behind her, and she spun around to see a twelve-foot-tall Kull charging toward her, swinging an ironbound club as large as she was. Another roar came from her left, and she saw a second Kull, as well as four smaller Urgals. Then a pair of cloaked, hunchbacked figures scurried out of the whitish haze and darted in her direction, chittering and waving their leaf-bladed swords. Although she had never seen them before, she knew they were the Ra'zac.

She laughed again. Now Galbatorix was just trying to punish her.

Ignoring the oncoming enemies—whom she knew she would never be able to kill or escape—she sat cross-legged on the ground and began to hum an old dwarvish tune.

Galbatorix's initial attempts to deceive her had been subtle affairs that might very well have succeeded in leading her astray had Murtagh not warned her beforehand. To keep Murtagh's help a secret, she had pretended to be ignorant of the fact that Galbatorix was manipulating her perception of reality, but regardless of what she saw or felt, she refused to allow the king to trick her into thinking of the things she should not or, far worse, giving him her loyalty. Defying him had not always been easy, but she held to her rituals of thought and speech and, with them, she had been able to thwart the king.

The first illusion had been of another woman, Rialla, who joined her in the Hall of the Soothsayer as a fellow prisoner. The woman claimed she was secretly wedded to one of the Varden's spies in Urû'baen, and that she had been captured while carrying a message for him. Over what seemed like the course of a week, Rialla tried to ingratiate herself with Nasuada and, in a sideways manner, convince her that the Varden's campaign was doomed, that their reasons for fighting were flawed, and that it was only right and proper to submit to Galbatorix's

authority.

In the beginning, Nasuada had not realized that Rialla herself was an illusion. She assumed that Galbatorix was distorting the woman's words or appearance, or perhaps that he was tampering with her own emotions to make her more susceptible to Rialla's arguments.

As the days had dragged on, and Murtagh neither visited nor contacted her, she had grown to fear that he had abandoned her to Galbatorix's clutches. The thought caused her more anguish than she would have liked to admit, and she found herself worrying about it at nearly every turn.

Then she had begun to wonder why Galbatorix had not come to torture her during the week, and it occurred to her that if a week *had* elapsed, then the Varden and the elves would have attacked Urû'baen. And if *that* had happened, Galbatorix surely would have mentioned it, if only to gloat. Moreover, Rialla's somewhat odd behavior, combined with a number of inexplicable gaps in her memory, Galbatorix's forbearance, and Murtagh's continued silence—for she could not bring herself to believe that he would break his word to her—convinced her, as outlandish as it seemed, that Rialla was an apparition and that time was no longer what it seemed.

It had shaken her to realize that Galbatorix could alter the number of days she thought had passed. She loathed the idea. Her sense of time had grown vague during her imprisonment, but she had retained a general awareness of its passage. To lose that, to become unmoored in time, meant she was even more at Galbatorix's mercy, for he could prolong or contract her experiences as he saw fit.

Still, she remained determined to resist Galbatorix's attempts at coercion, no matter how much time seemed to go by. If she had to endure a hundred years in her cell, then a hundred years she would endure.

When she had proven immune to Rialla's insidious whisperings—and indeed finally denounced the woman for being a coward and a traitor—the figment was taken from her chamber, and Galbatorix moved on to another ploy.

Thereafter, his deceptions had grown increasingly elaborate and improbable, but none broke the laws of reason and none conflicted with what he had already shown her, for the king was still trying to keep her ignorant of his meddling.

His efforts culminated when he seemed to take her from the chamber to a dungeon cell elsewhere in the citadel, where she saw what appeared to be Eragon and Saphira bound in chains. Galbatorix had threatened to kill Eragon unless she swore fealty to him, the king. When she refused, much to Galbatorix's displeasure—and, she thought, his surprise—Eragon shouted a spell that somehow freed the

three of them. After a brief duel, Galbatorix fled—which she doubted he ever would do in reality—and then she, Eragon, and Saphira started to fight their way out of the citadel.

It had been rather dashing and exciting, and she had been tempted to find out how the sequence of events would resolve itself, but by then she felt she had played along with Galbatorix's false show for long enough. So she seized upon the first discrepancy she noticed—the shape of the scales around Saphira's eyes—and used it as an excuse to feign a realization that the world around her was only a pretense.

"You promised you would not lie to me while I was in the Hall of the Soothsayer!" she had shouted into the air. "What is this but a lie, Oath-breaker?"

Galbatorix's wrath at her discovery had been prodigious; she had heard a growl like that of a mountain-sized dragon, and then he abandoned all subtlety, and for the rest of the session he subjected her to a series of fantastical torments.

At last the apparitions had ceased, and Murtagh had contacted her to let her know she could once again trust her senses. She had never been so happy to feel the touch of his mind.

That night, he had come to her, and they spent hours sitting together and talking. He told her of the Varden's progress—they were nearly upon the capital—and of the Empire's preparations, and he explained that he believed he had discovered a means of freeing her. When she pressed him for details, he refused to elaborate, saying, "I need another day or two to see if it will work. But there *is* a way, Nasuada. Take heart in that."

She had taken heart in his earnestness and his concern for her. Even if she never escaped, she was glad to know that she was not alone in her captivity.

After she recounted some of the things Galbatorix had done to her and the means by which she had foiled him, Murtagh chuckled. "You've proven more of a challenge than he anticipated. It's been a long time since anyone has given him this much of a fight. I certainly didn't.… I understand little about it, but I know it's incredibly difficult to create believable illusions. Any competent magician can make it seem as if you're floating in the sky or that you're cold or hot or that there's a flower growing in front of you. Small complicated things or large simple things are the most any one person can hope to create, and it requires a great deal of concentration to maintain the illusion. If your attention wavers, all of a sudden the flower has four petals instead of ten. Or it might vanish altogether. Details are the hardest thing to replicate. Nature is filled with infinite details, but our minds can only hold so much. If you're ever in doubt as to whether what you're seeing is real, look at the details. Look for the seams in the

world, where the spellcaster either does not know or has forgotten what should be there, or has taken a shortcut to conserve energy."

"If it's so difficult, then how does Galbatorix manage it?"

"He's using the Eldunarí."

"All of them?"

Murtagh nodded. "They provide the energy and the details needed, and he directs them as he wants."

"So then, the things I see are built on the memories of dragons?" she asked, feeling slightly awed.

He nodded again. "That and the memories of their Riders, for those who had Riders."

The following morning, Murtagh had woken her with a swift bolt of thought to tell her that Galbatorix was about to start again. Thereafter, phantoms and illusions of every sort had beset her, but as the day wore on, she noticed that the visions—with a few notable exceptions, such as that of her and Murtagh at the estate—had grown increasingly fuzzy and simple, as if either Galbatorix or the Eldunarí were growing tired.

And now she sat upon the barren plain, humming a dwarven tune as Kull, Urgals, and Ra'zac bore down on her. They caught her, and it felt as if they beat and cut her, and at times she screamed and wished her pain would end, but not once did she consider giving in to Galbatorix's desires.

Then the plain vanished, as did most of her suffering, and she reminded herself: *It is only in my mind. I shall not give in. I am not an animal; I am stronger than the weakness of my flesh*.

A dark cave lit by glowing green mushrooms appeared around her. For several minutes, she heard a large creature snuffling and padding about in the shadows between the stalagmites, and then she felt the creature's warm breath against the back of her neck, and she smelled the odor of carrion.

She started to laugh again, and she continued to laugh even as Galbatorix forced her to confront horror after horror in an attempt to find the particular combination of pain and fear that would break her. She laughed because she knew her will was stronger than his imagination, and she laughed because she knew she could count on Murtagh's help, and with him as her ally, she did not fear the spectral nightmares Galbatorix inflicted upon her, no matter how terrible they seemed at the time.

✦ ✦ ✦

A Question of Character

Eragon's foot slipped out from under him as he stepped on a patch of slick mud, and he fell onto his side in the wet grass with brutal suddenness. He uttered a grunt and winced as his hip began to throb. The impact was sure to leave a bruise.

"Barzûl," he said as he rolled to his feet and carefully stood. *At least I didn't land on Brisingr*, he thought as he pried scales of cold mud from his leggings.

Feeling glum, he resumed trudging toward the ruined building where they had decided to camp, in the belief it would be safer than by the forest.

As he strode through the grass, he startled a number of bullfrogs, who sprang out of hiding and fled hopping to either side. The bullfrogs were the only other strange creature they had encountered on the island; each had a hornlike projection above its reddish eyes, and from the center of its forehead sprouted a curving stalk—much like a fisherman's rod—upon the end of which hung a small, fleshy organ that at night glowed either white or yellow. The light allowed the bullfrogs to lure hundreds of flying insects within the reach of their tongues, and as a result of their easy access to food, the frogs grew enormously large. He had seen some the size of a bear's head, great fleshy lumps with staring eyes and mouths as wide as both his outstretched hands put together.

The frogs reminded him of Angela the herbalist, and he suddenly wished that she were there on Vroengard Island with them. *If anyone could tell us our true names, I bet she could*. For some reason, he always felt as if the herbalist could see right through him, as if she understood everything about him. It was a disconcerting sensation, but at the moment, he would have welcomed it.

He and Saphira had decided to trust Solembum and stay on Vroengard for another three days at most while they tried to discover their true names. Glaedr had left the decision up to them; he said, *You know Solembum better than I do. Stay or do not. Either way, the risk is great. There are no more safe paths*.

It was Saphira who ultimately made the choice. *The werecats would never serve Galbatorix*, she said. *They prize their freedom too highly. I would trust their word before that of any other creature, even an elf*.

So they had stayed.

They spent the rest of that day, and now most of the next, sitting,

thinking, talking, sharing memories, examining each other's minds, and trying various combinations of words in the ancient language, all in the hope that they would be able to either consciously work out their true names or—if they were lucky—strike upon them by accident.

Glaedr had offered his help when asked, but for the most part he kept to himself and gave Eragon and Saphira privacy for their conversations, many of which Eragon would have been embarrassed for anyone else to hear. *The finding of one's true name ought to be something one does by oneself*, said Glaedr. *If I think of either of yours, I will tell you—for we have no time to waste—but it would be better if you discover them on your own.*

As of yet, neither of them had succeeded.

Ever since Brom had explained to him about true names, Eragon had wanted to learn his own. Knowledge, particularly self-knowledge, was ever a useful thing, and he hoped his true name would allow him to better master his thoughts and feelings. Still, he could not help but feel a certain amount of trepidation about what he might discover.

Assuming that he *could* discover his name in the next few days, of which he was not entirely sure. He hoped he could, both for the success of their mission and because he did not want Glaedr or Saphira to figure it out for him. If he was to hear his whole being described in a word or phrase, then he wanted to arrive at that knowledge on his own, instead of having it thrust upon him.

Eragon sighed as he climbed the five broken steps that led up to the building. The structure had been a nesting house, or so Glaedr had said, and by the standards of Vroengard, it was so small as to be entirely unnoteworthy. Still, the walls were over three stories high, and the interior was large enough for Saphira to move about with ease. The southeastern corner had collapsed inward, taking part of the ceiling with it, but otherwise the building was sound.

Eragon's steps echoed as he walked through the vaulted entryway and made his way across the glassy floor of the main chamber. Embedded within the transparent material were swirling blades of color that formed an abstract design of dizzying complexity. Every time he looked at it, he felt as if the lines were about to resolve into a recognizable shape, but they never did.

The surface of the floor was covered with a fine web of cracks that radiated outward from the rubble beneath the gaping hole where the walls had given way. Long tendrils of ivy hung from the edges of the broken ceiling like lengths of knotted rope. Water dripped from the ends of the vines to fall into shallow, misshapen puddles, and the sound of the droplets striking echoed throughout the building, a constant, irregular beat that Eragon thought would drive him mad if

he had to listen to it for more than a few days.

Against the north-facing wall was a half circle of stones Saphira had dragged and pushed into place to protect their camp. When he reached the barrier, Eragon jumped onto the nearest block, which stood over six feet tall. Then he dropped down to the other side, landing heavily.

Saphira paused in the midst of licking her forefoot, and he felt a questioning thought from her. He shook his head, and she returned to her grooming.

Undoing his cloak, Eragon walked over to the fire he had built close to the wall. He spread the sodden garment on the floor, then removed his mud-caked boots and set them out to dry as well.

Does it look as if it will start raining again? Saphira asked.

Probably.

He squatted by the fire for a bit, and then sat on his bedroll and leaned against the wall. He watched Saphira as she worked her crimson tongue around the flexible cuticle at the base of each of her talons. An idea occurred to him, and he murmured a phrase in the ancient language, but to his disappointment, he felt no charge of energy in the words, nor did Saphira react to their utterance, as had Sloan when Eragon had spoken his true name.

Eragon closed his eyes and tipped his head back.

It frustrated him that he was unable to puzzle out Saphira's true name. He could accept that he did not fully understand himself, but he had known Saphira since the moment she had hatched, and he had shared nearly all of her memories. How could there be parts of her that were still a mystery to him? How could he have been better able to understand a murderer like Sloan than his own spell-bonded partner? Was it because she was a dragon and he was a human? Was it because Sloan's identity had been simpler than Saphira's?

Eragon did not know.

One of the exercises he and Saphira had done—on Glaedr's recommendation—was to tell each other all of the flaws they had noticed: he in her and she in him. It had been a humbling exercise. Glaedr had also shared his observations, and though the dragon had been kind, Eragon could not help but feel a sense of wounded pride upon hearing Glaedr list his various failings. And that too Eragon knew he needed to take into account when trying to discover his true name.

For Saphira, the hardest thing to come to terms with had been her vanity, which she had refused to acknowledge as such for the longest time. For Eragon, it had been the arrogance Glaedr claimed he sometimes displayed, his feelings concerning the men he had killed, and all the petulance, selfishness, anger, and other shortcomings to

which he, like so many others, was prey.

And yet, though they had examined themselves as honestly as they could, their introspection had yielded no results.

Today and tomorrow, that's all we have. The thought of returning to the Varden empty-handed depressed him. *How are we supposed to best Galbatorix?* he wondered, as he had so many times before. *Another few days and our lives may no longer be our own. We'll be slaves, like Murtagh and Thorn*.

He swore under his breath and surreptitiously punched a fist against the floor.

Be calm, Eragon, said Glaedr, and Eragon noticed the dragon was shielding his thoughts so that Saphira did not hear.

How can I? he growled.

It is easy to be calm when there is nothing to worry about, Eragon. The true test of your self-control, however, is whether you can remain calm in a trying situation. You cannot allow anger or frustration to cloud your thoughts, not at the moment. Right now, you need your mind to be clear.

Have you always been able to remain calm at times like this?

The old dragon seemed to chuckle. *No. I used to growl and bite and knock down trees and tear up the ground. Once, I broke the top off of a mountain in the Spine; the other dragons were rather upset with me for that. But I have had many years to learn that losing my temper rarely helps. You have not, I know, but allow my experience to guide you in this. Let go of your worries and focus only on the task at hand. The future will be what it will, and fretting about it will only make your fears more likely to come true*.

I know, Eragon sighed, *but it's not easy*.

Of course not. Few things of worth are. Then Glaedr withdrew and left him to the silence of his own mind.

Eragon fetched his bowl from the saddlebags, hopped over the half circle of stones, and walked barefoot to one of the puddles underneath the opening in the ceiling. A light drizzle had begun to fall, coating that part of the floor with a slippery layer of water. He squatted by the edge of the puddle and began to scoop water into the bowl with his bare hands.

Once the bowl was full, Eragon retreated a few feet and set it on a piece of stone that was the height of a table. Then he fixed an image of Roran in his mind and murmured, "Draumr kópa."

The water in the bowl shimmered, and an image of Roran appeared against a pure white background. He was walking next to Horst and Albriech, leading his horse, Snowfire. The three men looked tired and footsore, but they still carried weapons, so Eragon knew the Empire had not captured them.

He next scryed Jörmundur, then Solembum—who was tearing at a

freshly killed robin—and then Arya, but Arya's wards hid her from his sight, and all he saw was blackness.

At last Eragon released the spell and tossed the water back into the puddle. As he climbed over the barrier surrounding their camp, Saphira stretched and yawned, arching her back like a cat, and said, *How are they?*

"Safe, as far as I can tell."

He dropped the bowl on the saddlebags, then lay on his bedroll, closed his eyes, and returned to scouring his mind for ideas as to what his true name might be. Every few minutes, he thought of a different possibility, but none touched a chord within him, so he discarded them and began anew. All of the names contained a few constants: the fact that he was a Rider; his affection for Saphira and Arya; his desire to vanquish Galbatorix; his relationships with Roran, Garrow, and Brom; and the blood he shared with Murtagh. But no matter in what combination he placed those elements, the name did not speak to him. It was obvious that he was missing some crucial aspect of himself, so he kept making the names longer and longer in the hope that he might stumble across whatever it was he was overlooking.

When the names began to take him more than a minute to say, he realized he was wasting his time. He needed to reexamine his basic assumptions once again. He was convinced that his mistake lay in failing to notice some fault, or in not giving enough consideration to a fault he was already aware of. People, he had observed, were rarely willing to acknowledge their own imperfections, and he knew the same was true of himself. Somehow he had to cure himself of that blindness while he yet had time. It was a blindness born of pride and self-preservation, as it allowed him to believe the best of himself as he went about his life. However, he could no longer afford to indulge in such self-deception.

Thus he thought and continued to think as the day wore on, but his efforts met only with failure.

The rain grew heavier. Eragon disliked the sound of it drumming against the puddles, for the featureless noise made it difficult to hear if anyone was trying to sneak up on them. Since their first night on Vroengard, he had seen no sign of the strange, hooded figures whom he had watched wending their way through the city, nor had he felt any hint of their minds. Nevertheless, Eragon remained conscious of their presence, and he could not help feeling that he and Saphira were about to be attacked at any moment.

The gray light of day slowly faded to dusk, and a deep, starless night settled across the valley. Eragon heaped more wood onto the fire; it was the only illumination within the nesting house, and the cluster of yellow flames was like a tiny candle within the huge,

echoing space. Close to the fire, the glassy floor reflected the glow of the burning branches. It gleamed like a sheet of polished ice, and the blades of color within often distracted Eragon from his brooding.

Eragon ate no dinner. He was hungry, but he was too tense for food to sit well in his stomach, and in any case, he felt that a meal would slow his thinking. Never was his mind so keen as when his belly was empty.

He would not, he decided, eat again until he knew his true name, or until they had to leave the island, whichever came first.

Several hours passed. They spoke little amongst themselves, although Eragon remained conscious of the general drift of Saphira's moods and thoughts, even as she remained conscious of his.

Then, as Eragon was about to enter into his waking dreams—both to rest and out of hope that the dreams might provide some insight—Saphira uttered a *yowl*, reached forward with her right paw, and slapped it upon the floor. Several branches within the fire crumbled and fell apart, sending a burst of sparks toward the black ceiling.

Alarmed, Eragon sprang to his feet and drew Brisingr while he searched the darkness beyond the half circle of stones for enemies. An instant later, he realized that Saphira's mood was not one of concern or anger but of triumph.

I have done it! exclaimed Saphira. She arched her neck and loosed a jet of blue and yellow flame into the upper reaches of the building. *I know my true name!* She spoke a single line in the ancient language, and the inside of Eragon's mind seemed to ring with a sound like a bell, and for a moment, the tips of Saphira's scales gleamed with an inner light, and she looked as if she were made of stars.

The name was grand and majestic, but also tinged with sadness, for it named her as the last female of her kind. In the words, Eragon could hear the love and devotion she felt for him, as well as all the other traits that made up her personality. Most he recognized; a few he did not. Her flaws were as prominent as her virtues, but overall, the impression was one of fire and beauty and grandeur.

Saphira shivered from the tip of her nose to the tip of her tail, and she shuffled her wings.

I know who I am, she said.

Well done, Bjartskular, said Glaedr, and Eragon could sense how impressed he was. *You have a name to be proud of. I would not say it again, however, not even to yourself, until we are at the … at the spire we have come to see. You must take great care to keep your name hidden now that you know it.*

Saphira blinked and shuffled her wings again. *Yes, Master*. The excitement running through her was palpable.

Eragon sheathed Brisingr and walked over to her. She lowered her

head until it was at his level. He stroked the line of her jaw, and then pressed his forehead against her hard snout and held her as tightly as he could, her scales sharp against his fingers. Hot tears began to slide down his cheeks.

Why do you cry? she asked.

Because … I'm lucky enough to be bonded with you.

Little one.

They talked for a while longer, as Saphira was eager to discuss what she had learned about herself. Eragon was happy to listen, but he could not help feeling a little bitter that he still had not been able to divine his own true name.

Then Saphira curled up on her side of the half circle and went to sleep, leaving Eragon to ruminate by the light of the dying campfire. Glaedr remained awake and aware, and sometimes Eragon consulted with him, but for the most part, he kept to himself.

The hours crawled past, and Eragon grew increasingly frustrated. His time was running out—ideally he and Saphira should have left for the Varden the previous day—and yet no matter what he tried, he seemed unable to describe himself as he was.

It was nearly midnight, by his reckoning, when the rain ceased.

Eragon fidgeted, trying to make up his mind; then he bounded to his feet, too wound up to bear sitting any longer. *I'm going for a walk*, he said to Glaedr.

He expected the dragon to object, but instead Glaedr said, *Leave your weapons and armor here.*

Why?

Whatever you find, you need to face it by yourself. You cannot learn what you are made of if you rely on anyone or anything else to help you.

Glaedr's words made sense to Eragon, but still he hesitated before he unbuckled his sword and dagger and pulled off his mail hauberk. He donned his boots and his damp cloak, and then he dragged the saddlebags that contained Glaedr's heart of hearts closer to Saphira.

As Eragon started to leave the half circle of stones, Glaedr said, *Do what you must, but be careful.*

* * *

Outside the nesting house, Eragon was pleased to see patches of stars and enough moonlight shining through the gaps in the clouds for him to make out his surroundings.

He bounced on the balls of his feet a few times, wondering where to go, and then he set off at a brisk trot toward the heart of the ruined city. After a few seconds, his frustration got the better of him and he increased his pace to an all-out run.

As he listened to the sound of his breathing and of his footsteps pounding against the paving stones, he asked himself, *Who am I?* But no answer came to him.

He ran until his lungs began to fail, and then he ran some more, and when neither his lungs nor his legs would sustain him any longer, he stopped by a weed-filled fountain and leaned on his arms against it while he recovered his breath.

Around him loomed the shapes of several enormous buildings: shadowy hulks that looked like a range of ancient, crumbling mountains. The fountain stood in the center of a vast square courtyard, much of which was littered with pieces of broken stone.

He pushed himself off the fountain and slowly turned in a circle. In the distance, he could hear the deep, resonant croaking of the bullfrogs, an odd booming sound that grew especially loud whenever one of the larger frogs participated.

A cracked slab of stone several yards away caught his eye. He walked over, grasped it by the edges, and, with a heave, picked it off the ground. The muscles in his arms burning, he staggered to the edge of the courtyard and threw the slab onto the grass beyond.

It landed with a soft but satisfying *thump*.

He strode back to the fountain, unclasped his cloak, and draped it over the edge of the sculpture. Then he strode to the next piece of rubble—a jagged wedge that had cleaved off a larger block—and he fit his fingers underneath it and lifted it onto his shoulder.

For over an hour, he labored to clear the courtyard. Some of the fallen masonry was so big, he had to use magic to move it, but for the most part he was able to use his hands. He was methodical about it; he worked back and forth across the courtyard, and every piece of rubble he encountered, no matter how large or small, he stopped to remove.

The effort soon left him drenched in sweat. He would have removed his tunic, but the edges of the stone were often sharp and would have cut him. As it was, he accumulated a host of bruises across his chest and shoulders, and he scraped his hands in numerous places.

The exertion helped calm his mind and, since it required little thought, left him free to mull over all that he was and all that he might be.

In the midst of his self-appointed task, as he was resting after having shifted a particularly heavy length of cornice, he heard a threatening *hiss*, and he looked up to see a snalglí—this one with a shell at least six feet tall—gliding out of the darkness with startling speed. The creature's boneless neck was fully extended, its lipless mouth was like a slash of darkness splitting its soft flesh, and its bulbous eyes were pointed directly at him. By the light of the moon,

the snalglí's exposed flesh gleamed like silver, as did the track of slime it left behind.

"Letta," said Eragon, and he straightened upright and shook drops of blood from his torn hands. "Ono ach *néiat* threyja eom verrunsmal edtha, O snalglí."

As he spoke his warning, the snail slowed and retracted its eyes several inches. It paused when it was a few yards away, hissed again, and began to circle around to his left.

"Oh no you don't," he muttered, turning with it. He glanced over his shoulders to make sure no other snalglí were approaching from behind.

The giant snail seemed to realize that it could not catch him by surprise, for it stopped and sat hissing and waving its eyeballs at him.

"You sound like a teapot left to boil," he said to it.

The snalglí's eyeballs waved even faster, and then it charged at him, the edges of its flat belly undulating.

Eragon waited until the last moment, then jumped to the side and let the snalglí slide past. He laughed and slapped the back of its shell. "Not too bright, are you?" Dancing away from it, he began to taunt the creature in the ancient language, calling it all sorts of insulting but perfectly accurate names.

The snail seemed to puff up with rage—its neck thickened and bulged, and it opened its mouth even farther and began to sputter as well as hiss.

Again and again, it charged at Eragon, and every time he jumped out of the way. At last the snalglí grew tired of the game. It withdrew a half-dozen yards and sat staring at him with its fist-sized eyeballs.

"How do you ever catch anything when you're so slow?" Eragon asked in a mocking tone, and he stuck his tongue out at the snail.

The snalglí hissed once more, and then it turned around and slid off into the darkness.

Eragon waited several minutes to be sure it was gone before he returned to clearing the rubble. "Maybe I should just call myself Snail Vanquisher," he muttered as he rolled a section of a pillar across the courtyard. "Eragon Shadeslayer, Vanquisher of Snails.… I would strike fear into the hearts of men wherever I went."

It was the deepest part of the night when he finally dropped the last piece of stone onto the border of grass that edged the courtyard. There he stood, panting. He was cold and hungry and tired, and the scrapes on his hands and wrists smarted.

He had ended by the northeastern corner of the courtyard. To the north was an immense hall that had been mostly destroyed during the battle; all that remained standing was a portion of the back walls and

a single, ivy-covered pillar where the entryway had been.

He stared at the pillar for the longest time. Above it, a cluster of stars—red, blue, and white—shone through an opening in the clouds, gleaming like cut diamonds. He felt a strange attraction to them, as if their appearance signified something that he ought to be aware of.

Without bothering to consider his action, he walked to the base of the pillar—scrambling over piles of rubble—then reached as high as he could and grasped the thickest part of the ivy: a stem as big around as his forearm and covered with thousands of tiny hairs.

He tugged on the vine. It held, so he jumped off the ground and began to climb. Hand over hand, he scaled the pillar, which must have been three hundred feet tall, but which felt taller the farther he got from the ground.

He knew he was being reckless, but then, he felt reckless.

Halfway up, the smaller tendrils of vine began to peel off the stone when he put his full weight on them. After that, he was careful to only grab hold of the main stem and some of the thicker side branches.

His grip had almost given out by the time he arrived at the top. The crown of the pillar was still intact; it formed a square, flat surface large enough to sit on, with over a foot to spare on each side.

Feeling somewhat shaky from the exertion, Eragon crossed his legs and rested his hands palm upward on his knees, allowing the air to soothe his torn skin.

Below him lay the ruined city: a maze of shattered husks that often echoed with strange, forlorn cries. In a few places where there were ponds, he could see the faint, glowing lights of the bullfrogs' lures, like lanterns viewed from a great distance.

Angler frogs, he thought suddenly in the ancient language. *That's what their name is: angler frogs*. And he knew he was right, for the words seemed to fit like a key in a lock.

Then he shifted his gaze to the cluster of stars that had inspired his climb. He slowed his breathing and concentrated on maintaining a steady, never-ending flow of air in and out of his lungs. The cold, his hunger, and his trembling exhaustion gave him a peculiar sense of clarity; he seemed to float apart from his body, as if the bond between his consciousness and his flesh had grown attenuated, and there came upon him a heightened awareness of the city and the island around him. He was acutely sensitive to every motion of the wind and to every sound and smell that wafted past the top of the pillar.

As he sat there, he thought of more names, and though none fully described him, his failures did not upset him, for the clarity he felt was too deep-seated for any setback to perturb his equanimity.

How can I include everything I am in just a few words? he wondered, and he continued to ponder the question as the stars turned.

Three warped shadows flew across the city—like small, moving rifts in reality—and landed upon the roof of the building to his left. Then the dark, owl-shaped silhouettes spread their barbed plumes and stared at him with luminous, evil-looking eyes. The shadows chattered softly to one another, and two of them scratched their empty wings with claws that had no depth. The third held the remains of a bullfrog between its ebony talons.

He watched the menacing birds for several minutes, and they watched him in return, and then they took flight and ghosted away to the west, making no more noise than a falling feather.

Near dawn, when Eragon could see the morning star between two peaks to the east, he asked himself, "What do I want?"

Until then, he had not bothered to consider the question. He wanted to overthrow Galbatorix: that, of course. But should they succeed, what, then? Ever since he had left Palancar Valley, he had thought that he and Saphira would one day return, to live near the mountains he so loved. However, as he pondered the prospect, he slowly realized that it no longer appealed to him.

He had grown up in Palancar Valley, and he would always consider it home. But what was left there for him or Saphira? Carvahall was destroyed, and even if the villagers rebuilt it someday, the town would never be the same. Besides, most of the friends he and Saphira had made lived elsewhere, and the two of them had obligations to the various races of Alagaësia—obligations that they could not ignore. And after all the things they had done and seen, he could not imagine that either of them would be content to live in such an ordinary, isolated place.

For the sky is hollow and the world is round.…

Even if they did return, what would they do? Raise cows and farm wheat? He had no desire to eke out a living from the land as his family had during his childhood. He and Saphira were a Rider and dragon; their doom and their destiny was to fly at the forefront of history, not to sit before a fire and grow fat and lazy.

And then there was Arya. If he and Saphira lived in Palancar Valley, he would see her rarely, if at all.

"No," said Eragon, and the word was like a hammerblow in the silence. "I don't want to go back."

A cold tingle crawled down his spine. He had known he had changed since he, Brom, and Saphira had set out to track down the Ra'zac, but he had clung to the belief that, at his core, he was still the same person. Now he understood that this was no longer true. The boy he had been when he first set foot outside of Palancar Valley had ceased to exist; Eragon did not look like him, he did not act like him,

and he no longer wanted the same things from life.

He took a deep breath and then released it in a long, shuddering sigh as the truth sank into him.

"I am not who I was." Saying it aloud seemed to give the thought weight.

Then, as the first rays of dawn brightened the eastern sky over the ancient island of Vroengard, where the Riders and dragons had once lived, he thought of a name—a name such as he had not thought of before—and as he did, a sense of certainty came over him.

He said the name, whispered it to himself in the deepest recesses of his mind, and all his body seemed to vibrate at once, as if Saphira had struck the pillar beneath him.

And then he gasped, and he found himself both laughing and crying —laughing that he had succeeded and for the sheer joy of comprehension; crying because all his failings, all the mistakes he had made, were now obvious to him, and he no longer had any delusions to comfort himself with.

"I am not who I was," he whispered, gripping the edges of the column, "but I know who I am."

The name, his true name, was weaker and more flawed than he would have liked, and he hated himself for that, but there was also much to admire within it, and the more he thought about it, the more he was able to accept the true nature of his self. He was not the best person in the world, but neither was he the worst.

"And I *won't* give up," he growled.

He took solace in the fact that his identity was not immutable; he could improve himself if he wished. And right then, he swore to himself that he would do better in the future, be it ever so hard.

Still laughing, still crying, he turned his face toward the sky and spread his arms out to either side. In time, the tears and the laughter stopped, and in their place he felt a sense of deep calm overlaid with a tinge of happiness and resignation. Despite Glaedr's admonition, he again whispered his true name, and once more his entire being shook from the force of the words.

Keeping his arms outstretched, he stood atop the pillar, and then he tipped forward and fell headfirst toward the ground. Just before he struck, he said, "Vëoht," and he slowed, rotated, and alit upon the cracked stone as gently as if he were stepping out of a carriage.

He returned to the fountain in the center of the courtyard and retrieved his cloak. Then, as light spread through the ruined city, he hurried back toward the nesting house, eager to wake Saphira and tell her and Glaedr of his discovery.

THE VAULT OF SOULS

Eragon lifted his sword and shield, eager to proceed, but also somewhat afraid.

As before, he and Saphira stood at the base of the Rock of Kuthian while Glaedr's heart of hearts sat in the small chest hidden within the saddlebags upon Saphira's back.

It was still early morning, and the sun shone brightly through large tears in the canopy of clouds. Eragon and Saphira had wanted to go directly to the Rock of Kuthian once Eragon had returned to the nesting house, but Glaedr had insisted that Eragon eat first, and that they then wait for the food to settle in his stomach.

But now they were finally at the jagged spire of stone, and Eragon was tired of waiting, as was Saphira.

Ever since they had shared their true names, the bond between them seemed to have grown stronger, perhaps because they had both heard how much they cared for each other. It was something they had always known, but nevertheless, to have it stated in such irrefutable terms had increased the sense of closeness they shared.

Somewhere to the north, a raven called.

I'll go first, said Glaedr. *If it's a trap, I might be able to spring it before it catches either of you.*

Eragon started to pull his mind away from Glaedr, as did Saphira, to allow the dragon to utter his true name without being overheard. But Glaedr said, *No, you have told me your names. It is only right you should know mine.*

Eragon looked at Saphira, and then they both said, *Thank you, Ebrithil.*

Then Glaedr spoke his name, and it boomed forth in Eragon's mind like a fanfare of trumpets, regal and yet discordant, colored throughout by Glaedr's grief and anger at Oromis's death. His name was longer than either Eragon's or Saphira's; it went on for several sentences—a record of a life that had stretched over centuries and which had contained joys and sorrows and accomplishments too numerous to count. His wisdom was evident in his name, but also contradictions: complexities that made it difficult to fully grasp his identity.

Saphira felt the same sense of awe upon hearing Glaedr's name as did Eragon; the sound of it made them both realize how young they still were and how far they had to go before they could hope to match

Glaedr's knowledge and experience.

I wonder what Arya's true name is. Eragon thought to himself.

They watched the Rock of Kuthian intently, but saw no change.

Saphira went next. Arching her neck and pawing at the ground like a high-spirited charger, she proudly stated her true name. Even in the daylight, her scales again shimmered and sparkled at the proclamation.

Hearing her and Glaedr say their true names made Eragon less self-conscious about his own. None of them were perfect, and yet they did not condemn each other for their shortcomings, but rather acknowledged and forgave them.

Again, nothing happened after Saphira uttered her name.

Lastly, Eragon stepped forward. A cold sweat coated his brow. Knowing that it might be his final act as a free man, he spoke his name with his mind, as had Glaedr and Saphira. They had agreed beforehand that it would be safer for him to avoid saying his name out loud, so as to reduce the chance that anyone might overhear it.

As Eragon formed the last word with his thoughts, a thin, dark line appeared at the base of the spire.

It ran upward fifty feet and then split in two and arched down to either side, tracing the outline of two broad doors. Upon the doors appeared row after row of glyphs limned in gold: wards against both physical and magical detection.

Once the outline was complete, the doors swung outward upon hidden hinges, scraping aside the dirt and plants that had accumulated before the spire since the doors had last opened, whenever that had been. Through the doorway was a huge vaulted tunnel that descended at a steep angle into the bowels of the earth.

The doors ground to a halt, and the clearing fell silent again.

Eragon stared at the dark tunnel, feeling a sense of increasing apprehension. They had found what they were looking for, but he still was not sure if it was a trap or not.

Solembum did not lie, said Saphira. Her tongue darted out as she tasted the air.

Yes, but what's waiting for us inside? asked Eragon.

This place should not exist, said Glaedr. *We and the Riders hid many secrets on Vroengard, but the island is too small for a tunnel as large as this to have been built without others knowing. And yet I have never heard of it before*.

Eragon frowned and glanced about. They were still alone; no one was trying to sneak up on them. *Could it have been built before the Riders made Vroengard their home?*

Glaedr thought for a moment. *I do not know.… Perhaps. It is the only explanation that makes sense, but if so, then it is ancient indeed*.

The three of them searched the passageway with their minds, but they felt no living thing within it.

Right then, said Eragon. The sour taste of dread filled his mouth, and his palms were slick within his gloves. Whatever they were about to find at the other end of the tunnel, he wanted to know once and for all. Saphira was also nervous, but less than he.

Let us dig out the rat hiding in this nest, she said.

Together then, they walked through the doorway and into the tunnel.

As the last inch of Saphira's tail slid over the threshold, the doors swung shut behind them and closed with a loud crack of stone meeting stone, plunging them into darkness.

"Ah, no, no, no!" growled Eragon, rushing back to the doors. "Naina hvitr," he said, and a directionless white light illuminated the entrance to the tunnel.

The inner surfaces of the doors were perfectly smooth, and no matter how he pushed and pounded on them, they refused to budge. "Blast it. We should have used a log or a boulder to wedge them open," he lamented, berating himself for not thinking of it beforehand.

If we have to, we can always break them down, said Saphira.

That I very much doubt, said Glaedr.

Eragon regripped Brisingr. *Then I guess we have no choice but to go forward.*

When have we ever had any choice but to go forward? asked Saphira.

Eragon altered his spell so that the werelight emanated from a single point near the ceiling—otherwise the lack of shadows made it difficult for him and Saphira to judge depth—and then, together, they started down the slanting tunnel.

The floor of the passageway was somewhat knobbly, which made it easy for them to maintain their footing in the absence of steps. Where the floor and the walls met, they flowed together as if the stone had been melted, which told Eragon that it was most likely elves who had excavated the tunnel.

Down they went, deeper and deeper into the earth, until Eragon guessed they had passed under the foothills behind the Rock of Kuthian and burrowed into the roots of the mountain beyond. The tunnel neither turned nor branched, and the walls remained utterly bare.

At last Eragon felt a hint of warm air rising toward them from farther down the tunnel, and he noticed a faint orange glow in the distance. "Letta," he murmured, and extinguished the werelight.

The air continued to warm as they descended, and the glow before them waxed in brightness. Soon they were able to see an end to the tunnel: a huge black arch that was covered entirely with sculpted

glyphs, which made the arch look as if it were wrapped in thorns. The smell of brimstone tainted the air, and Eragon felt his eyes begin to water.

They stopped before the archway; through it, all they could see was a flat gray floor.

Eragon glanced back the way they had come, then returned his gaze to the arch. The jagged structure made him nervous, and Saphira as well. He tried to read the glyphs, but they were too jumbled and too densely packed to make sense of, nor could he detect any energy stored within the black structure. Yet he had difficulty believing that it was not enchanted. Whoever built the tunnel had succeeded in hiding the latch spell for the doors to the outside, which meant they could have done the same with any spells they had placed upon the arch.

He exchanged a quick look with Saphira, and he wet his lips as he remembered what Glaedr had said: *There are no more safe paths*.

Saphira snorted, releasing a small jet of flame from the pit of each nostril, and then, as one, she and Eragon walked through the archway.

Lacuna, Part the First

Eragon noticed several things at once.

First, that they were standing at one side of a circular chamber over two hundred feet across with a large pit in the center, from which radiated a dull orange glow. Second, that the air was stiflingly hot. Third, that around the outer part of the room were two concentric rings of benchlike tiers—the back one higher than the front—upon which rested numerous dark objects. Fourth, that the wall behind this tier sparkled in numerous places, as if decorated with colored crystal. But he had no opportunity to examine either the wall or the dark objects, for in the open area next to the glowing pit there stood a man with the head of a dragon.

The man was made of metal, and he gleamed like polished steel. He wore no clothes other than a segmented loincloth fashioned out of the same lustrous material as his body, and his chest and limbs rippled with muscles like those of a Kull. In his left hand, he held a metal shield, and in his right, an iridescent sword that Eragon recognized as the blade of a Rider.

Behind the man, set within the far side of the room, Eragon vaguely saw a throne with the outline of the creature's body worn into its back and seat.

The dragon-headed man strode forward. His skin and joints moved as smoothly as flesh, but every step sounded as if a great weight was being dropped onto the floor. He stopped thirty feet from Eragon and Saphira and stared at them with eyes that flickered like a pair of crimson flames. Then, lifting his scaled head, he uttered a peculiar metallic roar that echoed until it seemed as if a dozen creatures were bellowing at them.

Even as Eragon was wondering whether they were supposed to fight the creature, he felt a strange, vast mind touch his. The consciousness was unlike any he had encountered before, and it seemed to contain a host of shouting voices, a great, disjointed chorus that reminded him of the wind inside a storm.

Before he could react, the mind stabbed through his defenses and seized control of his thoughts. For all the time he had spent practicing with Glaedr, Arya, and Saphira, he could not stop the attack; he could not even slow it. He might as well have tried to hold back the tide with his bare hands.

A blur of light and a roar of incoherent noise surrounded him as the

yammering chorus forced itself into every nook and cranny of his being. Then it felt as if the invader tore his mind into a half-dozen pieces—each of which remained aware of the others, but none of which was free to do as it wished—and his vision fragmented, as if he were seeing the chamber through the facets of a jewel.

Six different memories began to race through his fractured consciousness. He had not chosen to recall them; they simply appeared, and they flew past faster than he could follow. At the same time, his body bent and flexed in various poses, and then his arm lifted Brisingr to where his eyes could see, and he beheld six identical versions of the sword. The invader even had him cast a spell, the purpose of which he did not and could not understand, for the only thoughts he had were those the other allowed. Nor did he feel any emotion but that of fading alarm.

For what seemed like hours, the alien mind examined every one of his memories, from the moment he had set out from his family's farm to hunt deer in the Spine—three days before he had found Saphira's egg—up until the present. In the back of his mind, Eragon could sense the same thing happening to Saphira, but the knowledge meant nothing to him.

At last, long after he would have given up hope of release if he still had command of his thoughts, the whirling chorus carefully rejoined the pieces of his mind and then withdrew.

Eragon staggered forward and dropped to one knee before he was able to regain his balance. Beside him, Saphira lurched and snapped at the air.

How? he thought. *Who?* To capture both of them at once, and Glaedr as well, he assumed, was something he did not believe even Galbatorix was capable of.

Again the consciousness pressed against Eragon's mind, but this time it did not attack. This time it said, *Our apologies, Saphira. Our apologies, Eragon, but we had to be certain of your intentions. Welcome to the Vault of Souls. Long have we waited for you. And welcome to you as well, cousin. We are glad that you are still alive. Take now your memories, and know that your task is at long last complete!*

A bolt of energy flashed between Glaedr and the consciousness. An instant later, Glaedr uttered a mental bellow that made Eragon's temples throb with pain. A surge of jumbled emotions rushed forth from the golden dragon: sorrow, triumph, disbelief, regret, and, overriding them all, a sense of joyous relief so intense, Eragon found himself smiling without knowing why. And brushing against Glaedr's mind, he felt not just one strange mind but a multitude, all whispering and murmuring.

"Who?" whispered Eragon. Before them, the man with the head of a

dragon had not shifted so much as an inch.

Eragon, said Saphira. *Look at the wall. Look …*

He looked. And he saw that the circular wall was not decorated with crystal, as he had first taken it to be. Rather, dozens upon dozens of alcoves dotted the wall, and within each alcove rested a glittering orb. Some were large, some were small, but they all pulsed with a soft inner glow, like coals smoldering in a dying campfire.

Eragon's heart skipped a beat as comprehension dawned upon him.

He lowered his gaze to the dark objects on the tiers below; they were smooth and ovoid and appeared to have been sculpted from stone of differing colors. As with the orbs, some were large and some were small, but regardless of their size, their shape was one he would have recognized anywhere.

A hot flush crept over him, and his knees grew weak. *It cannot be*. He wanted to believe what he saw, but he feared that it might be an illusion created to prey on his hopes. And yet the possibility that what he beheld was actually there took his breath away and left him staggered and overwhelmed to such a degree that he knew not what to do or say. Saphira's reaction was much the same, if not stronger.

Then the mind spoke again: *You are not mistaken, hatchlings, nor do your eyes deceive you. We are the secret hope of our race. Here lie our hearts of hearts—the last free Eldunarí in the land—and here lie the eggs that we have guarded for over a century*.

LACUNA, PART THE SECOND

For a moment, Eragon was unable to move or breathe.

Then he whispered, "Eggs, Saphira.… *Eggs*."

She shivered, as if with cold, and the scales along her spine prickled and lifted their tips slightly from her hide.

Who are you? he asked the mind. *How do we know if we can trust you?*

They speak the truth, Eragon, said Glaedr in the ancient language. *I know, for Oromis was among those who devised the plan for this place*.

Oromis …?

Before Glaedr could elaborate, the other mind said, *My name is Umaroth. My Rider was the elf Vrael, leader of our order before our doom came upon us. I speak for the others but I do not command them, for while many of us were bonded with Riders, more were not, and our wild brethren acknowledge no authority but their own*. This he said with a hint of exasperation. *It would be too confusing for all of us to speak at once, so my voice will stand for the rest*.

Are you …? And Eragon indicated the silvery, dragon-headed man in front of him and Saphira.

Nay, replied Umaroth. *He is Cuaroc, Hunter of the Nïdhwal and Bane of the Urgals. Silvarí the Enchantress fashioned for him the body he now wears, so that we would have a champion to defend us should Galbatorix or any foes force their way into the Vault of Souls*.

As Umaroth spoke, the dragon-headed man reached across his torso with his right hand, undid a hidden latch, and pulled open the front of his chest, as if he were pulling open the door to a cupboard. Within Cuaroc's chest nestled a purple heart of hearts, which was surrounded by thousands of silver wires, each no thicker than a hair. Then Cuaroc swung shut his breastplate, and Umaroth said, *No, I am over here*, and he directed Eragon's vision toward an alcove that contained a large white Eldunarí.

Eragon slowly sheathed Brisingr.

Eggs and Eldunarí. Eragon could not seem to grasp the enormity of the revelation all at once. His thoughts felt slow and sluggish, as if he had taken a blow to the head—which, in a way, he supposed he had.

He started toward the tiers to the right of the black, glyph-covered arch, then paused before Cuaroc and said, both out loud and with his mind, "May I?"

The dragon-headed man clacked his teeth together and retreated

with crashing steps to stand by the glowing pit in the center of the room. He kept his sword out, however, something of which Eragon remained constantly aware.

A sense of wonder and reverence gripped Eragon as he approached the eggs. He leaned against the lower tier and released a shuddering breath while he stared at a gold and red egg that was almost five feet tall. Struck by a sudden urge, he peeled off a glove and placed the palm of his bare hand against the egg. It was warm to the touch, and when he extended his mind along with his hand, he could feel the slumbering consciousness of the unhatched dragon within.

Saphira's hot breath passed across his neck as she joined him.

Your egg was smaller than this, he said.

That is because my mother was not so old and not so large as the dragon who laid this one.

Ahh. I hadn't thought of that.

He looked out over the rest of the eggs and felt his throat tighten. "There are so many," he whispered. He pressed his shoulder against Saphira's massive jaw and felt the quivers coursing through her. She wanted, he could tell, nothing more than to rejoice and embrace the minds of her kin, but like him, she could hardly bring herself to believe that what she beheld was real.

She snorted and swung her head around until she was looking at the rest of the room, and then she uttered a roar that shook dust from the ceiling. *How?!* she growled with her mind. *How could you have escaped Galbatorix? We dragons do not hide when we fight. We are not cowards to run from danger. Explain yourselves!*

Not so loudly, Bjartskular, or you will upset the younglings in their eggs, chided Umaroth.

Saphira's muzzle creased as she snarled. *Then speak, old one, and tell us how this can be*.

For a moment, Umaroth seemed amused, but when the dragon answered her, his words were somber. *You are correct: we are not cowards, and we do not hide when we fight, but even dragons may lie in wait so as to catch their prey by surprise. Would you not agree, Saphira?*

She snorted again and lashed her tail from side to side.

And we are not like the Fanghur or the lesser vipers who abandon their young to live or die according to the whims of fate. Had we joined the battle for Doru Araeba, we would only have been destroyed. Galbatorix's victory would have been absolute—as indeed he believes it was—and our kind would have passed forever from the face of the earth.

Once the true extent of Galbatorix's power and ambition became evident, said Glaedr, *and once we realized that he and the traitors with him intended to attack Vroengard, then Vrael, Umaroth, Oromis, and I, and a few others, decided that it would be best to hide the eggs of our race, as*

well as a number of the Eldunarí. It was easy to convince the wild dragons; Galbatorix had been hunting them, and they had no defense against his magic. They came here, and they gave charge of their unhatched offspring to Vrael, and those who could laid eggs when otherwise they would have waited, for we knew that the survival of our race was threatened. Our precautions, it seems, were well thought of.

Eragon rubbed his temples. "Why didn't you know of this before? Why didn't Oromis? And how is it possible to hide their minds? You told me it couldn't be done."

It can't, replied Glaedr, *or at least not with magic alone. In this instance, however, where magic fails, distance may yet succeed. That is why we are far underground, a mile below Mount Erolas. Even if Galbatorix or the Forsworn had thought to search with their minds in such an unlikely location, the intervening rock would have made it difficult for them to feel much more than a confused flux of energy, which they would have attributed to eddies within the blood of the earth, which lies close beneath us. Moreover, before the Battle of Doru Araeba, more than a hundred years ago, all of the Eldunarí were placed in a trance so deep as to be akin to death, which made them that much more difficult to find. Our plan was to rouse them after the fighting was over, but those who built this place also cast a spell that would wake them from their trance once several moons had passed.*

As it did, said Umaroth. *The Vault of Souls was placed here for another reason as well. The pit you see before you opens onto a lake of molten stone that has lain beneath these mountains since the world was born. It provides the warmth needed to keep the eggs comfortable, and it also provides the light needed for us Eldunarí to maintain our strength.*

Addressing Glaedr, Eragon said, *You still haven't answered my question: why didn't you or Oromis remember this place?*

Umaroth was the one who answered: *Because all who knew of the Vault of Souls agreed to have the knowledge removed from their minds and replaced with a false memory, including Glaedr. It was not an easy decision, especially for the mothers of the eggs, but we could not allow anyone outside this room to remain in possession of the truth, lest Galbatorix should learn of us from them. So we said farewell to our friends and comrades, knowing full well that we might never see them again and that, if the worst came to pass, they would die believing we had entered into the void.… As I said, it was not an easy decision. We also erased from all memory the names of the rock that marks the entrance to this sanctuary, even as we had earlier erased the names of the thirteen dragons who chose to betray us.*

I've spent the last hundred years believing that our kind was doomed to oblivion, said Glaedr. *Now, to know that all my anguish was for naught … I am glad, though, that I was able to help safeguard our race*

through my ignorance.

Then Saphira said to Umaroth, *Why didn't Galbatorix notice that you and the eggs were missing?*

He thought we were killed in the battle. We were but a small portion of the Eldunarí on Vroengard, not enough for him to become suspicious of our absence. As for the eggs, no doubt he was enraged by their loss, but he would have had no reason to believe trickery was involved.

Ah yes, said Glaedr sadly. *That was why Thuviel agreed to sacrifice himself: to conceal our deception from Galbatorix*.

"But didn't Thuviel kill many of his own?" said Eragon.

He did, and it was a great tragedy, said Umaroth. *However, we had agreed that he was not to act unless it was obvious that defeat was unavoidable. By immolating himself, he destroyed the buildings where we normally kept the eggs, and he also rendered the island poisonous to ensure that Galbatorix would not choose to settle here*.

"Did he know why he was killing himself?"

At the time, no, only that it was necessary. One of the Forsworn had slain Thuviel's dragon a month before. Though he had refrained from passing into the void, as we needed every warrior we had to fight Galbatorix, Thuviel no longer wished to continue living. He was glad for the task then; it granted him the release he yearned for while also allowing him to serve our cause. By the gift of his life, he secured a future for both our race and the Riders. He was a great and courageous hero, and his name shall someday be sung in every corner of Alagaësia.

And after the battle, you waited, said Saphira.

And then we waited, Umaroth agreed. The thought of spending over a hundred years within a single room buried deep underground made Eragon quail. *But we have not been idle. When we woke from our trance, we began to cast our minds out, slowly at first, and then with ever-greater confidence once we realized Galbatorix and the Forsworn had left the island. Together our strength is great, and we have been able to observe much of what has transpired throughout the land in the years since. We cannot scry, not normally, but we can see the skeins of tangled energy strewn across Alagaësia, and we can often listen to the thoughts of those who make no effort to defend their minds. In that way, we have gathered our information.*

As the decades crawled past, we began to despair that anyone would be able to kill Galbatorix. We were prepared to wait for centuries if needed, but we could sense the Egg-breaker's power growing, and we feared that our wait might be one of thousands of years instead of hundreds. That, we agreed, would be unacceptable, both for the sake of our sanity and for the sake of the younglings in the eggs. They are bound with magic that slows their bodies, and they can remain as they are for years more, but it is not good for them to stay within their shells for too long. If they do, their minds

can grow twisted and strange.

Thus spurred by our concern, we began to intervene in the events we saw. At first only in small ways: a nudge here, a whispered suggestion there, a sense of alarm to one about to be ambushed. We did not always succeed, but we were able to help those who still fought Galbatorix, and as time progressed, we grew more adept and more confident with our tampering. On a few rare occasions, our presence was noticed, but no one was ever able to determine who or what we were. Thrice we were able to arrange the death of one of the Forsworn; when not ruled by his passions, Brom was a useful weapon for us.

"You helped Brom!" Eragon exclaimed.

We did, and many others as well. When the human known as Hefring stole Saphira's egg from Galbatorix's treasure room—nigh on twenty years ago—we aided his escape, but we went too far, for he noticed us and became frightened. He fled and did not meet with the Varden as he was supposed to. Later, after Brom had rescued your egg, and the Varden and the elves started to bring younglings before it in an attempt to find the one for whom you would hatch, we decided that we should make certain preparations for that eventuality. So we reached out to the werecats, who have long been friends of the dragons, and we spoke with them. They agreed to help us, and to them we gave the knowledge of the Rock of Kuthian and the brightsteel beneath the roots of the Menoa tree, and then we removed all memory of our conversation from their minds.

"You did all that, from here?" said Eragon, wondering.

And more. Have you never wondered why Saphira's egg happened to appear in front of you while you were in the midst of the Spine?

That was your doing? said Saphira, her shock as strong as Eragon's.

"I thought it was because Brom is my father, and Arya mistook me for him."

Nay, said Umaroth. *The spells of elves do not so easily go astray. We altered the flow of magic so that you and Saphira would meet. We thought there was a chance—a small one, but a chance nevertheless—that you might prove a fit match for her. We were right.*

"Why didn't you bring us here sooner, though?" asked Eragon.

Because you needed time for your training, and otherwise we risked alerting Galbatorix to our presence before you or the Varden were ready to confront him. If we had contacted you after the Battle of the Burning Plains, for example, what good would it have done, with the Varden still so far from Urû'baen?

There was silence for a minute.

Eragon slowly said, "What else have you done for us?"

A few nudges, warnings mostly. Visions of Arya in Gil'ead, when she needed your aid. The healing of your back during the Agaetí Blödhren.

A feeling of disapproval emanated from Glaedr. *You sent them to*

Gil'ead, untrained and without wards, knowing that they would have to face a Shade?

We thought Brom would be with them, but even once he died, we could not stop them, for they still had to go to Gil'ead to find the Varden.

"Wait," said Eragon. "You were responsible for my … transformation?"

In part. We touched the reflection of our race that the elves summon during the celebration. We provided the inspiration, and she-he-it provided the strength for the spell.

Eragon looked down and clenched his hand for a moment, not angry, but so filled with other emotions that he could not remain still. Saphira, Arya, his sword, the very shape of his body—he owed them all to the dragons within the room. "Elrun ono," he said. Thank you.

You are most welcome, Shadeslayer.

"Have you helped Roran as well?"

Your cousin has required no assistance from us. Umaroth paused. *We have watched both of you, Eragon and Saphira, for many years now. We have watched you grow from hatchlings to mighty warriors, and we are proud of all you have accomplished. You, Eragon, have been all we hoped for in a new Rider. And you, Saphira, have proven yourself worthy of being counted among the greatest members of our race*.

Saphira's joy and pride mingled with Eragon's. He sank to one knee, even as she pawed at the floor and dipped her head. Eragon felt like jumping and shouting and otherwise celebrating, but he did none of those things. Instead, he said, "My sword is yours—"

—And my teeth and claws, said Saphira.

"To the end of our days," they concluded in unison. *"What would you have of us, Ebrithilar?"*

Satisfaction came from Umaroth, and he replied, *Now that you have found us, our days of hiding are over; we would go with you to Urû'baen and fight alongside you to kill Galbatorix. The time has come for us to leave our den and once and for all confront that traitorous egg-breaker. Without us, he would be able to pry open your minds as easily as did we, for he has many Eldunarí at his command*.

I cannot carry all of you, said Saphira.

You shall not have to, said Umaroth. *Five of us will stay to watch over the eggs, along with Cuaroc. In the event we should fail to defeat Galbatorix, they will tamper no more with the skeins of energy, but will content themselves with waiting until it is again safe for dragons to venture forth in Alagaësia. But you need not worry; we shall not be a burden to you, for we will provide the strength to move our weight*.

"How many of you are there?" asked Eragon, gazing around the room.

One hundred and thirty-six. But do not think we will be able to best the

Eldunarí Galbatorix has enslaved. We are too few, and those who were chosen to be placed within this vault were either too old and too valuable to risk in the fighting or too young and too inexperienced to participate in the battle. That is why I elected to join them; I provide a bridge between the groups, a point of common understanding that otherwise would be lacking. Those who are older are wise and powerful indeed, but their minds wander down strange paths, and it is often hard to convince them to concentrate upon anything outside of their dreams. Those who are younger are more unfortunate: they parted from their bodies before they should have; thus their minds remain limited by the size of their Eldunarí, which can never grow or expand once it leaves the flesh. Let that be a lesson to you, Saphira, not to disgorge your Eldunarí unless you have reached a respectable size or face the direst of emergencies.

"So we are still outmatched," said Eragon grimly.

Yes, Shadeslayer. But now Galbatorix cannot force you to your knees the moment he sees you. We may not be able to best them, but we will be able to hold off his Eldunarí long enough for you and Saphira to do what you must. And have hope; we know many things, many secrets, about war and magic and the workings of the world. We will teach you what we can, and it may be that some piece of our knowledge will allow you to slay the king.

Thereafter, Saphira inquired of the eggs and learned that two hundred and forty-three had been saved. Twenty-six were set to be joined with Riders; the rest were unbonded. Then they fell to discussing the flight to Urû'baen. While Umaroth and Glaedr advised Saphira as to the quickest way to reach the city, the dragon-headed man sheathed his sword, laid down his shield, and, one by one, began to remove the Eldunarí from their alcoves in the wall. He placed each of the gemlike orbs in the silk purse upon which it had been resting, then piled them gently on the floor next to the glowing pit. The girth of the largest Eldunarí was so immense, the metal-bodied dragon was unable to wrap his arms all the way around it.

As Cuaroc worked, and as they talked, Eragon continued to feel a sense of dazed incredulousness. He had hardly dared to dream that there were any other dragons hiding in Alagaësia. Yet here they were, the remnants of a lost age. It was as if the stories of old had come to life, and he and Saphira were caught in the midst of them.

Saphira's emotions were more complicated. Knowing that her race was no longer doomed to extinction had lifted a shadow from her mind—a shadow that had lain there for as long as Eragon could remember—and her thoughts soared with a joy so profound, it seemed to make her eyes and scales sparkle brighter than normal. Still, a curious defensiveness tempered her elation, as though she was self-

conscious before the Eldunarí.

Even through his daze, Eragon was aware of Glaedr's change of mood; he did not seem to have entirely forgotten his sorrow, but he was the happiest Eragon had felt him since Oromis had died. And while Glaedr was not deferential to Umaroth, he treated the other dragon with a level of respect that Eragon had not witnessed from him before, not even when Glaedr had spoken with Queen Islanzadí.

When Cuaroc was nearly done with his task, Eragon walked to the edge of the pit and peered into it. He saw a circular shaft that sank through the stone for over a hundred feet, then opened onto a cave half filled with a sea of glowing stone. The thick yellow liquid bubbled and splattered like a pot of boiling glue, and tails of swirling fumes rose from its heaving surface. He thought he saw a light, like that of a spirit, flit across the face of the burning sea, but it vanished so quickly, he could not be sure.

Come, Eragon, said Umaroth as the dragon-headed man set the last of the Eldunarí who were to travel with them upon the pile. *You must cast a spell now. The words are as follows—*

Eragon frowned as he listened. "What is the … *twist* in the second line? What am I supposed to twist, the air?"

Umaroth's explanation left Eragon even more confused. Umaroth attempted again, but Eragon still could not understand the concept. Other, older Eldunarí joined in the conversation, but their explanations made even less sense, for they came mainly as a torrent of overlapping images, sensations, and strange, esoteric comparisons that left Eragon hopelessly bewildered.

Somewhat to his relief, Saphira and Glaedr seemed similarly puzzled, although Glaedr said, *I think I understand, but it is like trying to catch hold of a frightened fish; whenever I think I have it, it slips out between my teeth.*

At last Umaroth said, *This is a lesson for another time. You know what the spell is supposed to do, if not how. That will have to suffice. Take from us the strength needed and cast it, and then let us be off.*

Nervous, Eragon fixed the words of the spell in his mind to avoid making mistakes, and then he began to speak. As he uttered the lines, he drew upon the reserves of the Eldunarí, and his skin tingled as an enormous rush of energy poured through him, like a river of water both hot and cold.

The air around the uneven pile of Eldunarí rippled and shimmered; then the pile seemed to fold in on itself and it winked out of sight. A gust of wind tousled Eragon's hair, and a soft, dull *thud* echoed throughout the chamber.

Astonished, Eragon watched as Saphira pushed her head forward and swung it through the spot where the Eldunarí had just been. They

had disappeared, completely and utterly, as if they had never existed, and yet he and she could still feel the dragons' minds close at hand.

Once you leave the vault, said Umaroth, *the entrance to this pocket of space will remain at a fixed distance above and behind you at all times, save when you are in a confined area or when a person's body should happen to pass through that space. The entrance is no larger than a pinprick, but it is more deadly than any sword; it would cut right through your flesh were you to touch it.*

Saphira sniffed. *Even your scent has gone.*

"Who discovered how to do this?" Eragon asked, amazed.

A hermit who lived on the northern coast of Alagaësia twelve hundred years ago, Umaroth replied. *It is a valuable trick if you want to hide something in plain sight, but dangerous and difficult to do correctly.* The dragon was silent for a moment thereafter, and Eragon could feel him gathering his thoughts. Then Umaroth said, *There is one more thing you and Saphira need to know. The moment you pass through the great arch behind you—the Gate of Vergathos—you will begin to forget about Cuaroc and the eggs hidden here, and by the time you reach the stone doors at the end of the tunnel, all memory of them will have vanished from your minds. Even we Eldunarí will forget about the eggs. If we succeed in killing Galbatorix, the gate will restore our memories, but until then, we must remain ignorant of them.* Umaroth seemed to rumble. *It is … unpleasant, I know, but we cannot allow Galbatorix to learn of the eggs.*

Eragon disliked the idea, but he could not think of a reasonable alternative.

Thank you for telling us, said Saphira, and Eragon added his thanks to hers.

Then the great metal warrior, Cuaroc, picked up his shield from the floor, drew his sword, and walked over to his ancient throne and sat thereon. After laying his naked blade across his knees and leaning his shield against the side of the throne, he placed his hands flat upon his thighs and grew as still as a statue, save for the dancing sprites of his crimson eyes, which gazed out over the eggs.

Eragon shivered as he turned his back on the throne. There was something haunting about the sight of the lone figure at the far side of the chamber. Knowing that Cuaroc and the other Eldunarí who were staying behind might have to remain there by themselves for another hundred years—or longer—made it difficult for Eragon to leave.

Farewell, he said with his mind.

Farewell, Shadeslayer, five whispers answered. *Farewell, Brightscales. Luck be with you.*

Then Eragon squared his shoulders, and together he and Saphira strode through the Gate of Vergathos and thus departed the Vault of Souls.

RETURN

Eragon frowned as he stepped out of the tunnel into the early-afternoon sunlight that bathed the clearing before the Rock of Kuthian.

He felt as if he had forgotten something important. He tried to remember what, but nothing came to mind, only a sense of emptiness that unsettled him. Had it to do with … no, he could not recall. *Saphira, did you …* he started to say, then trailed off.

What?

Nothing. I just thought … Never mind; it doesn't matter.

Behind them, the doors to the tunnel swung shut with a hollow boom, and the lines of glyphs upon them faded away, and the rough, mossy spire once again appeared to be a solid piece of stone.

Come, said Umaroth, *let us be away. The day grows long, and many leagues lie between here and Urû'baen.*

Eragon glanced around the clearing, still feeling as if he was missing something; then he nodded and climbed into Saphira's saddle.

As he tightened the straps around his legs, the eerie chatter of a shadow bird sounded among the heavy-boughed fir trees to the right. He looked, but the creature was nowhere to be seen. He made a face. He was glad to have visited Vroengard, but he was equally glad to be leaving. The island was an unfriendly place.

Shall we? asked Saphira.

Let's, he said with a sense of relief.

With a sweep of her wings, Saphira jumped into the air and took flight over the grove of apple trees at the other side of the clearing. She rose quickly above the floor of the bowl-shaped valley, circling the ruins of Doru Araeba as she climbed. Once she was high enough to soar over the mountains, she turned east and set off for the mainland and Urû'baen, leaving behind the remains of the Riders' once-glorious stronghold.

The City of Sorrows

The sun was still near its zenith when the Varden arrived at Urû'baen.

Roran heard the cries from the men at the head of his column as they crested a ridge. Curious, he looked up from the heels of the dwarf in front of him, and when he arrived at the top of the ridge, he paused to take in the view, as had each of the warriors before him.

The land sloped gently downward for several miles, flattening out into a broad plain dotted with farms, mills, and grand stone estates that reminded him of the ones near Aroughs. Some five miles away, the plain arrived at the outer walls of Urû'baen.

Unlike those of Dras-Leona, the walls of the capital were long enough to encompass the whole of the city. They were taller, too; even from a distance, Roran could see that they dwarfed those of both Dras-Leona and Aroughs. He guessed that they stood at least three hundred feet tall. Upon the wide battlements, he spotted ballistae and catapults mounted at regular intervals.

The sight worried him. The machines would be difficult to take down—no doubt they were protected from magical attacks—and he knew from experience just how deadly such weapons could be.

Behind the walls was an odd mixture of human-built structures and those he guessed the elves had made. The most prominent of the elven buildings were six tall, graceful towers—made of a malachite-green stone—which were scattered in an arc throughout what he assumed was the oldest part of the city. Two of the towers were missing their roofs, and he thought he saw the stumps of two more partially buried among the jumble of houses below.

What interested him most, however, was not the wall or the buildings, but the fact that much of the city lay shadowed underneath a huge stone shelf, which must have been over half a mile wide and five hundred feet thick at its narrowest. The overhang formed one end of a massive, sloping hill that stretched off to the northeast for several miles. Atop the craggy lip of the shelf stood another wall, like that which surrounded the city, and several thick watchtowers.

At the back of the cavelike recess underneath the shelf was an enormous citadel adorned with a profusion of towers and parapets. The citadel rose high above the rest of the city, high enough that it almost scraped the underside of the shelf. Most intimidating of all was the gate set within the front of the fortress: a great, gaping cavern that looked large enough for Saphira and Thorn to walk through side by

side.

Roran's gut tightened. If the gate was any indication, Shruikan was big enough to wipe out their whole army by himself. *Eragon and Saphira had better hurry up*, he thought. *And the elves too*. From what he had seen, the elves might be able to hold their own against the king's black dragon, but even they would be hard-pressed to kill him.

All that and more Roran took in as he paused on the ridge. Then he tugged on Snowfire's reins. Behind him, the white stallion snorted and followed as Roran resumed his weary march, following the winding road as it descended to the lowlands.

He could have ridden—was supposed to ride, actually, as captain of his battalion—but after his trip to Aroughs and back, he had come to loathe sitting in a saddle.

As he walked, he tried to figure out how best to attack the city. The pocket of stone Urû'baen sat nestled within would prevent assaults from the sides and the rear and would interfere with attacks from above, which was surely why the elves had chosen to settle in that location to begin with.

If we could somehow break off the overhang, we could crush the citadel and most of the city, he thought, but he deemed that unlikely, as the stone was too thick. *Still, we might be able to take the wall at the top of the hill. Then we could drop stones and pour boiling oil onto those below. It wouldn't be easy, though. Uphill fighting, and those walls … Maybe the elves could manage it. Or the Kull. They might enjoy it*.

The Ramr River was several miles north of Urû'baen, too far to be of any help. Saphira could dig a ditch large enough to divert it, but even she would need weeks to complete such a project, and the Varden did not have weeks' worth of food. They had only a few days left. After that, they would have to starve or disband.

Their only option was to attack before the Empire did. Not that Roran believed Galbatorix *would* attack. So far the king had seemed content to allow the Varden to come to him. *Why should he risk his neck? The longer he waits, the weaker we grow*.

Which meant a frontal assault—a brazen fool's charge over open ground toward walls too thick to breach and too tall to climb while archers and war machines shot at them the whole time. Just imagining it made a sweat break out on his brow. They would die in droves. He cursed. *We'll dash ourselves to pieces, and all the while Galbatorix will sit laughing in his throne room.… If we can get close to the walls, the soldiers won't be able to hit us with their foul contraptions, but then we'll be vulnerable to pitch and oil and rocks being dropped on our heads*.

Even if they managed to breach the walls, they would still have the whole of Galbatorix's army to overcome. More important than the

defenses of the city, then, would be the character and quality of the men the Varden would face. Would they fight to their last breath? Could they be frightened? Would they break and flee if pushed hard enough? What manner of oaths and spells bound them?

The Varden's spies had reported that Galbatorix had placed an earl by the name of Lord Barst in command of the troops within Urû'baen. Roran had never heard of Barst before, but the information seemed to dismay Jörmundur, and the men in Roran's battalion had shared enough stories to persuade him of Barst's villainy. Supposedly, Barst had been lord of a rather large estate near Gil'ead, which the invasion of the elves had forced him to abandon. His vassals had lived in mortal fear of him, for Barst had a tendency to resolve disputes and punish criminals in the harshest manner possible, often choosing to simply execute those he believed were in the wrong. Of itself, that was hardly notable; many a lord throughout the Empire had a reputation for brutality. Barst, however, was not only ruthless but strong—impressively strong—and cunning to boot. In everything Roran had heard about Barst, the man's intelligence had been clear. Barst might be a bastard, but he was a smart bastard, and Roran knew it would be a mistake to underestimate him. Galbatorix would not have chosen a weakling or a dullard to command his men.

And then there were Thorn and Murtagh. Galbatorix might not stir from his stronghold, but the red dragon and his Rider were sure to defend the city. *Eragon and Saphira will have to lure them away. Otherwise, we'll never make it over the walls*. Roran frowned. That would be a problem. Murtagh was stronger than Eragon now. Eragon would need the help of the elves to kill him.

Once again, Roran felt bitter anger and resentment welling up inside him. He hated that he was at the mercy of those who could use magic. At least when it came to strength and cunning, a man might make up for a lack of one with a surfeit of the other. But there was no making up for the absence of magic.

Frustrated, he scooped up a pebble from the ground and, as Eragon had taught him, said, "Stenr rïsa." The pebble remained motionless.

The pebble *always* remained motionless.

He snorted and tossed it by the side of the road.

His wife and unborn child were with the Varden, and yet there was nothing he could do to kill either Murtagh or Galbatorix. He clenched his fists and imagined breaking things. Bones, mostly.

Maybe we should flee. It was the first time the thought had occurred to him. He knew there were lands to the east beyond Galbatorix's reach—fertile plains where none but nomads lived. If the other villagers came with him and Katrina, they could start anew, free of the Empire and Galbatorix. The idea made him sick to consider, however.

He would be abandoning Eragon, his men, and the land that he called home. *No. I won't allow our child to be born into a world where Galbatorix still holds sway. Better to die than to live in fear*.

Of course, that still did not solve the problem of how to capture Urû'baen. Always before, there had been a weakness he could exploit. In Carvahall, it had been the Ra'zac's failure to understand that the villagers would fight. When he wrestled the Urgal Yarbog, it had been the creature's horns. In Aroughs, it had been the canals. But here at Urû'baen, he saw no weaknesses, no place where he could turn his opponents' strength against them.

If we had the supplies, I would wait and starve them out. That would be the best way. Anything else is madness. But as he knew, war was a catalog of madness.

Magic is the only way, he finally concluded. *Magic and Saphira. If we can kill Murtagh, then either she or the elves will have to help us past the walls*.

He scowled, a sour taste in his mouth, and quickened his stride. The faster they made camp, the better. His feet were sore from walking, and if he was going to die in a senseless charge, then at least he wanted a hot meal and a good night's sleep beforehand.

The Varden set up their tents a mile from Urû'baen, by a small stream that fed the Ramr River. Then the men, dwarves, and Urgals began constructing defenses, a process that would continue until night and then resume in the morning. In fact, as long as they stayed in one location, they would continue to work on reinforcing their perimeter. The warriors detested the labor, but it kept them busy and, moreover, it might save their lives.

Everyone thought the orders came from the shadow-Eragon. Roran knew they actually came from Jörmundur. He had come to respect the older warrior since Nasuada's abduction and Eragon's departure. Jörmundur had been fighting the Empire nearly his whole life, and he had a deep understanding of tactics and logistics. He and Roran got along well; they were both men of steel, not magic.

And then there was King Orrin, with whom—after the initial defenses had been established—Roran found himself arguing. Orrin never failed to irritate him; if anyone was going to get them killed, it was him. Roran knew that offending a king was not the healthiest thing to do, but the fool wanted to send a messenger to the front gates of Urû'baen and issue a formal challenge, the way they had at Dras-Leona and Belatona.

"Do you *want* to provoke Galbatorix?" Roran growled. "If we do that, he might respond!"

"Well, of course," said King Orrin, drawing himself upright. "It's

only proper that we announce our intentions and provide him with the opportunity to parley for peace."

Roran stared; then he turned away in disgust and said to Jörmundur, "Can't you make him see reason?"

The three of them were gathered in Orrin's pavilion, where the king had summoned them.

"Your Majesty," said Jörmundur, "Roran is right. It would be best to wait to contact the Empire."

"But they can see us," protested Orrin. "We're camped right outside their walls. It would be … *rude* not to send an envoy to state our position. You are both commoners; I would not expect you to understand. Royalty demands certain courtesies, even if we are at war."

An urge to strike the king swept through Roran. "Are you so puffed up as to believe Galbatorix considers you an equal? Bah! We're insects to him. He cares nothing for your courtesy. You forget, Galbatorix was a commoner like us before he overthrew the Riders. His ways are not your ways. There is no one like him in the world, and you think to predict him? You think to placate him? Bah!"

Orrin's face colored, and he threw aside his goblet of wine, dashing it against the rug upon the ground. "You go too far, Stronghammer. No man has the right to insult me like that."

"I have the right to do whatever I want," growled Roran. "I'm not one of your subjects. I don't answer to you. I'm a free man, and I'll insult anyone I choose, whenever I choose, however I choose—even you. It would be a mistake to send that messenger, and I—"

There was a screech of sliding steel as King Orrin tore his sword from its scabbard. He did not catch Roran entirely unawares; Roran already had his hand on his hammer, and as he heard the sound, he yanked the weapon from his belt.

The king's blade was a silver blur in the dim light of the tent. Roran saw where Orrin was going to strike and stepped out of the way. Then he rapped the flat of the king's sword, causing it to flex and ring and leap out of Orrin's hand.

The jeweled weapon fell onto the rug, the blade quivering.

"Sire," cried one of the guards outside. "Are you all right?"

"I just dropped my shield," replied Jörmundur. "There's no need for concern."

"Sir, yes sir."

Roran stared at the king; there was a wild, hunted look on Orrin's face. Without taking his eyes off him, Roran returned his hammer to his belt. "Contacting Galbatorix is stupid and dangerous. If you try, I'll kill whomever you send before he reaches the city."

"You wouldn't dare!" said Orrin.

"I would, and I will. I won't let you endanger the rest of us just to satisfy your royal … *pride*. If Galbatorix wants to talk, then he knows where to find us. Otherwise, *let him be*."

Roran stormed out of the pavilion. Outside, he stood with his hands on his hips and gazed at the puffy clouds while he waited for his pulse to subside. Orrin was like a yearling mule: stubborn, overconfident, and all too willing to kick you in the gut if you gave him the opportunity.

And he drinks too much, thought Roran.

He paced in front of the pavilion until Jörmundur emerged. Before the other man could speak, Roran said, "I'm sorry."

"As well you should be." Jörmundur drew a hand over his face, then removed a clay pipe from the purse on his belt and began to fill it with cardus weed, which he tamped down with the ball of his thumb. "It took me this whole time to convince him not to send an envoy just to spite you." He paused for a moment. "Would you really kill one of Orrin's men?"

"I don't make idle threats," said Roran.

"No, I didn't think so.… Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that." Jörmundur started down the path between the tents, and Roran followed. As they walked, men moved out of their way and respectfully dipped their heads. Gesturing with his unlit pipe, Jörmundur said, "I admit, I've wanted to give Orrin a good tongue-lashing on more than one occasion." His lips stretched in a thin smile. "Unfortunately, discretion has always gotten the better of me."

"Has he always been so … intractable?"

"Hmm? No, no. In Surda, he was far more reasonable."

"What happened, then?"

"Fear, I think. It does strange things to men."

"Aye."

"It may offend you to hear this, but you acted rather stupidly yourself."

"I know. My temper got the better of me."

"And you've earned yourself a king as a foe."

"You mean *another* king."

Jörmundur uttered a low laugh. "Yes, well, I suppose when you have Galbatorix as a personal enemy, all others seem rather harmless. Nevertheless …" He stopped by a campfire and pulled a thin burning branch from the midst of the flames. Tipping the end of the branch into the bowl of his pipe, he puffed several times, setting the flame, then threw the branch back into the fire. "Nevertheless, I wouldn't ignore Orrin's anger. He was willing to kill you back there. If he holds a grudge, and I think he will, he may seek his revenge. I'll post a guard by your tent for the next few days. After that, though …"

Jörmundur shrugged.

"After that, we may all be dead or enslaved."

They walked in silence for a few more minutes, Jörmundur puffing on his pipe the whole while. As they were about to part, Roran said, "When you see Orrin next …"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps you can let him know that if he or his men hurt Katrina, I'll rip out his guts in front of the whole camp."

Jörmundur tucked his chin against his breast and stood thinking for a moment, then he looked up and nodded. "I think I might find a way to do that, Stronghammer."

"My thanks."

"You're most welcome. As always, this was a unique pleasure."

"Sir."

Roran sought out Katrina and convinced her to bring their dinner to the northern embankment, where he kept vigil for any messengers Orrin might send. They ate on a cloth that Katrina spread over the freshly turned soil, then sat together as the shadows grew long and the stars began to appear in the purple sky above the overhang.

"I'm glad to be here," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"Are you? Really?"

"It's beautiful, and I have you all to myself." She squeezed his arm.

He drew her closer, but the shadow in his heart remained. He could not forget the danger that threatened her and their child. The knowledge that their greatest foe was but a few miles distant burned within him; he wanted nothing more than to leap up, run to Urû'baen, and kill Galbatorix.

But that was impossible, so he smiled and laughed and hid his fear, even as he knew she hid hers.

Blast it, Eragon, he thought, *you'd better hurry, or I swear I'll haunt you from the grave*.

War Council

On the flight from Vroengard to Urû'baen, Saphira did not have to battle her way through a storm and was fortunate enough to have a tailwind to speed her progress, for the Eldunarí told her where to find the fast-moving stream of air, which they said blew nearly every day of the year. Also, the Eldunarí fed her a constant supply of energy, so she never flagged or grew tired.

As a result, the city first came into sight on the horizon a mere two days after they departed the island.

Twice during the trip, when the sun was at its brightest, Eragon thought he glimpsed the entrance to the pocket of space where the Eldunarí floated hidden behind Saphira. It appeared as a single dark point, so small that he could not keep his eyes fixed upon it for more than a second. At first he assumed it was a mote of dust, but then he noticed that the point never varied in its distance from Saphira, and when he saw it, it was always in the same place.

As they flew, the dragons had, through Umaroth, poured memory after memory into Eragon and Saphira: a cascade of experiences—battles won and battles lost, loves, hates, spells, events witnessed throughout the land, regrets, realizations, and ponderings concerning the workings of the world. The dragons possessed thousands of years of knowledge, and they seemed driven to share every last bit.

It's too much! Eragon had protested. *We can't remember it all, much less understand it.*

No, said Umaroth. *But you can remember some, and it may be that some will be what you need to defeat Galbatorix. Now, let us continue*.

The torrent of information was overwhelming; at times Eragon felt as if he was forgetting who he was, for the dragons' memories far outnumbered his own. When that happened, he would separate his mind from theirs and repeat his true name to himself until he again felt secure in his identity.

The things he and Saphira learned amazed and troubled him and oftentimes caused him to question his own beliefs. But he never had time to dwell on such thoughts, for there was always another memory to take their place. It would, he knew, take him years to begin to make sense of what the dragons were showing them.

The more he learned about the dragons, the more he regarded them with awe. Those who had lived for hundreds of years were strange in their ways of thinking, and the oldest were as different from Glaedr

and Saphira as Glaedr and Saphira were from the Fanghur in the Beor Mountains. Interacting with these elders was confusing and unsettling; they made jumps, associations, and comparisons that seemed meaningless but that Eragon knew made sense at some deep level. He was rarely able to figure out what they were trying to say, and the ancient dragons did not deign to explain themselves in terms that he could understand.

After a while, he realized that they *couldn't* express themselves in any other way. Over the centuries, their minds had changed; what was simple and straightforward for him often seemed complicated for them, and the same was true in reverse. Listening to their thoughts, he felt, must be like listening to the thoughts of a god.

When he made that particular observation, Saphira snorted and said to him, *There is a difference.*

What?

Unlike gods, we take part in the events of the world.

Perhaps the gods choose to act without being seen.

Then what good are they?

You believe that dragons are better than gods? he asked, amused.

When we are fully grown, yes. What creature is greater than us? Even Galbatorix depends upon us for his strength.

What of the Nïdhwal?

She sniffed. *We can swim, but they cannot fly.*

The very oldest of the Eldunarí, a dragon by the name of Valdr—which meant "ruler" in the ancient language—spoke to them directly only once. From him, they received a vision of beams of light turning into waves of sand, as well as a disconcerting sense that everything that seemed solid was mostly empty space. Then Valdr showed them a nest of sleeping starlings, and Eragon could feel their dreams flickering in their minds, fast as the blink of an eye. At first Valdr's emotion was one of contempt—the starlings' dreams seemed tiny, petty, and inconsequential—but then his mood changed and became warm and sympathetic, and even the smallest of the starlings' concerns grew in importance until it seemed equal to the worries of kings.

Valdr lingered over the vision, as if to make sure that Eragon and Saphira would remember it amid all the other memories. Yet neither of them was certain what the dragon was trying to say, and Valdr refused to explain himself further.

When at last Urû'baen came into view, the Eldunarí ceased sharing their memories with Eragon and Saphira, and Umaroth said, *Now you would be best served by studying the lair of our foe.*

This they did as Saphira descended toward the ground over the

course of many leagues. What they saw did not encourage either of them, nor did their moods improve when Glaedr said, *Galbatorix has built much since he drove us from this place. The walls were not so thick nor so tall in our day*.

To which Umaroth added: *Nor was Ilirea this heavily fortified during the war between our kind and the elves. The traitor has burrowed deep and piled a mountain of stone about his hole. He will not come out of his own accord, I think. He is like a badger who has retreated into his den and who will bloody the nose of anyone who tries to dig him out*.

A mile southwest from the walled shelf and the city beneath lay the Varden's camp. It was significantly larger than Eragon remembered, which puzzled him until he realized that Queen Islanzadí and her army must have finally joined forces with the Varden. He gave a small sigh of relief. Even Galbatorix was wary of the might of the elves.

When he and Saphira were a league or so from the tents, the Eldunarí helped Eragon extend the range of his thoughts until he was able to feel the minds of the men, dwarves, elves, and Urgals gathered within the camp. His touch was too light for anyone to notice unless they were deliberately watching for it, and the moment he located the distinctive strain of wild music that marked Blödhgarm's thoughts, he narrowed his focus to the elf alone.

Blödhgarm, he said. *It is I, Eragon*. The more formal phrasing seemed natural to him after so long spent reliving experiences from ages past.

Shadeslayer! Are you safe? Your mind feels most strange. Is Saphira with you? Is she hurt? Has something happened to Glaedr?

They are both well, as am I.

Then—Blödhgarm's confusion was evident.

Cutting him off, Eragon said, *We're not far, but I've hidden us from sight for the time being. Is the illusion of Saphira and me still visible to those below?*

Yes, Shadeslayer. We have Saphira circling the tents a mile above. Sometimes we hide her in a bank of clouds, or we make it seem as if you and she have gone off on patrol, but we dare not let Galbatorix think you've left for long. We will make your images fly away now, so that you may rejoin us without arousing suspicion.

No. Rather, wait and maintain your spells for a while longer.

Shadeslayer?

We are not returning directly to the camp. Eragon glanced at the ground. *There is a small hill perhaps two miles to the southeast. Do you know it?*

Yes, I can see it.

Saphira will land behind it. Have Arya, Orik, Jörmundur, Roran, Queen Islanzadí, and King Orrin join us there, but make sure they do not leave the camp all at once. If you could help hide them, that would be best. You

should come as well.

As you wish.… Shadeslayer, what did you find on—

No! Do not ask me. It would be dangerous to think of it here. Come and I will tell you, but I do not want to blare the answer where others might be listening.

I understand. We will meet with you as quickly as we can, but it may take some time to stagger our departures correctly.

Of course. I trust you'll do what's best.

Eragon severed their connection and leaned back in the saddle. He smiled slightly as he imagined Blödhgarm's expression when he learned of the Eldunarí.

With a whirl of wind, Saphira landed in the hollow by the base of the hill, startling a flock of nearby sheep, who scurried away while uttering plaintive bleats.

As she folded her wings, Saphira looked after the sheep and said, *It would be easy to catch them, since they cannot see me.* She licked her chops.

"Yes, but where would the sport be in that?" Eragon asked, loosening the straps around his legs.

Sport does not fill your belly.

"No, but then you aren't hungry, are you?" The energy from the Eldunarí, though insubstantial, had suppressed her desire to eat.

She released a great amount of air in what seemed to be a sigh. *No, not really.…*

While they waited, Eragon stretched his sore limbs, then ate a light lunch from what remained of his provisions. He knew that Saphira was sprawled her full, sinuous length on the ground next to him, though he could not see her. Her presence was betrayed only by the shadowed impression her body left upon the flattened stalks of grass, like a strangely shaped hollow. He was not sure why, but the sight amused him.

As he ate, he gazed out at the pleasant fields around the hill, watching the stir of air in the stalks of wheat and barley. Long, low walls of piled stone separated the fields; it must have taken the local farmers hundreds of years to dig so many stones out of the ground.

At least that wasn't a problem we had in Palancar Valley, he thought.

A moment later, one of the dragons' memories returned to him, and he knew exactly how old the stone walls were; they dated to the time when humans had come to live in the ruins of Ilirea, after the elves had defeated King Palancar's warriors. He could see, as if he had been there, lines of men, women, and children combing over freshly tilled fields and carrying the rocks they found over to where the walls would be.

After a time, Eragon allowed the memory to fade away, and then he

opened his mind to the ebb and flow of energy around them. He listened to the thoughts of the mice in the grass and the worms in the earth and the birds that fluttered past overhead. It was a slightly risky thing to do, for he could end up alerting any nearby enemy spellcasters to their presence, but he preferred to know who and what was close, so that no one could attack them by surprise.

Thus he sensed the approach of Arya, Blödhgarm, and Queen Islanzadí, and he was not alarmed when the shadows of their footsteps moved toward him from around the western side of the hill.

The air rippled like water, and then the three elves appeared before him. Queen Islanzadí stood in the lead, as regal as ever. She was garbed in a golden corselet of scale armor, with a jeweled helm upon her head and her red, white-trimmed cape clasped about her shoulders. A long, slim sword hung from her narrow waist. She carried a tall, white-bladed spear in one hand and a shield shaped like a birch leaf—its edges were even serrated like a leaf—in the other.

Arya, too, was clad in fine armor. She had exchanged her usual dark clothes for a corselet like her mother's—although Arya's was the gray of bare steel, not gold—and she wore a helm decorated with embossed knotwork upon the brow and nosepiece and a pair of stylized eagle wings that swept back from her temples. Compared with the splendor of Islanzadí's raiment, Arya's was somber, but all the more deadly because of it. Together, mother and daughter were like a pair of matched blades, where one was adorned for display and one fitted for combat.

Like the two women, Blödhgarm wore a shirt of scale armor, but his head was bare, and he carried no weapon besides a small knife on his belt.

"Show yourself, Eragon Shadeslayer," said Islanzadí, looking toward the spot where he stood.

Eragon released the spell that concealed him and Saphira, then bowed to the elf queen.

She ran her dark eyes over him, studying him as if he were a prize draft horse. Unlike before, he had no difficulty holding her gaze. After a few seconds, the queen said, "You have improved, Shadeslayer."

He gave a second, shorter bow. "Thank you, Your Majesty." As always, the sound of her voice sent a thrill through him. It seemed to hum with magic and music, as if every word were part of an epic poem. "Such a compliment means much from one so wise and fair as you."

Islanzadí laughed, showing her long teeth, and the hill and the fields rang with her mirth. "And you have grown eloquent as well! You did not tell me he had become so well spoken, Arya!"

A faint smile touched Arya's face. "He is still learning." Then to

Eragon, she said, “It is good to see you safely returned.”

The elves plied him, Saphira, and Glaedr with numerous questions, but the three of them refused to provide answers until the others had arrived. Still, Eragon thought that the elves sensed something of the Eldunarí, for he noticed that they sometimes glanced in the direction of the hearts of hearts, although they seemed not to realize it.

Orik was the next to join them. He rode from the south on a shaggy pony that was lathered and panting. “Ho, Eragon! Ho, Saphira!” the dwarf king cried, raising a fist. He slid down from his exhausted mount, stomped over, and pulled Eragon into a rough embrace, pounding him on the back.

When they had finished greeting each other—and Orik had given Saphira a rub on her nose, which made her hum—Eragon asked, “Where are your guards?”

Orik gestured over his shoulder. “Braiding their beards by a farmhouse a mile west of here, and none too happy about it, I dare say. I’d trust every last one of them—they’re clanmates of mine—but Blödhgarm said I should best come alone, so alone I’ve come. Now tell me, why this secrecy? What did you discover on Vroengard?”

“You’ll have to wait for the rest of our council to find out,” said Eragon. “But I am glad to see you again.” And he clapped Orik on the shoulder.

Roran arrived on foot soon afterward, looking grim and dusty. He gripped Eragon’s arm and welcomed him, then pulled him aside and said, “Can you stop them from hearing us?” He motioned with his chin toward Orik and the elves.

It took Eragon only a few seconds to cast a spell that shielded them from listeners. “Done.” At the same time, he separated his mind from Glaedr and the other Eldunarí, although not from Saphira.

Roran nodded and looked off over the fields. “I had some words with King Orrin while you were gone.”

“Words? How so?”

“He was being a fool, and I told him so.”

“I take it he didn’t react very kindly.”

“You could say that. He tried to stab me.”

“He *what*?!”

“I managed to knock his sword out of his hand before he could land a blow, but if he had had his way, he would have killed me.”

“Orrin?” Eragon had trouble imagining the king doing any such thing. “Did you hurt him badly?”

For the first time, Roran smiled: a brief expression that quickly vanished under his beard. “I scared him, which might be worse.”

Eragon grunted and clenched the pommel of Brisingr. He realized that he and Roran were mirroring each other’s posture; they both had

their hands on their weapons, and they both stood with their weight on the opposite leg. “Who else knows of this?”

“Jörmundur—he was there—and whomever Orrin has told.”

Frowning, Eragon began to pace back and forth as he tried to decide what to do. “The timing of this couldn’t be worse.”

“I know. I wouldn’t have been so blunt with Orrin, but he was about to send ‘royal greetings’ to Galbatorix and other such nonsense. He would have put us all in danger. I couldn’t allow that to happen. You would have done the same.”

“Maybe so, but this just makes things all the more difficult. I’m the leader of the Varden now. An attack on you or any of the other warriors under my command is the same as an attack on me. Orrin knows that, and he knows we’re of the same blood. He might as well have thrown a gauntlet in my face.”

“He was drunk,” said Roran. “I’m not sure he was thinking of that when he drew his sword.”

Eragon saw Arya and Blödhgarm giving him curious glances. He stopped pacing and turned his back to them.

“I’m worried about Katrina,” Roran added. “If Orrin is angry enough, he might send his men after me or her. Either way, she could get hurt. Jörmundur already posted a guard at our tent, but that’s not enough protection.”

Eragon shook his head. “Orrin wouldn’t dare hurt her.”

“No? He can’t harm you, and he doesn’t have the stomach to confront me directly, so what does that leave? An ambush. Knives in the dark. Killing Katrina would be an easy way for Orrin to have his revenge.”

“I doubt that Orrin would resort to knives in the dark—or harming Katrina.”

“You can’t say for sure, though.”

Eragon thought for a moment. “I’ll place some spells on Katrina to keep her safe, and I’ll let Orrin know that I’ve placed them. That should put a stop to any plans he might have.”

The tension in Roran seemed to drain away. “I’d appreciate that.”

“I’ll give you some new wards as well.”

“No, save your strength. I can take care of myself.”

Eragon insisted, but Roran kept refusing. Finally, Eragon said, “Blast it! Listen to me. We’re about to go into battle against Galbatorix’s men. You have to have *some* protection, if only against magic. I’m going to give you wards whether you like it or not, so you might as well smile and thank me for them!”

Roran glowered at him, then he grunted and raised his hands. “Fine, as you wish. You never did know when it was sensible to give up.”

“Oh, and you do?”

A chuckle came from within the depths of Roran's beard. "I suppose not. I guess it runs in the family."

"Mmh. Between Brom and Garrow, I don't know who was the more stubborn."

"Father was," said Roran.

"Eh … Brom was as—No, you're right. It was Garrow."

They exchanged grins, remembering their life on the farm. Then Roran shifted his stance and gave Eragon an odd, sideways look. "You seem different than before."

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do. You seem more sure of yourself."

"Perhaps it's because I understand myself better than I once did."

To that, Roran had no answer.

Half an hour later, Jörmundur and King Orrin rode up together. Eragon greeted Orrin as politely as ever, but Orrin responded with a curt reply and avoided his gaze. Even from a distance of several feet, Eragon could smell wine on his breath.

Once they were all assembled before Saphira, Eragon began. First, he had everyone swear oaths of secrecy in the ancient language. Then he explained the concept of an Eldunarí to Orik, Roran, Jörmundur, and Orrin, and he recounted a brief history of the dragons' gemlike hearts with the Riders and Galbatorix.

The elves appeared uneasy with Eragon's willingness to discuss the Eldunarí before the others, but none protested, which pleased him. He had earned that much trust, at least. Orik, Roran, and Jörmundur reacted with surprise, disbelief, and dozens of questions. Roran in particular acquired a sharp gleam in his eye, as if the information had given him a host of new ideas on how to kill Galbatorix.

Throughout, Orrin was surly and remained stridently unconvinced of the existence of the Eldunarí. In the end, the only thing that quelled his doubts was when Eragon removed Glaedr's heart of hearts from the saddlebags and introduced the dragon to the four of them.

The awe they displayed at meeting Glaedr gratified Eragon. Even Orrin seemed impressed, although after exchanging a few words with Glaedr, he turned on Eragon and said, "Did Nasuada know of this?"

"Yes. I told her at Feinster."

As Eragon expected, the admission displeased Orrin. "So once again the two of you chose to ignore me. Without the support of my men and the food of my nation, the Varden would have had no hope of confronting the Empire. I'm the sovereign ruler of one of only four countries in Alagaësia, my army makes up a goodly portion of our forces, and yet neither of you deemed it appropriate to inform me of this!"

Before Eragon could respond, Orik stepped forward. “They did not tell me about it either, Orrin,” the dwarf king rumbled. “And mine people have helped the Varden for longer than yours. You should not take offense. Eragon and Nasuada did what they thought was best for our cause; they meant no disrespect.”

Orrin scowled and looked as if he was going to continue arguing, but Glaedr preempted him by saying, *They did as I asked, King of the Surdans. The Eldunarí are the greatest secret of our race, and we do not share it lightly with others, even kings*.

“Then why have you chosen to do so now?” demanded Orrin. “You could have gone into battle without ever revealing yourself.”

In answer, Eragon recounted the story of their trip to Vroengard, including their encounter with the storm at sea and the sight they had witnessed at the very top of the clouds. Arya and Blödhgarm seemed the most interested in that part of his story, whereas Orik was the most uncomfortable.

“Barzûl, but that sounds a nasty experience,” he said. “It makes me shiver just to think of it. The ground is the proper place for a dwarf, not the sky.”

I agree, said Saphira, which caused Orik to scowl suspiciously and twist the braided ends of his beard.

Resuming his tale, Eragon told of how he, Saphira, and Glaedr had entered the Vault of Souls, though he refrained from divulging that this had required their true names. And when he at last revealed what the vault had contained, there was a moment of shocked silence.

Then Eragon said, “Open your minds.”

A moment later, the sound of whispering voices seemed to fill the air, and Eragon felt the presence of Umaroth and the other hidden dragons surround them.

The elves staggered, and Arya dropped to one knee, pressing a hand to the side of her head as if she had been struck. Orik uttered a cry and looked about, wild-eyed, while Roran, Jörmundur, and Orrin stood dumbfounded.

Queen Islanzadí knelt, adopting a pose much like her daughter’s. In his mind, Eragon heard her speaking to the dragons, greeting many by name and welcoming them as old friends. Blödhgarm did likewise, and for several minutes a flurry of thoughts passed between the dragons and those gathered at the base of the hill.

The mental cacophony was so great, Eragon shielded himself from it and retreated to sit on one of Saphira’s forelegs while he waited for the noise to subside. The elves seemed most affected by the revelation: Blödhgarm stared into the air with an expression of joy and wonder, while Arya continued to kneel. Eragon thought he saw a line of tears on each of her cheeks. Islanzadí beamed with a triumphant radiance,

and for the first time since he had met her, Eragon thought she seemed truly happy.

Orik shook himself then and broke from his reverie. Looking over at Eragon, he said, “By Morgothal’s hammer, this puts a new twist on things! With their help, we might actually be able to kill Galbatorix!”

“You didn’t think we could before?” Eragon asked mildly.

“Of course I did. Only not so much as I do now.”

Roran shook himself, as if waking from a dream. “I didn’t.… I knew that you and the elves would fight as hard as you could, but I didn’t believe you could win.” He met Eragon’s gaze. “Galbatorix has defeated so many Riders, and you’re but one, and not that old. It didn’t seem possible.”

“I know.”

“Now, though …” A wolfish look came into Roran’s eyes. “Now we have a chance.”

“Aye,” said Jörmundur. “And just think: we no longer have to worry so much about Murtagh. He’s no match for you and the dragons combined.”

Eragon drummed his heels against Saphira’s leg and did not answer. He had other ideas on that front. Besides, he did not like to consider having to kill Murtagh.

Then Orrin spoke up. “Umaroth says that you have devised a battle plan. Do you intend to share it with us, *Shadeslayer*?”

“I would like to hear it as well,” said Islanzadí in a kinder tone.

“And I,” said Orik.

Eragon stared at them for a moment, then nodded. To Islanzadí, he said, “Is your army ready to fight?”

“It is. Long we have waited for our vengeance; we need wait no longer.”

“And ours?” Eragon asked, directing his words toward Orrin, Jörmundur, and Orik.

“Mine knurlan are eager for battle,” proclaimed Orik.

Jörmundur glanced at King Orrin. “Our men are tired and hungry, but their will is unbroken.”

“The Urgals too?”

“Them too.”

“Then we attack.”

“When?” demanded Orrin.

“At first light.”

For a moment, no one spoke.

Roran broke the silence. “Easy to say, hard to do. How?”

Eragon explained.

When he finished, there was another silence.

Roran squatted and began to draw in the dirt with the tip of a

finger. “It’s risky.”

“But bold,” said Orik. “Very bold.”

“There are no safe paths anymore,” said Eragon. “If we can catch Galbatorix unprepared, even a bit, it might be enough to tip the scales.”

Jörmundur rubbed his chin. “Why not kill Murtagh first? That’s the part I don’t understand. Why not finish him and Thorn while we have the chance?”

“Because,” Eragon replied, “then Galbatorix would know of *them*.” And he motioned toward where the hidden Eldunarí floated. “We would lose the advantage of surprise.”

“What of the child?” Orrin asked harshly. “What makes you think that she will accommodate you? She hasn’t before.”

“This time she will,” Eragon promised, more confidently than he felt.

The king grunted, unconvinced.

Then Islanzadí said, “Eragon, it is a great and terrible thing you propose. Are you willing to do this? I ask not because I doubt your dedication or your bravery, but because this is something to be undertaken only after much consideration. So I ask you: are you willing to do this, even knowing what the cost may be?”

Eragon did not rise, but he allowed a bit of steel to enter his voice. “I am. It must be done, and we are the ones to whom the task has fallen. Whatever the cost, we cannot turn away now.”

As a sign of her agreement, Saphira opened her jaws a few inches and then snapped them shut, punctuating the end of his sentence.

Islanzadí turned her face toward the sky. “And do you and those you speak for approve of this, Umaroth-elda?”

We do, replied the white dragon.

“Then here we go,” Roran murmured.

The ten of them—including Umaroth—continued to talk for another hour. Orrin required more convincing, and there were numerous details to decide: questions of timing and placement and signaling.

Eragon was relieved when Arya said, “Unless either you or Saphira object, I will accompany you tomorrow.”

“We would be glad to have you,” he said.

Islanzadí stiffened. “What good would that accomplish? Your talents are needed elsewhere, Arya. Blödhgarm and the other spellcasters I assigned to Saphira and Eragon are more skilled at magic than you and more experienced in battle as well. Remember, they fought against the Forsworn, and unlike many, they lived to tell of it. Many of the elder members of our race would volunteer to take your place. It would be selfish to insist upon going when there are others better suited for the task who are willing and close at hand.”

“I think no one is as suited for the task as Arya,” Eragon said in a calm voice. “And there is no one, other than Saphira, I would rather have by my side.”

Islanzadí kept her gaze upon Arya and to Eragon said, “You are still young, Shadeslayer, and you are allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment.”

“No, Mother,” said Arya. “It is you who are allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment.” She moved toward Islanzadí with long, graceful steps. “You are right, there are others who are stronger, wiser, and more experienced than I. But it was I who ferried Saphira’s egg about Alagaësia. I who helped save Eragon from the Shade Durza. And I who, with Eragon’s help, killed the Shade Varaug in Feinster. Like Eragon, I am now a Shadeslayer, and you well know that I swore myself in service to our people long ago. Who else among our kind can claim as much? Even if I wanted to, I would not turn away from this. I would sooner die. I am as prepared for this challenge as any of our elders, for it is to this I have devoted the whole of my life, as has Eragon.”

“And the whole of your life has been so short,” said Islanzadí. She put a hand up to Arya’s face. “You have devoted yourself to fighting Galbatorix all these years since your father’s death, but you know little of the joys life can provide. And in those years, we have spent such a small amount of time together: a handful of days scattered throughout a century. It is only since you brought Saphira and Eragon

to Ellesméra that we have begun to speak once more, as a mother and daughter ought. I would not lose you again so soon, Arya."

"It was not I who chose to remain apart," said Arya.

"No," said Islanzadí, and she took her hand away. "But it was you who chose to leave Du Weldenvarden." Her expression softened. "I do not wish to argue, Arya. I understand that you see this as your duty, but please, for my sake, will you not allow another to take your place?"

Arya lowered her gaze and was silent for a time. Then she said, "I cannot allow Eragon and Saphira to go without me any more than you can allow your army to march into battle without you at its head. I cannot.… Would you have it said of me that I am a coward? Those of our family do not turn away from what must be done; do not ask me to shame myself."

The shine in Islanzadí's eyes looked suspiciously like tears to Eragon. "Yes," said the queen, "but to fight Galbatorix …"

"If you are so afraid," said Arya, but not unkindly, "then come with me."

"I cannot. I must stay to command my troops."

"And I must go with Eragon and Saphira. But I promise you, I shall not die." Arya placed her hand on Islanzadí's face even as her mother had done to her. *"I shall not die."* Once more Arya repeated the phrase, but this time in the ancient language.

Arya's determination impressed Eragon; to say what she had in the ancient language meant that she believed it without qualification. Islanzadí also appeared impressed, and proud too. She smiled and kissed Arya once on each cheek. "Then go, and go with my blessings. And take no more risks than you must."

"Nor you." And the two of them embraced.

As they separated, Islanzadí looked at Eragon and Saphira and said, "Watch over her, I implore you, for she has not a dragon or the Eldunarí to protect her."

We will, both Eragon and Saphira replied, in the ancient language.

Once they had settled what needed to be settled, the war council broke and its various members began to disperse. From where he sat by Saphira, Eragon watched the others mill about. Neither he nor she made an effort to move. Saphira was going to remain hidden behind the hill until the attack, while he intended to wait for dark before he ventured into the camp.

Orik was the second to depart, after Roran. Before he did, the dwarf king came over to Eragon and gave him a rough hug. "Ah, I wish I were going with the two of you," he said, his eyes solemn above his beard.

"And I wish you were coming," said Eragon.

"Well, we'll see each other afterward and toast our victory with barrels of mead, eh?"

"I look forward to it."

As do I, said Saphira.

"Good," said Orik, and he nodded firmly. "That's settled, then. You'd better not let Galbatorix get the better of you, or I'll be honor-bound to march in after you."

"We'll be careful," Eragon said with a smile.

"I should hope so, because I doubt I could do much more than tweak Galbatorix on the nose."

That I would like to see, said Saphira.

Orik grunted. "May the gods watch over you, Eragon, and you as well, Saphira."

"And you, Orik, Thrifk's son." Then Orik slapped Eragon on the shoulder and stomped off to where he had tied his pony to a bush.

When Islanzadí and Blödhgarm left, Arya stayed. She was deep in conversation with Jörmundur, and so Eragon thought little of it. When Jörmundur rode off, however, and Arya still lingered nearby, he realized that she wanted to talk to them alone.

Sure enough, once everyone else had gone, she looked at him and Saphira and said, "Did something else happen to you while you were gone, something that you didn't want to speak of in front of Orrin or Jörmundur … or my mother?"

"Why do you ask?"

She hesitated. "Because … you both seem to have changed. Is it the Eldunarí, or does it have to do with your experience in the storm?"

Eragon smiled at her perception. He consulted with Saphira, and when she approved, he said, "We learned our true names."

Arya's eyes widened. "You did? And … were you pleased with them?"

In part, said Saphira.

"We learned our true names," Eragon repeated. "We saw that the earth is round. And during the flight here, Umaroth and the other Eldunarí shared many of their memories with us." He allowed himself a wry smile. "I can't say we understand all of them, but they make things seem … different."

"I see," murmured Arya. "Do you think the change is for the better?"

"I do. Change itself is neither good nor bad, but knowledge is always useful."

"Was it difficult to find your true names?"

So he told her how they had accomplished it, and he also told her about the strange creatures they had encountered on Vroengard Island, which interested her greatly.

As Eragon spoke, an idea occurred to him, one that resonated within him too strongly to ignore. He explained it to Saphira, and once again she granted him her permission, although somewhat more reluctantly than before.

Must you? she asked.

Yes.

Then do as you will, but only if she agrees.

When they finished speaking of Vroengard, he looked Arya in the eyes and said, "Would you like to hear my true name? I would like to share it with you."

The offer seemed to shock her. "No! You shouldn't tell it to me or anyone else. Especially not when we're so close to Galbatorix. He might steal it from my mind. Besides, you should only give your true name to … to one whom you trust above all others."

"I trust you."

"Eragon, even when we elves exchange our true names, we do not do so until we have known each other for many, many years. The knowledge they provide is too personal, too intimate, to bandy about, and there is no greater risk than sharing it. When you teach someone your true name, you place everything you are in their hands."

"I know, but I may never have the chance again. This is the only thing I have to give, and I would give it to you."

"Eragon, what you are proposing … It is the most precious thing one person can give another."

"I know."

A shiver ran through Arya, and then she seemed to withdraw within herself. After a time, she said, "No one has ever offered me such a gift before.… I'm honored by your trust, Eragon, and I understand how much this means to you, but no, I must decline. It would be wrong for you to do this and wrong for me to accept just because tomorrow we may be killed or enslaved. Danger is no reason to act foolishly, no matter how great our peril."

Eragon inclined his head. Her reasons were good reasons, and he would respect her choice. "Very well, as you wish," he said.

"Thank you, Eragon."

A moment passed. Then he said, "Have you ever told anyone your true name?"

"No."

"Not even your mother?"

Her mouth twisted. "No."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Of course. Why would you think otherwise?"

He half shrugged. "I didn't. I just wasn't sure." Silence came between them. Then, "When … how did you learn your true name?"

Arya was quiet for so long, he began to think that she would refuse to answer. Then she took a breath and said, “It was a number of years after I left Du Weldenvarden, when I finally had become accustomed to my role among the Varden and the dwarves. Faolin and my other companions were away, and I had a great deal of time to myself. I spent most of it exploring Tronjheim, wandering in the empty reaches of the city-mountain, where others rarely tread. Tronjheim is bigger than most realize, and there are many strange things within it: rooms, people, creatures, forgotten artifacts.… As I wandered, I thought, and I came to know myself better than ever I had before. One day I discovered a room somewhere high in Tronjheim—I doubt I could locate it again, even if I tried. A beam of sunlight seemed to pour into the room, though the ceiling was solid, and in the center of the room was a pedestal, and upon the pedestal was growing a single flower. I do not know what kind of flower it was; I have never seen its like before or since. The petals were purple, but the center of the blossom was like a drop of blood. There were thorns upon the stem, and the flower exuded the most wonderful scent and seemed to hum with a music all its own. It was such an amazing and unlikely thing to find, I stayed in the room, staring at the flower for longer than I can remember, and it was then and there that I was finally able to put words to who I was and who I am.”

“I would like to see that flower someday.”

“Perhaps you will.”

Searching for an answer in the memories the Eldunarí had given him, Eragon said, “I thought that elves instinctively knew their true names. That’s what Brom told me.”

“We do,” said Arya, “but not when we are young. As children, we know little of ourselves or the world around us, and as we grow, we are in a state of constant change. Every day we are different from the day before, and like us, our names vary from moment to moment. It is only when we fully mature—physically, at least—that we are able to comprehend our own nature. For me, it was later than some but sooner than many.”

“Ah. I understand.”

Arya glanced toward the Varden’s camp. “I should go. There is much yet to be done.”

He nodded. “We’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow.” Arya began to walk away. After a few steps, she paused and looked back. “I’m glad that Saphira chose you as her Rider, Eragon. And I’m proud to have fought alongside you. You have become more than any of us dared hope. Whatever happens tomorrow, know that.”

Then she resumed her stride, and soon she disappeared around the

curve of the hill, leaving him alone with Saphira and the Eldunarí.

Fire in the Night

When darkness fell, Eragon cast a spell to hide himself. Then he patted Saphira on the nose and set out on foot for the Varden's camp.

Be careful, she said.

Invisible as he was, it was easy to slip past the warriors who kept watch around the periphery of the camp. As long as he was quiet, and as long as the men did not catch sight of his footprints or shadows, he could move about freely.

He wound his way between the woolen tents until he found Roran and Katrina's. He rapped his knuckles against the central pole, and Roran popped his head out.

"Where are you?" whispered Roran. "Hurry in!"

Releasing the flow of magic, Eragon revealed himself. Roran flinched, then grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the dark interior of the tent.

"Welcome, Eragon," said Katrina, rising from where she sat on their tiny cot.

"Katrina."

"It's good to see you again." She gave him a quick embrace.

"Will this take long?" Roran asked.

Eragon shook his head. "It shouldn't." Squatting on his heels, he thought for a moment, then began to chant softly in the ancient language. First, he placed spells around Katrina, to protect her against any who might harm her. He made the spells more extensive than he had originally planned, in an attempt to ensure that she and her unborn child would be able to escape Galbatorix's forces should something happen to both him and Roran. "These wards will shield you from a certain number of attacks," he told her. "I can't tell you how many exactly, because it depends on the strength of the blows or spells. I've given you another defense as well. If you're in danger, say the word *frethya* two times and you'll vanish from sight."

"Frethya," she murmured.

"Exactly. It won't hide you completely, however. The sounds you make can still be heard, and your footprints will still be visible. No matter what happens, don't go into water or your position will be obvious at once. The spell will draw its energy from you, which means that you'll tire faster than usual, and I wouldn't recommend sleeping while it's active. You might not wake up again. To end the spell, simply say *frethya letta*."

“Frethya letta.”

“Good.”

Then Eragon turned his attention to Roran. He spent longer placing the wards around his cousin—for it was likely Roran would confront a greater number of threats—and he endowed the spells with more energy than he thought Roran would have approved of, but Eragon did not care. He could not bear the thought of defeating Galbatorix only to find that Roran had died during the battle.

Afterward, he said, “I did something different this time, something I should have thought of long ago. In addition to the usual wards, I gave you a few that will feed directly off your own strength. As long as you’re alive, they’ll shield you from danger. But”—he lifted a finger—“they’ll only activate once the other wards are exhausted, and if the demands placed upon them are too great, you’ll fall unconscious and then you’ll die.”

“So in trying to save me, they may kill me?” Roran asked.

Eragon nodded. “Don’t let anyone drop another wall on you, and you’ll be fine. It’s a risk, but worth it, I think, if it keeps a horse from trampling you or a javelin from going through you. Also, I gave you the same spell as Katrina. All you have to do is say *frethya* twice and *frethya letta* to turn yourself invisible and visible at will.” He shrugged. “You might find that useful during the battle.”

Roran gave an evil chuckle. “That I will.”

“Just make sure the elves don’t mistake you for one of Galbatorix’s spellcasters.”

As Eragon rose to his feet, Katrina stood as well. She surprised him by grasping one of his hands and pressing it against her chest. “Thank you, Eragon,” she said softly. “You’re a good man.”

He flushed, embarrassed. “It’s nothing.”

“Guard yourself well tomorrow. You mean a great deal to both of us, and I expect you to be around to act the doting uncle for our child. I’ll be most put out if you get yourself killed.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry. Saphira won’t let me do anything foolish.”

“Good.” She kissed him on both cheeks, then released him. “Farewell, Eragon.”

“Farewell, Katrina.”

Roran accompanied him outside. Motioning toward the tent, Roran said, “Thank you.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

They gripped each other by the forearms and hugged; then Roran said, “Luck be with you.”

Eragon took a long, unsteady breath. “Luck be with you.” He tightened his grip on Roran’s forearm, reluctant to let go, for he knew

that they might never meet again. “If Saphira and I don’t come back,” he said, “will you see to it that we’re buried at home? I wouldn’t want our bones to lie here.”

Roran raised his brows. “Saphira would be difficult to lug all the way back.”

“The elves would help, I’m sure.”

“Then yes, I promise. Is there anywhere in particular you would like?”

“The top of the bald hill,” said Eragon, referring to a foothill near their farm. The bare-topped hill had always seemed like an excellent location for a castle, something they had discussed at great length when younger.

Roran nodded. “And if I don’t come back—”

“We’ll do the same for you.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask. If I don’t … you’ll see to Katrina?”

“Of course. You know that.”

“Aye, but I had to be sure.” They gazed at each other for another minute. Finally, Roran said, “We’ll be expecting you for dinner tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there.”

Then Roran slipped back into the tent, leaving Eragon standing alone in the night.

He looked up at the stars and felt a touch of grief, as if he had already lost someone close to him.

After a few moments, he padded away into the shadows, relying upon the darkness to conceal him.

He searched through the camp until he found the tent Horst and Elain shared with their baby girl, Hope. The three of them were still awake, as the infant was crying.

“Eragon!” Horst exclaimed softly when Eragon made his presence known. “Come in! Come in! We haven’t seen much of you since Dras-Leona! How are you?”

Eragon spent the better part of an hour talking with them—he did not tell them of the Eldunarí, but he did tell them of his trip to Vroengard—and when Hope finally fell asleep, he bade them farewell and returned to the night.

He next sought out Jeod, whom he found reading scrolls by candlelight while his wife, Helen, slept. When Eragon knocked and stuck his face into the tent, the scarred, thin-faced man put aside his scrolls and left the tent to join Eragon.

Jeod had many questions, and while Eragon did not answer them all, he answered enough that he thought Jeod would be able to guess much of what was about to happen.

Afterward, Jeod laid a hand on Eragon's shoulder. "I don't envy you the task that lies ahead. Brom would be proud of your courage."

"I hope so."

"I'm sure of it.… If I don't see you again, you should know: I've written a small account of your experiences and of the events that led to them—mainly my adventures with Brom in recovering Saphira's egg." Eragon gave him a look of surprise. "I may not get the opportunity to finish it, but I thought it would make a useful addition to Heslant's work in *Domia abr Wyrda*."

Eragon laughed. "I think that would be most fitting. However, if you and I are both alive and free after tomorrow, there are some things I should tell you which will make your account that much more complete and that much more interesting."

"I'll hold you to it."

Eragon wandered through the camp for another hour or so, pausing by the fires where men, dwarves, and Urgals still sat awake. He spoke briefly with each of the warriors he met, inquired whether they were being fairly treated, commiserated about their sore feet and short rations, and sometimes exchanged a quip or two. He hoped that by showing himself among them, he could lift the warriors' spirits and strengthen their resolve, and thus spread a sense of optimism throughout the army. The Urgals, he found, were in the best mood; they seemed delighted about the upcoming battle and the opportunities for glory that it would provide.

He had another purpose as well: to spread false information. Whenever someone asked him about attacking Urû'baen, he hinted that he and Saphira would be among the battalion to besiege the northwestern section of the city wall. He hoped that Galbatorix's spies would repeat the lie to the king as soon as the alarms woke Galbatorix the following morn.

As he looked into the faces of those listening to him, Eragon could not help but wonder which, if any, were Galbatorix's servants. The thought made him uncomfortable, and he found himself listening for footsteps behind him when he moved from one fire to the next.

At last, when he was satisfied that he had spoken to enough warriors to ensure that the information would reach Galbatorix, he left the fires behind and made his way to a tent that was set slightly away from the others by the southern edge of the camp.

He knocked on the center pole: once, twice, three times. There was no response, so he knocked again, this time louder and longer.

A moment later, he heard a sleepy groan and the rustle of shifting blankets. He waited patiently until a small hand pulled aside the entrance flap and the witch-child, Elva, emerged. She wore a dark robe much too large for her, and by the faint light of a torch some

yards away, he could see a frown upon her sharp little face.

"What do you want, Eragon?" she demanded.

"Can't you tell?"

Her frown deepened. "No, I can't, only that you want something badly enough to wake me in the middle of the night, which even an idiot could see. What is it? I get little enough rest as is, so this had best be important."

"It is."

He spoke without interruption for several minutes, describing his plan, then said, "Without you, it won't work. You're the point upon which it all turns."

She gave an ugly laugh. "Such irony, the mighty warrior relying upon a child to kill the one he cannot."

"Will you help?"

The girl looked down and scuffed her bare foot against the ground.

"If you do, all this"—he motioned toward the camp and the city beyond—"may end far sooner, and then you will not have to endure quite so much—"

"I'll help." She stamped her foot and glared at him. "You don't have to bribe me. I was going to help anyway. I'm not about to let Galbatorix destroy the Varden just because I don't like you. You're not *that* important, Eragon. Besides, I made a promise to Nasuada, and I intend to keep it." She cocked her head. "There's something you're not telling me. Something you're afraid Galbatorix will find out before we attack. Something about—"

The sound of clanking chains interrupted her.

For a moment, Eragon was confused. Then he realized the sound was coming from the city.

He put his hand on his sword. "Ready yourself," he said to Elva. "We may have to leave at once."

Without argument, the girl turned around and disappeared inside the tent.

Reaching out with his mind, Eragon contacted Saphira. *Do you hear it?*

Yes.

If we have to, we'll meet you by the road.

The clanking continued for a short while, then there was a hollow boom, followed by silence.

Eragon listened as intently as he could but heard nothing more. He was just about to cast a spell to increase the sensitivity of his ears when there was a dull *thud*, accompanied by a series of sharp clacks.

Then another …

And another …

A shiver of horror ran down Eragon's spine. The sound was

unmistakably that of a dragon walking on stone. But what a dragon, to hear its steps from over a mile away!

Shruikan, he thought, and his gut clenched with dread.

Throughout the camp, alarm horns blared, and men, dwarves, and Urgals lit torches as the army scrambled to wakefulness.

Eragon spared Elva a sideways glance as she hurried out of the tent, followed by Greta, the old woman who was her caretaker. The girl had donned a short red tunic, over which she wore a mail hauberk just her size.

The footsteps in Urû'baen ceased. The dragon's shadowy bulk blotted out most of the lanterns and watchlights in the city. *How big is he?* Eragon wondered, dismayed. Bigger than Glaedr, that was certain. As big as Belgabad? Eragon could not tell. Not yet.

Then the dragon leaped up and out from the city, and he unfurled his massive wings, and their opening was like a hundred black sails filling with wind. When he flapped, the air shook as if from a clap of thunder, and throughout the countryside, dogs bayed and roosters crowed.

Without thinking, Eragon crouched, feeling like a mouse hiding from an eagle.

Elva tugged on the hem of his tunic. "We should go," she insisted.

"Wait," he whispered. "Not yet."

Great swaths of stars vanished as Shruikan wheeled across the sky, climbing higher and higher. Eragon tried to guess the dragon's size from the outline of his shape, but the night was too dark and the distance too hard to determine. Whatever Shruikan's exact proportions, he was frighteningly large. At only a century of age, he ought to have been smaller than he was, but Galbatorix seemed to have accelerated his growth, even as he had Thorn's.

As he watched the shadow drifting above, Eragon hoped with all his might that Galbatorix was not with the dragon, or if he was, that he would not bother to examine the minds of those below. If he did, he would discover—

"Eldunarí," gasped Elva. "That's what you're hiding!" Behind her, the girl's caretaker frowned with puzzlement and started to ask a question.

"Quiet!" growled Eragon. Elva opened her mouth, and he clamped his hand over it, silencing her. "Not here, not now," he warned. She nodded, and he removed his hand.

At that very moment, a bar of fire as wide as the Anora River arced across the sky. Shruikan whipped his head back and forth, spraying the torrent of blinding flames above the camp and the surrounding fields, and the night filled with a sound like a crashing waterfall. Heat stung Eragon's upturned face. Then the flames evaporated, like mist in

the sun, leaving behind a throbbing afterimage and a smoky, sulfurous smell.

The huge dragon turned and flapped once more—shaking the air—before his formless black shape glided back down toward the city and settled among the buildings. Footsteps followed, then the clanking of the chains, and finally the echoing crack of a gate slamming shut.

Eragon released the breath he had been holding and swallowed, though his throat was dry. His heart was pounding so hard, it was painful. *We have to fight … that?* he thought, all his old fears rushing back.

"Why didn't he attack?" asked Elva in a small, fearful voice.

"He wanted to frighten us." Eragon frowned. "Or distract us." He searched through the minds of the Varden until he found Jörmundur, then gave the warrior instructions to check that all the sentries were still at their posts and to redouble the watch for the remainder of the night. To Elva, he said, "Were you able to feel anything from Shruikan?"

The girl shuddered. "Pain. Great pain. And anger too. If he could, he would kill every creature he met and burn every plant, until there were none left. He's utterly mad."

"Is there no way to reach him?"

"None. The kindest thing to do would be to release him from his misery."

The knowledge made Eragon sad. He had always hoped that they might be able to save Shruikan from Galbatorix. Subdued, he said, "We had best be off. Are you ready?"

Elva explained to her caretaker that she was leaving, which displeased the old woman, but Elva soothed her worries with a few quick words. The girl's power to see into others' hearts never ceased to amaze Eragon, and trouble him as well.

Once Greta had granted her consent, Eragon hid both Elva and himself with magic, and then they set off together toward the hill where Saphira was waiting.

OVER THE WALL AND INTO THE MAW

"Must you do that?" asked Elva.

Eragon paused in the midst of checking the leg straps on Saphira's saddle and looked over to where the girl sat cross-legged on the grass, toying with the links of her mail shirt.

"What?" he asked.

She tapped her lip with a small, pointed fingernail. "You keep chewing on the inside of your mouth. It's distracting." After a moment's consideration, she said, "And disgusting."

With some surprise, he realized that he had bitten the inner surface of his right cheek until it was covered with several bloody sores. "Sorry," he said, and healed himself with a quick spell.

He had spent the deepest part of the night meditating—thinking not of what was to come nor of what had been, but only of what was: the touch of the cool air against his skin, the feel of the ground beneath him, the steady flow of his breath, and the slow beat of his heart as it marked off the remaining moments of his life.

Now, however, the morning star, Aiedail, had risen in the east—heralding the arrival of dawn's first light—and the time had come to ready themselves for battle. He had inspected every inch of his equipment, adjusted the harness of the saddle until it was perfectly comfortable for Saphira, emptied the saddlebags of everything but the chest that contained Glaedr's Eldunarí and a blanket for padding, and buckled and rebuckled his sword belt at least five times.

He finished examining the straps on the saddle, then jumped off Saphira. "Stand up," he said. Elva gave him a look of annoyance but did as he asked, brushing grass from the side of her tunic. Moving quickly, he ran his hands over her thin shoulders and tugged on the edge of her mail hauberk to ensure that it was sitting properly. "Who made this for you?"

"A pair of charming dwarf brothers called Ûmar and Ulmar." Her cheeks dimpled as she smiled at him. "They didn't think I needed it, but I was *very* persuasive."

I'm sure she was, Saphira said to Eragon. He suppressed a smile. The girl had spent a goodly portion of the night talking with the dragons, beguiling them as only she could. However, Eragon could tell that they also feared her—even the older ones, such as Valdr—for they had no defense against Elva's power. No one did.

"And did Ûmar and Ulmar give you a blade to fight with?" he

asked.

Elva frowned. “Why would I want that?”

He stared at her for a moment, then he fetched his old hunting knife, which he used when eating, and had her tie it around her waist with a leather thong. “Just in case,” he said when she protested. “Now, up you go.”

She obediently climbed onto his back and locked her arms around his neck. He had carried her to the hill in that manner, which had been uncomfortable for them both, but she could not keep pace with him on foot.

He carefully climbed up Saphira’s side to the peak of her shoulders. As he clung to one of the spikes that protruded from her neck, he twisted his body so that Elva was able to pull herself into the saddle.

Once he felt the girl’s weight leave him, Eragon dropped back to the ground. He tossed his shield up to her, then lunged forward, arms outstretched, when it nearly pulled her off Saphira.

“Have you got it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, tugging the shield onto her lap. She made a shooing motion with one hand. “Go, go.”

Holding Brisingr’s pommel to keep the sword from tangling between his legs, Eragon ran to the top of the hill and knelt on one knee, staying as low as he could. Behind him, Saphira crawled partway up the rise, then pressed herself flat against the ground and snaked her head through the grass until it was next to him and she could see what he saw.

A thick column of humans, dwarves, elves, Urgals, and werecats streamed out of the Varden’s camp. In the flat gray light of early dawn, the figures were difficult to make out, especially because they carried no lights. The column marched across the sloping fields toward Urû’baen, and when the warriors were about half a mile from the city, they divided into three lines. One positioned itself before the front gate, one turned toward the southeastern part of the curtain wall, and one went toward the northwestern part.

It was the last group that Eragon had hinted he and Saphira were going to accompany.

The warriors had wrapped rags around their feet and weapons, and they kept their voices to a whisper. Still, Eragon could hear the occasional bray of a donkey or the whinny of a horse, and a number of dogs were barking at the procession. The soldiers on the walls would soon notice the activity—most likely when the warriors began to move the catapults, ballistae, and siege towers that the Varden had already assembled and placed in the fields before the city.

Eragon was impressed that the men, dwarves, and Urgals were still willing to go into battle after seeing Shruikan. *They must have a great*

deal of faith in us, he said to Saphira. The responsibility weighed heavily upon him, and he was keenly aware that if he and those with him failed, few of the warriors would survive.

Yes, but if Shruikan flies out again, they will scatter like so many frightened mice.

Then we'd best not let that happen.

A horn sounded in Urû'baen, and then another and another, and lights began to appear throughout the city as lanterns were unshuttered and torches lit.

"Here we go," Eragon murmured, his pulse quickening.

Now that the alarm had been raised, the Varden abandoned all attempts at secrecy. To the east, a group of elves on horseback set off at a gallop toward the hill that backed the city, planning to ride up the side of it and attack the wall along the top of the immense shelf that hung over Urû'baen.

In the center of the Varden's mostly empty camp, Eragon saw what appeared to be Saphira's glittering shape. On the illusion sat a lone figure—which he knew bore a perfect copy of his own features—holding a sword and shield.

The duplicate of Saphira raised her head and spread her wings; then she took flight and loosed a stirring roar.

They do a good job of it, don't they? he said to Saphira.

Elves understand how a dragon is supposed to look and behave … unlike some humans.

The shadow-Saphira landed next to the northernmost group of warriors, although Eragon noticed the elves were careful to keep her some distance from the men and dwarves, so that they would not brush up against her and discover that she was as insubstantial as a rainbow.

The sky lightened as the Varden and their allies gathered in orderly formations at each of the three locations outside the walls. Inside the city, Galbatorix's soldiers continued to prepare for the assault, but it was obvious as they ran about the battlements that they were panicked and disorganized. However, Eragon knew their confusion would not last long.

Now, he thought. *Now! Don't wait any longer*. He swept his gaze over the buildings, searching for the slightest scrap of red, but none met his eye. *Where are you, blast it?! Show yourself!*

Three more horns sounded, this time the Varden's. A great chorus of shouts and cries rose from the army, and then the Varden's war machines launched their projectiles at the city, archers loosed their arrows, and the ranks of warriors broke and charged toward the seemingly impenetrable curtain wall.

The stones, javelins, and arrows appeared to move slowly as they

arced across the ground that separated the army from the city. None of the missiles hit the outer wall; it would be pointless to try to batter it down, so the engineers aimed above and beyond. Some of the stones shattered as they struck within Urû'baen, sending dagger-like shards in every direction, while others punched through buildings and bounced up the streets like giant marbles.

Eragon thought how horrible it would be to wake amid such confusion, with large chunks of stone raining down. Then activity elsewhere caught his attention as the shadow-Saphira took flight over the running warriors. With three flaps of her wings, she climbed above the wall and bathed the battlements with a tongue of flame that, to Eragon's eye, appeared somewhat brighter than normal. The fire, he knew, was real enough, conjured into being by the elves close to the northern part of the wall, who had created and were sustaining the illusion.

The apparition of Saphira swooped back and forth over the same stretch of wall, clearing it of soldiers. Once she had, a band of twenty-some elves flew from the ground outside the city up to the top of one of the wall towers, so they could continue to keep watch on the apparition as it ranged deeper into Urû'baen.

If Murtagh and Thorn don't show themselves soon, they're going to start wondering why we're not attacking the other parts of the wall, he said to Saphira.

They will think we're defending the warriors trying to breach this section, she replied. *Give it time*.

Elsewhere along the wall, soldiers fired arrows and javelins at the army below, felling dozens of the Varden. The deaths were unavoidable, but Eragon regretted them all the same, for the warriors' attacks were merely a distraction; they had little chance of actually surmounting the city's defenses. Meanwhile, the siege towers trundled closer, and flights of arrows leaped between their upper levels and the men on the battlements.

From above, a ribbon of burning pitch fell across the edge of the overhang and disappeared among the buildings below. Eragon looked up and saw flashes of light atop the wall that guarded the lip of the precipice. Even as he watched, he saw four bodies tumble over the side; they looked like understuffed dolls as they plummeted toward the ground. The sight pleased Eragon, for it meant the elves had taken the upper wall.

The shadow-Saphira looped over the city, lighting several buildings on fire. As she did, a flock of arrows shot up from archers stationed on a nearby rooftop. The apparition swerved to avoid the darts and, seemingly by accident, crashed into one of the six green elf towers scattered throughout Urû'baen.

The collision looked perfectly real. Eragon winced with sympathy as he saw the dragon's left wing break against the tower, the bones snapping like stalks of dry grass. The imitation Saphira roared and thrashed as she spiraled down to the streets. The buildings hid her after that, but her roars were audible for miles around, and the flame she seemed to breathe painted the sides of the houses and lit the underside of the stone shelf that hung over the city.

I would never have been so clumsy, sniffed Saphira.

I know.

A minute passed. The tension within Eragon increased to a nearly unbearable level. "Where are they?" he growled, clenching his fist. With every passing second, it became increasingly likely the soldiers would discover that the dragon they thought they had forced down did not actually exist.

Saphira saw them first. *There*, she said, showing him with her mind.

Like a ruby blade dropped from above, Thorn plunged out of an opening hidden within the overhang. He fell straight down for several hundred feet, then unfolded his wings just enough to slow himself to a safe speed before landing in a square close to where the shadow-Saphira and the shadow-Eragon had fallen.

Eragon thought he spotted Murtagh on the red dragon, but the distance was too great to be sure. They would have to hope it was Murtagh, because if it was Galbatorix, their plan was almost certainly doomed to failure.

There must be tunnels in the stone, he said to Saphira.

More dragon fire erupted from between the buildings; then the apparition of Saphira hopped above the rooftops and, like a bird with an injured wing, fluttered a short distance before sinking to the ground again. Thorn followed.

Eragon did not wait to see more.

He spun around, ran back along Saphira's neck, and threw himself into the saddle behind Elva. It took just a few seconds to slip his legs into the straps and tighten two on each side. He left the rest loose; they would only slow him later. The uppermost strap held Elva's legs also.

Swiftly chanting the words, he cast a spell to hide the three of them. When the magic took effect, he experienced the usual sense of disorientation as his body vanished. It looked to him as if he were hanging a number of feet above a dark, dragon-shaped pattern pressed into the plants of the hill.

The moment he finished the spell, Saphira surged forward. She jumped off the crest of the hill and flapped hard, struggling to gain height.

"It's not very comfortable, is it?" said Elva as Eragon took his shield

from her.

"No, not always!" he replied, raising his voice to be heard over the wind.

In the back of his mind, he could feel Glaedr and Umaroth and the other Eldunarí watching as Saphira angled downward and dove toward the Varden's camp.

Now we will have our revenge, said Glaedr.

Eragon hunched low over Elva as Saphira gained speed. Gathered in the center of the camp, he saw Blödhgarm and his ten elven spellcasters, as well as Arya—who carried the Dauthdaert. They each had a thirty-foot-long piece of rope tied around their chests, under their arms. At the other end, all the ropes were bound to a log as thick as Eragon's thigh and equal in length to a fully grown Urgal.

When Saphira swooped toward the camp, Eragon signaled them with his mind and two of the elves threw the log into the air. Saphira caught it with her talons, the elves jumped, and a moment later, Eragon felt a jolt and Saphira dipped as she took up their weight.

Through her body, Eragon saw the elves, the ropes, and the log wink out of sight as the elves cast a spell of invisibility, the same as he had.

Flapping mightily, Saphira climbed a thousand feet above the ground, high enough that she and the elves below could easily clear the walls and buildings of the city.

To their left, Eragon glimpsed first Thorn and then the shadow-Saphira as they chased each other on foot through the northern part of the city. The elves controlling the apparition were trying to keep Thorn and Murtagh so busy physically that neither of them would have the opportunity to attack with their minds. If they did, or if they caught the apparition, they would quickly realize they had been fooled.

Just a few more minutes, Eragon thought.

Over the fields flew Saphira. Over the catapults with their devoted attendants. Over banks of archers with their arrows stuck in the ground in front of them, like tufts of white-topped reeds. Over a siege tower, and over the warriors on foot: men, dwarves, and Urgals hiding beneath their shields as they rushed ladders toward the curtain wall, and among them elves: tall and slender, with their bright helms and their long-bladed spears and narrow-bladed swords.

Then Saphira soared past the wall itself. Eragon felt a strange twinge as Saphira reappeared beneath him, and he found himself looking at the back of Elva's head. He assumed that Arya and the other elves hanging below them had become visible as well. Eragon bit off a curse and ended the spell that had concealed them. Galbatorix's wards, it seemed, would not allow them to enter the city

unseen.

Saphira hastened her flight toward the citadel's massive gate. Below them, Eragon heard shouts of fear and astonishment, but he paid them no heed. Murtagh and Thorn were the ones he was worried about, not the soldiers.

Bringing in her wings, Saphira dove toward the gate. Just when it looked as if she was going to slam into it, she turned and reared upright while back-flapping to slow herself. When she had reached a near stop, she allowed herself to drift downward until the elves were safely on the ground.

Once they had cut themselves free of the ropes and moved out of the way, Saphira landed in the courtyard before the gate, jarring both Eragon and Elva with the force of the impact.

Eragon yanked on the buckles of the straps that held him and Elva in the saddle. Then he helped the girl down from Saphira's back and they hurried after the elves toward the gate.

The entrance to the citadel took the form of two giant black doors, which met in a point high above. They looked to be made of solid iron and were studded with hundreds, if not thousands, of spiked rivets, each the size of Eragon's head. The sight was daunting; Eragon could not imagine a less inviting entrance.

Spear in hand, Arya ran to the sally port set within the left-hand door. The port was visible only as a thin, dark seam that outlined a rectangle barely wide enough for a single man to pass through. Within the rectangle was a horizontal strip of metal, perhaps three fingers wide and thrice as long, that was slightly lighter than its surroundings.

As Arya neared the door, the strip sank inward a half inch, then slid to the side with a rusty scrape. A pair of owlish eyes peered out of the dark interior.

"Who are you, then?" demanded a haughty voice. "State your business or be gone!"

Without hesitation, Arya jabbed the Dauthdaert through the open slot. A gurgle emanated from within; then Eragon heard the sound of a body falling to the floor.

Arya pulled the lance back and shook the blood and scraps of flesh from the barbed blade. Then she grasped the haft of the weapon with both hands, placed the tip of it along the right seam of the sally port, and said, "Verma!"

Eragon squinted and turned aside as a fierce blue flame appeared between the lance and the gate. Even from several feet away, he could feel the heat.

Her face contorted with strain, Arya pressed the blade of the spear into the gate, slowly cutting through the iron. Sparks and drops of molten metal poured out from underneath the blade and skittered

across the paved ground like grease on a hot pan, causing Eragon and the others to step back.

As she worked, Eragon glanced in the direction of Thorn and the shadow-Saphira. He could not see them, but he could still hear roars and the crash of breaking masonry.

Elva sagged against him, and he looked down to see that she was shaking and sweating, as if she had a fever. He knelt next to her. "Do you want me to carry you?"

She shook her head. "I'll be better once we're inside and away from … that." She motioned in the direction of the battle.

At the edges of the courtyard, Eragon saw a number of people—they did not look like soldiers—standing in the spaces between the grand houses, watching what they were doing. *Scare them off, would you?* he asked Saphira. She swung her head around and gave a low growl, and the onlookers scurried away.

When the fountain of sparks and white-hot metal ceased, Arya kicked at the sally port until—on the third kick—the door fell inward and landed on the body of the gatekeeper. A second later, the smell of burning wool and skin wafted out.

Still holding the Dauthdaert, Arya stepped through the dark portal. Eragon held his breath. Whatever wards Galbatorix had placed on the citadel, the Dauthdaert ought to allow her to pass through them without harm, even as it had allowed her to cut open the sally port. But there was always a chance that the king had cast a spell the Dauthdaert would be unable to counter.

To his relief, nothing happened as Arya entered the citadel.

Then a group of twenty soldiers rushed toward her, pikes outstretched. Eragon drew Brisingr and ran to the sally port, but he dared not cross the threshold of the citadel to join her, not yet.

Wielding the spear with the same proficiency as her sword, Arya fought her way through the men, dispatching them with impressive speed.

"Why didn't you warn her?" exclaimed Eragon, never taking his eyes off the fight.

Elva joined him by the hole in the gate. "Because they won't hurt her."

Her words proved prophetic; none of the soldiers managed to land a blow. The last two men tried to flee, but Arya bounded after them and slew them before they had gone more than a dozen yards down the immense hallway, which was even larger than the four main corridors of Tronjheim.

When all of the soldiers were dead, Arya pulled the bodies aside so that there was a clear path to the sally port. Then she walked down the hallway a good forty feet, placed the Dauthdaert on the floor, and

slid it back out to Eragon.

As her hand left the spear, she tensed as if in preparation for a blow, but she seemed to remain unaffected by whatever magics were in the area.

"Do you feel anything?" Eragon called. His voice echoed in the interior of the hall.

She shook her head. "As long as we stay clear of the gate, we should be fine."

Eragon handed the spear to Blödhgarm, who took it and entered through the sally port. Together Arya and the fur-covered elf went into the rooms on either side of the gate and worked the hidden mechanisms to open it, a task that would have been beyond the same number of humans.

The clanking of chains filled the air as the giant iron doors slowly swung outward.

Once the gap was wide enough for Saphira, Eragon shouted, "Stop!" and the doors ground to a halt.

Blödhgarm emerged from the room to the right and—keeping a safe distance from the threshold—slid the Dauthdaert to another of the elves.

In that fashion, they entered the citadel one by one.

When only Eragon, Elva, and Saphira remained outside, a terrible roar sounded in the northern part of the city, and for a moment, the whole of Urû'baen fell silent.

"They have discovered our deception," cried the elf Uthinarë. He tossed the spear to Eragon. "Hurry, Argetlam!"

"You next," said Eragon, handing the Dauthdaert to Elva.

Cradling it in the crooks of her arms, she scurried over to join the elves, then pushed the spear back to Eragon, who grabbed it and ran across the threshold. Turning, he was alarmed to see Thorn rise above the buildings by the far edge of the city. Eragon dropped to one knee, placed the Dauthdaert on the floor, and rolled it to Saphira. "Quickly!" he shouted.

A number of seconds were lost as Saphira fumbled with the lance, struggling to pick it up between the tips of her jaws. At last she got it between her teeth, and she leaped into the gigantic corridor, scattering the bodies of the soldiers.

In the distance, Thorn bellowed and flapped furiously, racing toward the citadel.

Speaking in unison, Arya and Blödhgarm cast a spell. A deafening clatter sounded within the stone walls, and the iron doors swung shut many times faster than they had opened. They closed with a *boom* that Eragon felt through his feet, and then a metal bar—three feet thick and six feet wide—slid out of each wall and through brackets bolted

to the inside of the doors, securing them in place.

"That should hold them for a while," said Arya.

"Not for that long," said Eragon, looking at the open sally port.

Then they turned to see what lay before them.

The hallway ran for what Eragon guessed was close to a quarter mile, which would take them deep inside the hill behind Urû'baen. At the far end was another set of doors, just as large as the first but covered in patterned gold that glowed beautifully in the light of the flameless lanterns mounted at regular intervals along the walls. Dozens of smaller passageways branched off to either side, but none were large enough for Shruikan, although Saphira could have fit in many of them. Red banners embroidered with the outline of the twisting flame that Galbatorix used as his sigil hung along the walls every hundred feet. Otherwise, the hall was bare.

The sheer size of the passageway was intimidating, and its emptiness made Eragon that much more nervous. He assumed the throne room was on the other side of the golden doors, but he did not think it would be as easy to reach as it appeared. If Galbatorix was even half as cunning as his reputation implied, he would have littered the corridor with dozens, if not hundreds, of traps.

Eragon found it puzzling that the king had not already attacked them. He did not feel the touch of any mind save those of Saphira and his companions, but he remained acutely aware of how close they were to the king. The entire citadel seemed to be watching them.

"He must know we're here," he said. "*All* of us."

"Then we had best make haste," said Arya. She took the Dauthdaert from Saphira's mouth. The weapon was covered in saliva. "Thurra," said Arya, and the slime fell to the floor.

Behind them, outside the iron gate, there was a loud crash as Thorn landed in the courtyard. He uttered a roar of frustration, then something heavy struck the gate, and the walls rang with the noise.

Arya trotted to the front of their group, and Elva joined her. The dark-haired girl placed a hand on the shaft of the spear—so that she too shared its protective powers—and the two of them started forward, leading the way down the long hall as they hurried ever deeper into Galbatorix's lair.

The Storm Breaks

"Sir, it's time."

Roran opened his eyes and nodded at the boy with a lantern who had stuck his head into the tent. The boy hurried off, and Roran leaned over and kissed Katrina on the cheek; she kissed him back. Neither of them had slept.

Together they rose and dressed. She finished first, for it took him longer to don his armor and weapons.

As he pulled on his gloves, she handed him a slice of bread, a wedge of cheese, and a cup of lukewarm tea. He ignored the bread, took a single bite of cheese, and downed the whole cup of tea at once.

They held each other for a moment, and he said, "If it's a girl, name her something fierce."

"And if it's a boy?"

"The same. Boy or girl, you have to be strong in order to survive in this world."

"I'll do it. I promise." They released each other, and she looked him in the eye. "Fight well, my husband."

He nodded, then turned and left before he lost his composure.

The men under his command were assembling by the northern entrance to the camp when he joined them. The only light they had was from the faint glow above and the torches planted along the outer breastwork. In the dim, flickering illumination, the warriors' figures seemed like a pack of shuffling beasts, threatening and alien.

Among their ranks were a large number of Urgals, including some Kull. His battalion contained a greater share of the creatures than most, as Nasuada had deemed them more likely to follow orders from him than from anyone else. The Urgals carried the long and heavy siege ladders that would be used to climb over the city walls.

Also among the men were a score of elves. Most of their kind would be fighting on their own, but Queen Islanzadí had granted permission for some to serve in the Varden's army as protection against attack by Galbatorix's spellcasters.

Roran welcomed the elves and took the time to ask each their name. They answered politely enough, but he had a feeling they did not think very highly of him. That was all right. He did not care for them either. There was something about them he did not trust; they were too aloof, too well practiced, and above all, too *different*. The dwarves

and Urgals, at least, he understood. But not the elves. He could not tell what they were thinking, and that bothered him.

"Greetings, Stronghammer!" said Nar Garzhvog in a whisper that could be heard at thirty paces. "Today we shall win much glory for our tribes!"

"Yes, today we will win much glory for our tribes," Roran agreed, moving on. The men were nervous; some of the younger ones looked as if they might be sick—and some were, which was only to be expected—but even the older men seemed tense, short-tempered, and either overly talkative or overly withdrawn. The cause was obvious enough: Shruikan. There was little Roran could do to help them other than to hide his own fears and hope that the men did not lose courage entirely.

The sense of anticipation that clung to everyone there, himself included, was dreadful. They had sacrificed much in order to reach this point, and it was not just their lives that were at risk in the battle to come. It was the safety and well-being of their families and descendants, as well as the future of the land itself. All of their prior battles had been similarly fraught, but this was the final one. This was the end. One way or another, there would be no more battles with the Empire after this day.

The thought hardly felt real. Never again would they have the chance to kill Galbatorix. And while confronting Galbatorix had seemed fine enough in conversations late at night, now that the moment was almost upon them, the prospect was terrifying.

Roran sought out Horst and the other villagers from Carvahall, and the lot of them formed a knot within the battalion. Birgit was among the men, clutching an ax that looked freshly sharpened. He acknowledged her by lifting his shield, as he might a mug of ale. She returned the gesture, and he allowed himself a grim smile.

The warriors muffled their boots and feet with rags, then stood waiting for the order to depart.

It soon arrived, and they marched out of the camp, doing their best to keep their arms and armor from making noise. Roran led his warriors across the fields to their place before the front gate of Urû'baen, where they joined two other battalions, one led by his old commander Martland Redbeard—whom Jörmundur had summoned back from Dras-Leona while Eragon was off at Vroengard—and one led by Jörmundur himself.

The alarm went up in Urû'baen soon afterward, so they pulled the rags off their weapons and feet and prepared to attack. A few minutes later, the Varden's horns sounded the advance and they set off at a run across the dark ground toward the immensity of the city wall.

Roran took a place at the forefront of the charge. It was the fastest

way to get himself killed, but the men needed to see him braving the same dangers they faced. It would, he hoped, stiffen their spines and keep them from breaking rank at the first sign of serious opposition. For whatever happened, Urû'baen would *not* be easy to take. Of that, he was sure.

They ran past one of the siege towers, the wheels of which were over twenty feet high and creaked like a set of rusty hinges, and then they were on open ground. Arrows and javelins rained upon them from the soldiers atop the battlements.

The elves shouted in their strange tongue, and by the faint light of dawn, Roran saw many of the arrows and spears turn and bury themselves harmlessly in the dirt. But not all. A man behind him uttered a desperate cry, and Roran heard a clatter of armor as men and Urgals leaped aside to avoid stepping on the fallen warrior. Roran did not look back, nor did he or those with him slow their headlong dash toward the wall.

An arrow struck the shield he held over his head. He barely felt the impact.

When they arrived at the wall, he moved to the side, shouting, "Ladders! Make way for the ladders!"

The men parted to allow the Urgals carrying the ladders to move forward. The ladders' great length meant that the Kull had to use poles made of trees lashed together to push them upright. Once the ladders touched the wall, they sagged inward under their own weight, so that the upper two-thirds lay flat against the dressed stone and slid from side to side, threatening to fall.

Roran elbowed his way back through the men and grabbed one of the elves, Othíara, by the arm. She gave him a look of anger, which he ignored. "Keep the ladders in place!" he shouted. "Don't let the soldiers push them away!"

She nodded and began to chant in the ancient language, as did the other elves.

Turning, Roran hurried back to the wall. One of the men was already starting to climb the nearest ladder. Roran grabbed him by the belt and pulled him off. "I'll go first," he said.

"Stronghammer!"

Roran slung his shield over his back, then began to climb, hammer in hand. He had never been fond of heights, and as the men and Urgals grew smaller below him, he felt increasingly uneasy. The feeling just grew worse when he reached the section of the ladder that lay flat against the wall, for he could no longer wrap his hands all the way around the rungs, nor could he get a good foothold—only the first few inches of his boots would fit on the bark-covered branches, and he had to move carefully to ensure that they did not slip off.

A spear flew past him, close enough that he felt the wind on his cheek.

He swore and kept climbing.

He was less than a yard from the battlements when a soldier with blue eyes leaned over the edge and looked straight at him.

"Bah!" Roran shouted, and the soldier flinched and stepped back. Before the man had time to recover, Roran scrambled up the remaining rungs and hopped over the battlements to land on the walkway along the top of the wall.

The soldier he had scared stood several feet in front of him, holding a short archer's sword. The man's head was turned to the side as he shouted at a group of soldiers farther down the wall.

Roran's shield was still on his back so he swung his hammer at the man's wrist. Without the shield, Roran knew he would have difficulty fending off a trained swordsman; his safest course was to disarm his opponent as quickly as possible.

The soldier saw what he intended and parried the blow. Then he stabbed Roran in the belly.

Or rather, he tried to. Eragon's spells stopped the tip of the blade a quarter inch from Roran's gut. Roran grunted, surprised, then knocked aside the blade and brained the man with three rapid strikes.

He swore again. It was a bad beginning.

Up and down the wall, more of the Varden tried to climb over the battlements. Few made it. Clumps of soldiers waited at the top of most every ladder, and reinforcements were streaming onto the walkway from the stairs to the city.

Baldor joined him—he had used the same ladder as Roran—and together they ran toward a ballista manned by eight soldiers. The ballista was mounted near the base of one of the many towers that rose out of the wall, each of which stood about two hundred feet apart. Behind the soldiers and the tower, Roran saw the illusion of Saphira that the elves had created, flying over and around the wall, breathing fire on it.

The soldiers were smart; they grabbed their spears and poked at him and Baldor, keeping them at a distance. Roran tried to catch one of the spears, but the man wielding it was too fast, and Roran nearly got stabbed again. A moment more and he knew the soldiers would overwhelm him and Baldor.

Before that could happen, an Urgal pulled himself over the edge of the wall behind the soldiers, then lowered his head and charged, bellowing and swinging the ironbound club he carried.

The Urgal struck one man in the chest, breaking his ribs, and another on the hip, breaking his pelvis. Either injury ought to have incapacitated the soldiers, but as the Urgal bulled past them, the two

men picked themselves off the stone as if nothing had happened and proceeded to stab the Urgal in the back.

A sense of doom settled upon Roran. “We’ll have to bash in their skulls or take off their heads if we’re going to stop them,” he growled to Baldor. Keeping his eyes on the soldiers, he shouted to the Varden behind them, “They can’t feel pain!”

Out over the city, the illusionary Saphira crashed into a tower. Everyone but Roran paused to look; he knew what the elves were doing.

Jumping forward, he slew one of the soldiers with a blow to the temple. He used his shield to shove the next soldier aside; then he was too close for their spears to be of any use, and he was able to make short work of them with his hammer.

Once he and Baldor had killed the rest of the soldiers around the ballista, Baldor looked at him with an expression of despair. “Did you see? Saphira—”

“She’s fine.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry about it. She’s fine.”

Baldor hesitated, then accepted Roran’s word, and they rushed at the next clump of soldiers.

Soon afterward, Saphira—the *real* Saphira—appeared over the southern part of the wall as she flew toward the citadel, prompting cheers of relief from the Varden.

Roran frowned. She was supposed to remain hidden for the whole of her flight. “Frethya. Frethya,” he said quickly under his breath. He remained visible. *Blast it*, he thought.

Turning, he said, “Back to the ladders!”

“Why?” demanded Baldor as he grappled with another soldier. Uttering a ferocious shout, he pushed the man off the wall, into the city.

“Stop asking questions! Move!”

Side by side, they fought their way through the line of soldiers that separated them from the ladders. It was bloody and difficult, and Baldor received a cut on his left calf, behind his greave, and a severe bruise on one of his shoulders, where a spear nearly pierced his mail shirt.

The soldiers’ immunity to pain meant that killing them was the only sure way to stop them, and killing them was no easy task. Also, it meant that Roran dared not show mercy. More than once, he thought he had killed a soldier, only to have the wounded man rear up and strike at him while he was engaged with another opponent. And there were so many soldiers on the walkway, he began to fear that he and Baldor would never make it off.

When they reached the nearest ladder, he said, “Here! Stay here.”

If Baldor was puzzled, he did not show it. They held off the soldiers by themselves until another two men climbed up the ladder and joined them, then a third, and at last Roran began to feel as if they had a good chance of pushing back the soldiers and capturing that segment of the wall.

Even though the attack had been devised as only a distraction, Roran saw no reason to treat it as such. If they were going to risk their lives, they might as well get something out of it. They needed to clear the walls anyway.

Then they heard Thorn roar with rage, and the red dragon appeared above the tops of the buildings, winging his way toward the citadel. Roran saw a figure he thought was Murtagh on his back, crimson sword in hand.

“What does it mean?” shouted Baldor between sword strokes.

“It means the game is up!” Roran replied. “Brace yourself; these bastards are in for a surprise!”

He had barely finished speaking when the voices of the elves sounded above the noise of the battle, eerie and beautiful as they sang in the ancient language.

Roran ducked under a spear and poked the end of his hammer into a soldier’s belly, knocking the wind from the man’s lungs. The soldiers might not be able to feel pain, but they still had to breathe. As the soldier struggled to recover, Roran slipped past his guard and crushed his throat with the rim of his shield.

He was about to attack the next man when he felt the stone tremble beneath his feet. He retreated until his back was pressed against the battlements, then widened his stance for balance.

One of the soldiers was foolish enough to rush him at that very moment. As the man ran toward him, the trembling grew stronger, then the top of the wall rippled, like a blanket being tossed, and the onrushing soldier, as well as most of his companions, fell and remained prone, helpless to rise as the earth continued to shake.

From the other side of the wall tower that separated them from Urû’baen’s main gate came a sound like a mountain breaking. Fan-shaped jets of water sprayed into the air, and then with a great noise, the wall over the gate shuddered and began to crumble inward.

And still the elves sang.

As the motion beneath his feet subsided, Roran sprang forward and killed three of the soldiers before they were able to stand. The rest turned and fled back down the stairs that led into the city.

Roran helped Baldor to his feet, then shouted, “After them!” He grinned, tasting blood. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad start after all.

"Stop," said Elva.

Eragon froze with his foot in the air. The girl waved him back, and he retreated.

"Jump to there," said Elva. She pointed at a spot a yard in front of him. "By the scrollwork."

He crouched, then hesitated as he waited for her to tell him whether it was safe.

She stamped her foot and made a sound of exasperation. "It won't work if you don't mean it. I can't tell if something is going to hurt you unless you actually intend to put yourself in danger." She gave him a smile that he found less than reassuring. "Don't worry; I won't let anything happen to you."

Still doubtful, he flexed his legs again and was just about to spring forward when—

"Stop!"

He cursed and waved his arms as he tried to keep from falling onto the section of floor that would trigger the spikes hidden both above and below.

The spikes were the third trap Eragon and his companions had encountered in the long hallway leading to the golden doors. The first had been a set of hidden pits. The second had been blocks of stone in the ceiling that would have squished them flat. And now the spikes, much like those that had killed Wyrden in the tunnels beneath Dras-Leona.

They had seen Murtagh enter the hallway through the open sally port, but he had made no effort to pursue them without Thorn. After watching for a few seconds, he had disappeared into one of the side rooms where Arya and Blödhgarm had broken the gears and wheels used to open and close the stronghold's main gate.

It might take Murtagh an hour to fix the mechanisms, or it might take him minutes. Either way, they dared not dawdle.

"Try a little bit farther out," said Elva.

Eragon grimaced, but did as she suggested.

"Stop!"

This time he would have fallen had Elva not grabbed the back of his tunic.

"Even farther," she said. Then, "Stop! Farther."

"I can't," he growled, his frustration increasing. "Not without a

running start." But with a running start, it would be impossible to stop himself in time, should Elva determine that the jump was dangerous. "What now? If the spikes go all the way to the doors, we'll never reach them." They had already thought of using magic to float over the trap, but even the smallest spell would set it off, or so Elva claimed, and they had no choice but to trust her.

"Maybe the trap is meant for a walking dragon," said Arya. "If it's only a yard or two long, Saphira or Thorn could step right over without ever realizing it was there. But if it's a hundred feet long, it would be sure to catch them."

Not if I jump, said Saphira. *A hundred feet is an easy distance*.

Eragon exchanged concerned glances with Arya and Elva. "Just make sure you don't let your tail touch the floor," he said. "And don't go too far, or you might run into another trap."

Yes, little one.

Saphira crouched and gathered herself in, lowering her head until it was only a foot or so above the stone. Then she dug her claws into the floor and leaped down the hallway, opening her wings just enough to give herself a bit of lift.

To Eragon's relief, Elva remained silent.

When Saphira had gone two full lengths of her body, she folded her wings and dropped to the floor with a resounding clatter.

Safe, she said. Her scales scraped on the floor as she turned around. She jumped back, and Eragon and the others moved out of the way to give her room to land on her return. *Well?* she said. *Who's first?*

It took her four trips to ferry them all across the bed of spikes. Then they continued forward at a swift trot, Arya and Elva again in the lead. They encountered no more traps until they were three-quarters of the way to the gleaming doors, at which point Elva shuddered and raised her small hand. They immediately stopped.

"Something will cut us in two if we continue," she said. "I'm not sure where it will come from … the walls, I think."

Eragon frowned. That meant that whatever would cut them had enough weight or strength behind it to overcome their wards—hardly an encouraging prospect.

"What if we—" he started to say, then stopped as twenty black-robed humans, men and women alike, filed out of a side passageway and formed a line in front of them, blocking the way.

Eragon felt a blade of thought stab into his mind as the enemy magicians began to chant in the ancient language. Opening her jaws, Saphira raked the spellcasters with a torrent of crackling flame, but it passed harmlessly around them. One of the banners along the wall caught fire, and scraps of smoldering fabric fell to the floor.

Eragon defended himself, but he did not attack in turn; it would

take too long to subdue the magicians one by one. Moreover, their chanting concerned him: if they were willing to cast spells before they had seized control of his mind—as well as those of his companions—then they no longer cared if they lived or died, only that they stopped the intruders.

He dropped to one knee next to Elva. She was speaking to one of the spellcasters, saying something about the man's daughter.

"Are they standing over the trap?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

She nodded, never pausing in her speech.

Reaching out, he slapped the palm of his hand against the floor.

He had expected something to happen, but still he recoiled when a horizontal sheet of metal—thirty feet long and four inches thick—shot out of each wall with a terrible *screech*. The plates of metal caught the magicians between them and cut them in two, like a pair of giant tin snips, then just as quickly retreated back into their hidden slots.

The suddenness of it shocked Eragon. He averted his eyes from the shambles before them. *What a horrible way to die.*

Next to him, Elva gurgled, then slumped forward in a faint. Arya caught her before her head hit the floor. Cradling her with one arm, Arya began to murmur to her in the ancient language.

Eragon consulted with the other elves about how best to bypass the trap. They decided that the safest way would be to jump over it, as they had with the bed of spikes.

Four of them climbed onto Saphira, and she was just about to spring forward when Elva cried out in a weak voice: "Stop! Don't!"

Saphira flicked her tail but remained where she was.

Elva slid out of Arya's grasp, staggered a few feet away, leaned over, and was sick. She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, then stared at the mangled bodies that lay before them, as if fixing them in her memory.

Still staring at them, she said, "There is another trigger, halfway across, in the air. If you jump"—she clapped her hands together, a loud, sharp sound, and made an ugly face—"blades come out from high on the walls, as well as lower."

A thought began to bother Eragon. "Why would Galbatorix try to kill us? … If you weren't here," he said, looking at Elva, "Saphira might be dead right now. Galbatorix wants her alive, so why this?" He gestured at the bloody floor. "Why the spikes and the blocks of stone?"

"Perhaps," said the elf woman Invidia, "he expected the pits to capture us before we reached the rest of the traps."

"Or perhaps," said Blödhgarm in a grim voice, "he knows that Elva is with us and what she is capable of."

The girl shrugged. "What of it? He can't stop me."

A chill crept through Eragon. “No, but if he knows of you, then he might be scared, and if he’s scared—”

Then he might really be trying to kill us, Saphira finished.

Arya shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. We still have to find him.”

They spent a minute discussing how to get past the blades, whereupon Eragon said, “What if I used magic to transport us over there, the way Arya sent Saphira’s egg to the Spine?” He gestured toward the area past the bodies.

It would require too much energy, said Glaedr.

Better to conserve our strength for when we face Galbatorix, Umaroth added.

Eragon gnawed on his lip. He looked back over his shoulder and was alarmed to see, far behind them, Murtagh running from one side of the hallway to the other. *We don’t have long.*

“Maybe we could put something into the walls, to keep the blades from coming out.”

“The blades are sure to be protected from magic,” Arya pointed out. “Besides, we don’t have anything with us that could hold them back. A knife? A piece of armor? The plates of metal are too big and heavy. They would tear past whatever was in front of them as if it were not there.”

Silence fell upon them.

Then Blödhgarm licked his fangs and said, “Not necessarily.” He turned and placed his sword on the floor in front of Eragon, then motioned for the elves under his command to do the same.

Eleven blades in total they laid before Eragon. “I can’t ask you to do this,” he said. “Your swords—”

Blödhgarm interrupted with a raised hand, his fur glossy in the soft light of the lanterns. “We fight with our minds, Shadeslayer, not our bodies. If we encounter soldiers, we can take what weapons we need from them. If our swords are of more use here and now, then we would be foolish to retain them merely for reasons of sentiment.”

Eragon inclined his head. “As you wish.”

To Arya, Blödhgarm said, “It should be an even number, if we are to have the best chance of success.”

She hesitated, then drew her own thin-bladed sword and placed it among the others. “Consider carefully what you are about to do, Eragon,” she said. “These are storied weapons all. It would be a shame to destroy them and gain nothing by it.”

He nodded, then frowned, concentrating as he recalled his lessons with Oromis. *Umaroth,* he said, *I’ll need your strength.*

What is ours is yours, the dragon replied.

The illusion that hid the slots from which the sheets of metal slid out was too well constructed for Eragon to pierce. This was as he

expected—Galbatorix was not one to overlook such a detail. On the other hand, the enchantments responsible for the illusion were easy enough to detect, and by them he was able to determine the exact placement and dimensions of the openings.

He could not tell exactly how far back the sheets of metal lay within the slots. He hoped it was at least an inch or two from the outer surface of the wall. If they were closer, his idea would fail, for the king was sure to have protected the metal against outside tampering.

Summoning the words he needed, Eragon cast the first of the twelve spells he intended to use. One of the elves' swords—Laufin's, he thought—disappeared with a faint breath of wind, like a tunic being swung through the air. A half second later, a solid *thud* emanated from the wall to their left.

Eragon smiled. It had worked. If he had tried to send the sword through the sheet of metal, the reaction would have been substantially more dramatic.

Speaking faster than before, he cast the rest of the spells, embedding six swords within each wall, each sword five feet from the next. The elves watched him intently as he spoke; if the loss of their weapons upset them, they did not show it.

When he had finished, Eragon knelt by Arya and Elva—who were both once more holding the Dauthdaert—and said, "Get ready to run."

Saphira and the elves tensed. Arya had Elva climb onto her back while still maintaining her hold on the green lance; then Arya said, "Ready."

Reaching forward, Eragon again slapped the floor.

A jarring crash sounded from each wall, and threads of dust fell from the ceiling, blossoming into hazy plumes.

The moment he saw that the swords had held, Eragon dashed forward. He had barely taken two steps when Elva screamed, "Faster!"

Roaring with the effort, he forced his feet to strike the ground even harder. To his right, Saphira ran past, head and tail low, a dark shadow at the edge of his vision.

Just as he reached the far side of the trap, he heard the *snap* of breaking steel and then the cringe-inducing shriek of metal scraping against metal.

Behind him, someone shouted.

He twisted as he flung himself away from the noise, and he saw that everyone had crossed the space in time, save the silver-haired elf woman Yaela, who had been caught between the last six inches of the two pieces of metal. The space around her flared blue and yellow, as if the air itself was burning, and her face contorted with pain.

"Flauga!" shouted Blödhgarm, and Yaela flew out from between the sheets of metal, which snapped together with a ringing clang. Then

they retreated into the walls with the same terrible shrieking that had accompanied their appearance.

Yaela had landed on her hands and knees close to Eragon. He helped her to her feet; to his surprise, she seemed unharmed. “Are you hurt?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, but … my wards are gone.” She lifted her hands and stared at them with an expression close to wonder. “I’ve not been without wards since … since I was younger than you are now. Somehow the blades stripped them from me.”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” said Eragon. He frowned.

Elva shrugged. “We would have all died, except for him”—she pointed at Blödhgarm—“if I hadn’t told you to move faster.”

Eragon grunted.

They continued on their way, expecting with every step to find another trap. But the rest of the hallway proved to be free of obstacles, and they reached the doors at the end without further incident.

Eragon looked up at the shining expanse of gold. Embossed across the doors was a life-sized oak tree, the leaves of which formed an arching canopy that joined with the roots below to inscribe a great circle about the trunk. Sprouting from either side of the trunk’s midsection were two thick bundles of branches, which divided the space within the circle into quarters. In the top-left quarter was a carving of an army of spear-bearing elves marching through a thick forest. In the top-right quarter were humans building castles and forging swords. In the bottom left, Urgals—Kull, mostly—burning down a village and killing the inhabitants. In the bottom right, dwarves mining caves filled with gems and veins of ore. Amid the roots and branches of the oak, Eragon spotted werecats and the Ra’zac, as well as a few small strange-looking creatures that he failed to recognize. And coiled in the very center of the bole of the tree was a dragon that held the end of its tail in its mouth, as if biting itself. The doors were beautifully crafted. Under different circumstances, Eragon would have been content to sit and study them for most of a day.

As it was, the sight of the shining doors filled him with dread as he contemplated what might lie on the other side. If it was Galbatorix, then their lives were about to change forever and nothing would ever be the same—not for them, and not for the rest of Alagaësia.

I’m not ready, Eragon said to Saphira.

When will we ever be ready? she replied. She flicked out her tongue, tasting the air. He could feel her nervous anticipation. *Galbatorix and Shruikan must be killed, and we are the only ones who might be able to do it.*

What if we can't?

Then we can't, and what will be will be.

He nodded and took a long breath. *I love you, Saphira.*

I love you too, little one.

Eragon stepped forward. "Now what?" he asked, trying to hide his uneasiness. "Should we knock?"

"First, let's see if it's open," said Arya.

"Wait," said Eragon. He went to Saphira's saddlebags and, from them, removed the bottle of enchanted faelnirv that Oromis had given him in Ellesméra. In a single draught, Eragon drank what remained of the liqueur. As it settled within him, burning like a spice, Eragon felt his senses sharpen and a surge of vigor pass through his limbs.

He returned the bottle to the saddlebags, then nodded to Arya. "All right."

They arranged themselves in a formation suitable for battle. Then Arya, with Elva next to her, grasped a handle set within the left-hand door and prepared to pull.

As she did, a column of shimmering air appeared around Blödhgarm and each of his ten spellcasters. Eragon shouted with alarm, and Saphira released a short hiss, as if she had stepped upon something sharp. The elves seemed unable to move within the columns: even their eyes remained motionless, fixed upon whatever they had been looking at when the spell took effect.

With a heavy clank, a door in the wall to the left slid open, and the elves began to move toward it, like a procession of statues gliding across ice.

Arya lunged toward them, barbed spear extended before her, in an attempt to cut through the enchantments binding the elves, but she was too slow, and she could not catch them.

"Letta!" shouted Eragon. Stop! The simplest spell he could think of that might help. However, the magic that imprisoned the elves proved too strong for him to break, and they disappeared within the dark opening, the door slamming shut behind them.

Dismay swept through Eragon. Without the elves …

Arya pounded on the door with the butt of the Dauthdaert, and she even tried to find the seam between the door and the wall with the tip of the blade—as she had with the sally port—but the wall seemed solid, immovable.

When she turned around, her expression was one of cold fury. *Umaroth*, she said. *I need your help to open this wall.*

No, said the white dragon. *Galbatorix is sure to have hidden your companions well. Trying to find them will only waste energy and place us in even greater danger.*

Arya's slanting eyebrows drew closer as she scowled. *Then we play*

into his hand, Umaroth-elda. He wants to divide us and make us weaker. If we continue without them, it will be that much easier for Galbatorix to defeat us.

Yes, little one. But think you not also that the Egg-breaker might want *us to pursue them? He might want us to forget him in our anger and concern, and thus to rush blindly into another of his traps.*

Why would he go to so much trouble? He could have captured Eragon, Saphira, you, and the rest of the Eldunarí, even as he captured Blödhgarm and the others, but he didn't.

Perhaps because he wants us to exhaust ourselves before we confront him or before he attempts to break us.

Arya lowered her head for a moment, and when she looked up, her fury had vanished—at least on the surface—replaced by her usual controlled watchfulness. *What, then, should we do, Ebrithil?*

We hope that Galbatorix will not kill Blödhgarm or the others—not immediately, at least—and we continue on until we find the king.

Arya acquiesced, but Eragon could tell that she found it distasteful. He could not blame her; he felt the same.

"Why didn't you sense the trap?" he asked Elva in an undertone. He thought he understood, but he wanted to hear it from her.

"Because it didn't hurt them," she said.

He nodded.

Arya strode back to the golden doors and again grasped the handle on the left. Joining her, Elva wrapped her small hand around the shaft of the Dauthdaert.

Leaning away from the door, Arya pulled and pulled, and the massive structure slowly began to swing outward. No one human, Eragon was sure, could have opened it, and even Arya's strength was barely sufficient.

When the door reached the wall, Arya released it, and then she and Elva joined Eragon in front of Saphira.

On the other side of the cavernous archway was a huge, dark chamber. Eragon was unsure of its size, for the walls lay hidden in velvet shadows. A line of flameless lanterns mounted on iron poles ran straight out from either side of the entranceway, illuminating the patterned floor and little else, while a faint glow came from above through crystals set within the distant ceiling. The two rows of lanterns ended over five hundred feet away, near the base of a broad dais, upon which rested a throne. On the throne sat a single black figure, the only figure in the whole room, and on his lap lay a bare sword, a long white splinter that seemed to emit a faint glow.

Eragon swallowed and tightened his grip on Brisingr. He gave Saphira's jaw a quick rub with the edge of his shield, and she she uttered a low growl in response. Then, by unspoken consent, the four

of them started forward.

The moment they were all in the throne room, the golden door swung shut behind them. Eragon had expected as much, but still, the noise of it closing made him start. As the echoes faded to dusky silence within the high presence chamber, the figure upon the throne stirred, as if waking from sleep, and then a voice—a voice such as Eragon had never heard before: deep and rich and imbued with authority greater than that of Ajihad or Oromis or Hrothgar, a voice that made even the elves' seem harsh and discordant—rang forth from the far side of the throne room.

And it said, "Ah, I have been expecting you. Welcome to my abode. And welcome to you in particular, Eragon Shadeslayer, and to you, Saphira Brightscales. I have much desired to meet with you. But I am also glad to see you, Arya—daughter of Islanzadí, and Shadeslayer in your own right—and you as well, Elva, she of the Shining Brow. And of course, Glaedr, Umaroth, Valdr, and those others who travel with you unseen. I had long believed them to be dead, and I am most glad to learn otherwise. Welcome, all! We have much to talk about."

The Heart of the Fray

Along with the warriors of his battalion, Roran fought his way down off Urû'baen's outer wall to the streets below. There they paused to regroup; then he shouted, "To the gate!" and pointed with his hammer.

He and several men from Carvahall, including Horst and Delwin, took the lead as they trotted along the inside of the wall toward the breach the elves had created with their magic. Arrows flitted over their heads as they ran, but none were aimed at them specifically, and he did not hear any of their group take a wound.

They encountered dozens of soldiers in the narrow space between the wall and the stone houses. A few paused to fight, but the rest ran, and even those who fought soon retreated down the adjoining alleyways.

At first the savage intensity of slaughter and victory blinded Roran to all else. But when the soldiers they met continued to flee, a sense of unease began to gnaw at his stomach, and he began to look around with greater alertness, searching for anything that seemed different from what it ought to be.

Something was wrong. He was sure of it.

"Galbatorix wouldn't let them give up this easily," he muttered to himself.

"What?" asked Albriech, who was next to him.

"I said, Galbatorix wouldn't let them give up this easily." Twisting his head around, Roran shouted to the rest of the battalion, "Pin back your ears and look sharp! Galbatorix has a surprise or two in store for us, I wager. We won't let ourselves get caught unawares, though, now will we?"

"Stronghammer!" they shouted in return, and pounded their weapons against their shields. All but the elves, that was. Satisfied, he quickened the pace even as he continued to scan the rooftops.

They soon broke out into the rubble-strewn street that led to what had once been the main gate of the city. Now all that was left was a gaping hole several hundred feet wide at the top, with a pile of broken stones at the bottom. Through the gap streamed the Varden and their allies: men, dwarves, Urgals, elves, and werecats, fighting alongside one another for the first time in history.

Arrows rained down on the army as it poured into the city, but the elves' magic stopped the deadly darts before they could cause harm.

The same did not hold true for Galbatorix's soldiers; Roran saw a number of them fall to the Varden's archers, although some appeared to have wards that protected them from the arrows. Galbatorix's favorites, he assumed.

As his battalion joined the rest of the army, Roran spotted Jörmundur riding in the press of warriors. Roran called out greetings, and Jörmundur replied in kind and shouted, "Once we reach that fountain"—he pointed with his sword toward a large, ornate edifice that stood in a courtyard several hundred yards in front of them —"take your men and head off to the right. Clear the southern part of the city, then meet back up with us at the citadel."

Roran nodded, exaggerating the movement so Jörmundur could see. "Sir!"

He felt safer now that they had the company of other warriors, but still his sense of unease continued. *Where are they?* he wondered, looking at the mouths of the empty streets. Galbatorix had supposedly gathered the whole of his army in Urû'baen, but Roran had yet to see evidence of a large force of men. There had been surprisingly few soldiers on the walls, and those who were present had fled far sooner than they should have.

He's luring us in, Roran realized with sudden certainty. *It's all a play designed to trick us*. Catching Jörmundur's attention again, he shouted, "Something's wrong! Where are the soldiers?"

Jörmundur frowned and turned to speak with King Orrin and Queen Islanzadí, who had ridden up to him. Oddly enough, a white raven sat on Islanzadí's left shoulder, his claws hooked into her corselet of golden armor.

And still the Varden continued to march deeper and deeper into Urû'baen.

"What is the matter, Stronghammer?" growled Nar Garzhvog as he pushed his way over to Roran.

Roran glanced up at the heavy-headed Kull. "I'm not sure. Galbatorix—"

He forgot whatever else he was going to say when a horn sounded among the buildings ahead of them. It blared for the better part of a minute, a low, ominous tone that caused the Varden to pause and look around with concern.

Roran's heart sank. "This is it," he said to Albriech. Turning, he waved his hammer, motioning toward the side of the street. "Move over!" he bellowed. "Get between the buildings and take cover!"

It took his battalion longer to extricate itself from the column of warriors than it had to join it. Frustrated, Roran continued shouting, trying to get them to move faster. "Quickly, you sorry dogs! Quickly!"

The horn sounded again, and Jörmundur finally called a halt to the

army.

By then, Roran's warriors were safely wedged into three streets, where they stood clustered behind buildings, waiting for his orders. He stood by the side of a house, along with Garzhvog and Horst, peering around the corner as he tried to see what was happening.

Once more the horn sounded, and then the tramp of many feet echoed through Urû'baen.

Dread crawled through Roran as he saw rank after rank of soldiers march into the streets leading from the citadel, the rows of men brisk and orderly, their faces devoid of even the slightest hint of fear. At their head rode a squat, broad-shouldered man upon a gray charger. He wore a gleaming breastplate that bulged over a foot outward, as if to accommodate a large belly. In his left hand, he carried a shield painted with the device of a crumbling tower upon a bare stone peak. In his right hand, he carried a spiked mace that most men would have found difficult to lift but that he swung back and forth with ease.

Roran wet his lips. He guessed that the man was none other than Lord Barst, and if even half the things he had heard about the man were true, then Barst would never ride straight at an opposing force unless he was utterly certain of destroying it.

Roran had seen enough. Pushing himself off the corner of the building, he said, "We're not going to wait. Tell the others to follow us."

"You mean to run away, Stronghammer?" rumbled Nar Garzhvog.

"No," said Roran. "I mean to attack from the side. Only a fool would attack an army like that head-on. Now go!" He gave the Urgal a shove, then hurried down the cross street to take his position at the front of his warriors. *And only a fool would go head to head with the man Galbatorix has chosen to lead his forces*.

As they made their way between the densely packed buildings, Roran heard the soldiers start to chant, "Lord Barst! Lord Barst! Lord Barst!" And they stamped the ground with their hobnail boots and banged their swords against their shields.

Better and better, Roran thought, wishing he were anywhere but there.

Then the Varden shouted in return, the air filled with cries of "Eragon!" and "The Riders!" and the city rang with the sounds of clashing metal and the screams of wounded men.

When his battalion was level with what Roran guessed was the midpoint of the Empire's army, he had them turn and start in the direction of their enemies. "Stay together," he ordered. "Form a wall with your shields, and whatever you do, make sure you protect the spellcasters."

They soon spotted the soldiers in the street—spearmen, mostly—

pressed close against one another as they shuffled toward the front of the battle.

Nar Garzhvog let out a ferocious bellow, as did Roran and the other warriors in the battalion, and they charged toward the ranks of men. The soldiers shouted with alarm, and panic spread among them as they scrambled backward, trampling their own kind as they tried to find room to fight.

Howling, Roran fell upon the first row of men. Blood sprayed around him as he swung his hammer and felt metal and bone give way. The soldiers were so tightly packed that they were nearly helpless. He killed four of them before even one managed to swing a sword at him, which he blocked with his shield.

By the edge of the street, Nar Garzhvog knocked down six men with a single blow of his club. The soldiers started to climb back to their feet, ignoring injuries that would have crippled them had they been able to feel pain, and Garzhvog struck again, pounding them to a pulp.

Roran was aware of nothing but the men in front of him, the weight of his hammer in his hand, and the slipperiness of the blood-coated cobblestones under his feet. He broke and he battered; he ducked and he shoved; he growled and he shouted and he killed and he killed and he killed—until, to his surprise, he swung his hammer and found nothing but empty air before him. His weapon bounced against the ground, striking sparks from the cobblestones, and a painful jolt ran up his arm.

Roran shook his head, his battle rage clearing; he had fought his way completely through the mass of soldiers.

Spinning around, he saw that most of his warriors were still engaged with soldiers to his right and left. Loosing another howl, he dove back into the fray.

Three soldiers closed in on him: two with spears, one with a sword. Roran lunged at the man with the sword, but his foot slipped beneath him as he stepped on something soft and wet. Even as he fell, he swung his hammer at the ankles of the nearest man. The soldier danced back and was about to bring his sword down on Roran when an elf leaped forward and, with two quick strokes, beheaded all three soldiers.

It was the same elf woman he had spoken to outside the city walls, only now splattered with stripes of gore. Before he could thank her, she darted past, her sword a blur as she cut down more of the soldiers.

After watching them in action, Roran decided that each elf was worth at least five men, not even counting their ability to cast spells. As for the Urgals, he just did his best to stay out of their way, especially the Kull. They seemed to make little distinction between friend and foe once roused, and the Kull were so big, it was easy for

them to kill someone without meaning to. He saw one of them crush a soldier between his leg and the side of a building and not even notice. Another time, he saw a Kull behead a soldier with an inadvertent swipe of a shield while turning about.

The fighting continued for another few minutes, whereupon the only soldiers remaining in the area were dead soldiers.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Roran glanced up and down the street. Farther into the city, he saw remnants of the force they had destroyed disappearing between the houses as the men ran to join another part of Galbatorix's army. He considered pursuing them, but the main battle lay closer to the edge of the city, and he wanted to fall upon the rear of the attacking soldiers and disrupt their lines.

"This way!" he shouted, raising his hammer and starting down the street.

An arrow buried itself in the edge of his shield, and he looked up to see the silhouette of a man sliding below the peak of a nearby roof.

When Roran emerged from between the close-set buildings into the open area before the remnants of Urû'baen's front gate, he found a scene of such confusion that he hesitated, unsure of what to do.

The two armies had mingled together until it was impossible to determine lines or ranks or even where the front of the battle was. The crimson tunics of the soldiers were scattered throughout the square, sometimes singly, sometimes in large clusters, and the fighting had spilled into all of the nearby streets, the armies spreading outward like a stain. Among the combatants Roran expected to see, he also spotted scores of cats—ordinary cats, not werecats—attacking the soldiers, as savage and frightening a sight as he had ever beheld. The cats, he knew, followed the direction of the werecats.

And in the center of the square, sitting upon his gray charger, was Lord Barst, his large round breastplate gleaming with the light of the fires burning in nearby houses. He swung his mace again and again, faster than any human ought to have been able to, and with every blow he slew at least one of the Varden. Arrows fired at him vanished in puffs of sickly orange flame, swords and spears bounced off him as if he were made of stone, and even the strength of a charging Kull was not enough to knock him off his steed. Roran watched with astonishment as, with a casual swipe of his mace, the armor-clad man brained an attacking Kull, breaking his horns and skull as easily as an eggshell.

Roran frowned. *How can he be so strong and fast?* Magic was the obvious answer, but that magic had to have a source. There were no gems upon Barst's mace or armor, nor could Roran believe that Galbatorix would be feeding energy to Barst from a distance. Roran remembered his conversation with Eragon the night before they

rescued Katrina from Helgrind. Eragon had told him that it was basically impossible to alter a human's body to have the speed and strength of an elf, even if the human was a Rider—which made what the dragons had done to Eragon during the Blood-oath Celebration all the more amazing. It seemed unlikely that Galbatorix could have managed a similar transformation with Barst, which again made Roran wonder, where was the source of Barst's unnatural might?

Barst pulled on the reins of his steed, turning the horse around. The light moving across the surface of his swollen breastplate caught Roran's attention.

Roran's mouth went dry, and he felt a sense of despair. From what he knew, Barst was not the sort of man to have a belly. He would not let himself go soft, nor would Galbatorix have chosen such a man to defend Urû'baen. The only explanation that made sense, then, was that Barst had an Eldunarí strapped to his body underneath his oddly shaped breastplate.

Then the street shook and split, and a dark crevice appeared beneath Barst and his charger. The hole would have swallowed them both, with room to spare, but the horse remained standing upon thin air, as if its hooves were still planted firmly upon the ground. A wreath of different colors flickered around Barst, like a nimbus of tattered rainbows. Alternating waves of heat and cold emanated from his location, and Roran saw tendrils of ice crawling up from the ground, seeking to wrap themselves around the horse's legs and hold them in place. But the ice could not grip the horse, nor did any of the magic seem to have an effect on either the man or the animal.

Barst pulled on the reins again, then spurred his horse toward a group of elves who stood beside a nearby house, chanting in the ancient language. It was they, Roran assumed, who had been casting the spells against Barst.

Lifting his mace above his head, Barst charged into the midst of the elves. They scattered, seeking to defend themselves, but to no avail, for Barst split their shields and broke their swords, and when he struck, the mace crushed the elves as if their bones were as thin and hollow as those of birds.

Why didn't their wards protect them? Roran wondered. *Why can't they stop him with their minds? He's only one man, and there's only one Eldunarí with him.*

A few yards away, a large round stone crashed into the sea of struggling bodies, leaving behind a bright red smear, and bounced into the front of a building, where it shattered the statues above the doorframe.

Roran ducked and cursed as he looked for where the stone had come from. Halfway across the city, he saw that Galbatorix's soldiers

had retaken the catapults and other war machines mounted on the curtain wall. *They're firing into their own city*, he thought. *They're firing at their own men!*

With a growl of disgust, he turned away from the square, so that he was facing the interior of the city. "We can't help here!" he shouted to the battalion. "Leave Barst to the others. Take the street over there!" He pointed to his left. "We'll fight our way to the wall and make our stand there!"

If the warriors responded, he did not hear, for he was already moving. Behind him, another stone crashed into the fighting armies, causing even more screams of pain.

The street Roran had chosen was full of soldiers, as well as a few elves and werecats, who were clumped together by the front door of a hatter's shop, hard-pressed to fend off the large number of enemies around them. The elves shouted something, and a dozen soldiers fell to the ground, but the rest remained standing.

Diving into the midst of the soldiers, Roran again lost himself in the red-tinged haze of battle. He leaped over one of the fallen soldiers and brought his hammer down on the helm of a man with his back turned. Confident that the man was dead, Roran used his shield to shove the next soldier back and then jabbed with the end of his hammer at the man's throat, crushing it.

Next to him, Delwin caught a spear in his shoulder and went down on one knee with a cry of pain. Swinging his hammer even faster than normal, Roran drove back the spearman while Delwin pulled the weapon out and got back to his feet.

"Fall back," Roran told him.

Delwin shook his head, teeth bared. "No!"

"Fall back, blast you! That's an order."

Delwin cursed, but he obeyed, and Horst took his place. The smith, Roran noticed, was bleeding from cuts on his arms and legs, but they did not seem to interfere with his ability to move.

Evading a sword thrust, Roran took a step forward. He seemed to hear a faint rushing sound behind him, and then a thunderclap went off in his ears, and the earth spun around him and everything went black.

He woke with a throbbing head. Above, he saw the sky—bright now with light from the rising sun—and the dark underside of the crevice-lined overhang.

Groaning with pain, he pushed himself upright. He was lying at the base of the city's outer wall, next to the bloody fragments of a stone from a catapult. His shield was missing, as was his hammer, which concerned him in a befuddled sort of way.

Even as he tried to regain his bearings, a group of five soldiers rushed at him, and one of the men stabbed him in the chest with a spear. The point of the weapon drove him back against the wall, but it did not pierce his skin.

"Grab him!" shouted the soldiers, and Roran felt hands take hold of his arms and legs. He thrashed, trying to wrench free, but he was still weak and disoriented, and there were too many soldiers for him to overpower.

The soldiers struck at him again and again, and he felt his strength fading as his wards shielded him from the blows. The world grew gray, and he was about to lose consciousness again when the blade of a sword sprouted from the mouth of one of the soldiers.

The soldiers dropped him, and Roran saw a dark-haired woman whirling among them, swinging her sword with the practiced ease of a seasoned warrior. Within seconds, she killed the five men, although one of them managed to give her a shallow cut along her left thigh.

Afterward, she offered him her hand and said, "Stronghammer."

As he grasped her forearm, he saw that her wrist—where her worn bracer did not cover it—was layered with scars, as if she had been burned or whipped nearly to the bone. Behind the woman stood a pale-faced teenage girl clad in a piecemeal collection of armor, and also a boy who looked a year or two younger than the girl.

"Who are you?" he asked, standing. The woman's face was striking: broad and strong-boned, with the bronzed, weather-beaten look of one who had spent most of her life outdoors.

"A passing stranger," she said. Bending at the knees, she picked up one of the soldiers' spears and handed it to him.

"My thanks."

She nodded, and then she and her young companions trotted off among the buildings, heading farther into the city.

Roran stared after them for a half second, wondering, then shook himself and hurried back along the street to rejoin his battalion.

The warriors greeted him with shouts of astonishment and, heartened, attacked the soldiers with renewed vigor. However, as Roran took his place along with the other men from Carvahall, he discovered that the stone that had struck him had also killed Delwin. His sorrow quickly turned to rage, and he fought with even greater ferocity than before, determined to help end the battle as soon as possible.

Afraid but determined, Eragon strode forward with Arya, Elva, and Saphira toward the dais where Galbatorix sat relaxed upon his throne.

It was a long walk, long enough that Eragon had time to consider a number of strategies, most of which he discarded as impractical. He knew that strength alone would not be enough to defeat the king; it would require cunning as well, and that was the one thing he felt he most lacked. Still, they had no choice now but to confront Galbatorix.

The two rows of lanterns that led to the dais were wide enough apart that the four of them were able to walk side by side. For that Eragon was glad, as it meant Saphira would be able to fight next to them if need be.

As they approached the throne, Eragon continued to study the chamber around them. It was, he thought, a strange room for a king to receive guests in. Aside from the bright path that lay before them, most of the space was hidden within impenetrable gloom—even more so than the halls of the dwarves beneath Tronjheim and Farthen Dûr—and the air contained a dry, musky scent that seemed familiar, even though he could not place it.

"Where is Shruikan?" he said in an undertone.

Saphira sniffed. *I can smell him, but I don't hear him.*

Elva frowned. "Nor can I feel him."

When they were perhaps thirty feet from the dais, they halted. Behind the throne hung thick black curtains made of velvety material, which stretched up toward the ceiling.

A shadow lay over Galbatorix, concealing his features. Then he leaned forward, into the light, and Eragon saw his face. It was long and lean, with a deep brow and a bladelike nose. His eyes were hard as stones, and they showed little white around the irises. His mouth was thin and wide with a slight downturn at the corners, and he had a close-cropped beard and mustache, which, like his clothes, were black as pitch. In age, he appeared to be in his fourth decade: still at the height of his strength, yet near the beginning of his decline. There were lines on his brow and on either side of his nose, and his tanned skin had a thin look to it, as if he had eaten nothing but rabbit meat and turnips through the winter. His shoulders were broad and well built, and his waist trim.

Upon his head was a crown of reddish gold set with all manner of jewels. The crown appeared old—older even than the hall, and Eragon

wondered if perhaps it had once belonged to King Palancar, many hundreds of years ago.

On Galbatorix's lap rested his sword. It was a Rider's sword, that much was obvious, but Eragon had never seen its like before. The blade, hilt, and crossguard were stark white, while the gem within the pommel was as clear as a mountain spring. Altogether, there was something about the weapon that Eragon found unsettling. Its color—or rather its *lack* of color—reminded him of a sun-bleached bone. It was the color of death, not life, and it seemed far more dangerous than any shade of black, be it ever so dark.

Galbatorix examined them each in turn with his sharp, unblinking gaze. "So, you have come to kill me," he said. "Well then, shall we begin?" He lifted his sword and spread his arms to either side in a welcoming gesture.

Eragon widened his stance and raised his sword and shield. The king's invitation unsettled him. *He's playing with us.*

Still keeping hold of the Dauthdaert, Elva stepped forward and began to speak. However, no sound came from her mouth, and she looked at Eragon with an expression of alarm.

Eragon tried to touch her mind with his own, but he could feel nothing of her thoughts; it was as if she were no longer in the room with them.

Galbatorix laughed, then returned his sword to his lap and leaned back in his throne. "Did you truly believe that I was ignorant of your ability, child? Did you really think you could render me helpless with such a petty, transparent trick? Oh, I have no doubt your words could harm me, but only if I can hear them." His bloodless lips curved in a cruel, humorless smile. "Such folly. *This* is the extent of your plan? A girl who cannot speak unless I grant her leave, a spear more suited for hanging on a wall than carrying into battle, and a collection of Eldunarí half out of their minds with age? Tut-tut. I had thought better of you, Arya. And you, Glaedr, but then I suppose your emotions have clouded your reason since I used Murtagh to slay Oromis."

To Eragon, Saphira, and Arya, Glaedr said, *Kill him.* The golden dragon felt perfectly calm, but his very serenity betrayed an anger that surpassed all other emotions.

Eragon exchanged a quick glance with Arya and Saphira, and then the three of them started toward the dais, even as Glaedr, Umaroth, and the other Eldunarí attacked Galbatorix's mind.

Before Eragon managed to take more than a few steps, the king rose up from his velvet seat and shouted a Word. The Word reverberated within Eragon's mind, and every part of his being seemed to thrum in response, as if he were an instrument upon which a bard had struck a

chord. Despite the intensity of his response, Eragon was unable to remember the Word; it faded from his mind, leaving behind only the knowledge of its existence and how it had affected him.

Galbatorix uttered other words after the first, but none seemed to have the same power, and Eragon was too dazed to comprehend their meaning. As the last phrase left the king's lips, a force gripped Eragon, stopping him in mid-stride. The jolt shook a yelp of surprise from him. He tried to move, but his body might as well have been encased in stone. All he could do was breathe, look, and as he had already discovered, speak.

He did not understand; his wards should have protected him from the king's magic. That they did not left him feeling as if he were teetering on the edge of a vast abyss.

Next to him, Saphira, Arya, and Elva appeared likewise immobilized.

Enraged by how easily the king had caught them, Eragon joined his mind with the Eldunarí as they battered at Galbatorix's consciousness. He felt a vast number of minds opposing them—dragons all, who crooned and babbled and shrieked in a mad, disjointed chorus that contained such pain and sorrow, Eragon wanted to pull himself away lest they drag him down into their insanity. They were strong too, as if most of them had been Glaedr's size or larger.

The opposing dragons made it impossible to attack Galbatorix directly. Every time Eragon thought he felt the touch of the king's thoughts, one of the enslaved dragons would throw itself at Eragon's mind and—gibbering all the while—force him to retreat. Fighting the dragons was difficult on account of their wild and incoherent thoughts; subduing any one of them was like trying to hold down a rabid wolf. And there were so many of them, far more than the Riders had hidden in the Vault of Souls.

Before either side could gain the advantage, Galbatorix, who seemed entirely unaffected by the invisible struggle, said, "Come out, my dears, and meet our guests."

A boy and a girl emerged from behind the throne and came to stand by the king's right hand. The girl looked about six, the boy perhaps eight or nine. They shared a close resemblance, and Eragon guessed they were brother and sister. Both were dressed in their night garments. The girl clung to the boy's arm and half hid behind him, while the boy appeared frightened but determined. Even as he struggled against Galbatorix's Eldunarí, Eragon could feel the minds of the children—could feel their terror and confusion—and he knew they were real.

"Isn't she charming?" asked Galbatorix, lifting the girl's chin with one long finger. "Such large eyes and such pretty hair. And isn't he a

handsome young lad?" He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Children, it is said, are a blessing to us all. I do not happen to share that belief. It has been my experience that children are every bit as cruel and vindictive as adults. They only lack the strength to subjugate others to their will.

"Perhaps you agree with me, perhaps you don't. Regardless, I know that you of the Varden pride yourselves on your virtue. You see yourselves as upholders of justice, defenders of the innocent—as if any are truly innocent—and as noble warriors fighting to right an ancient wrong. Very well, then; let us test your convictions and see if you are what you claim to be. Unless you stop your attack, I shall kill these two"—he shook the boy's shoulder—"and I shall kill them if you dare attack me again.… In fact, if you displease me excessively, I shall kill them anyway, so I advise you to be courteous." The boy and the girl appeared sick at his words, but they made no attempt to flee.

Eragon looked over at Arya, and he saw his despair mirrored in her eyes.

Umaroth! they cried out.

No, growled the white dragon, even as he wrestled with the mind of another Eldunarí.

You have to stop, said Arya.

No!

He'll kill them, said Eragon.

No! We will not give up. Not now!

Enough! roared Glaedr. *There are hatchlings in danger!*

And more hatchlings will be in danger if we do not kill the Egg-breaker.

Yes, but now is the wrong time to try, said Arya. *Wait a little while, and perhaps we can find a way to attack him without risking the lives of the children.*

And if not? asked Umaroth.

Neither Eragon nor Arya could bring themselves to answer.

Then we will do what we must, said Saphira. Eragon hated it, but he knew she was right. They could not place the two children before the whole of Alagaësia. If possible, they would save the boy and the girl, but if not, then they would still attack. They had no other choice.

As Umaroth and the Eldunarí he spoke for grudgingly subsided, Galbatorix smiled. "There, that's better. Now we may speak as civilized beings, without worrying about who is trying to kill whom." He patted the boy on the head and then pointed toward the steps of the dais. "Sit." Without arguing, the two children settled on the lowest step, as far from the king as they could get. Then Galbatorix motioned and said, "Kausta," and Eragon slid forward until he was standing at the base of the dais, as did Arya, Elva, and Saphira.

Eragon continued to be bewildered that their wards were not

protecting them. He thought of the Word—whatever it might have been—and a horrible suspicion began to take root within him. Hopelessness quickly followed. For all their plans, for all their talking and worrying and suffering, for all their sacrifices, Galbatorix had captured them as easily as he might a litter of newborn kittens. And if Eragon's suspicion was true, the king was even more formidable than they had suspected.

Still, they were not entirely helpless. Their minds were, for the moment, their own. And so far as he could tell, they could still use magic … one way or another.

Galbatorix's gaze settled upon Eragon. "So you are the one who has given me so much trouble, Eragon, son of Morzan.… You and I should have met long ago. Had your mother not been so foolish as to hide you in Carvahall, you would have grown up here, in Urû'baen, as a child of the nobility, with all the riches and responsibilities that entails, instead of whiling away your days grubbing in the dirt.

"Be that as it may, you are here now, and those things shall at last be yours. They are your birthright, your inheritance, and I shall see to it that you receive them." He seemed to study Eragon with greater intensity, and then he said, "You look more like your mother than your father. With Murtagh, the opposite holds true. Still, it matters little. Whichever one you resemble most, it is only right that you and your brother should serve me, even as did your parents."

"Never," said Eragon with a clenched jaw.

A thin smile appeared on the king's face. "Never? We shall see." His gaze shifted. "And you, Saphira. Of all my guests today, I am gladdest to see you. You have grown to a fine adulthood. Do you remember this place? Do you remember the sound of my voice? I spent many a night talking to you and the other eggs in my charge during the years when I was securing my rule over the Empire."

I … I remember a little, said Saphira, and Eragon relayed her words to the king. She did not want to communicate directly with the king, nor would the king have allowed it. Keeping their minds separate was the best way to protect themselves when not in open conflict.

Galbatorix nodded. "And I am sure you will remember more the longer you stay within these walls. You may not have been fully aware of it at the time, but you spent most of your life in a room not far from here. This is your home, Saphira. It is where you belong. And it is where you will build your nest and lay your eggs."

Saphira's eyes narrowed, and Eragon felt a strange yearning from her, mixed with a burning hatred.

The king moved on. "Arya Dröttningu. Fate, it seems, has a sense of humor, for here you are, even as I ordered you to be brought so long ago. Your path was a roundabout one, but still you have come, and of

your own accord. I find that rather amusing. Don't you?"

Arya pressed her lips together and refused to answer.

Galbatorix chuckled. "I admit you have been a thorn in my side for quite some time now. You've not caused as much mischief as that bumbling meddler Brom, but neither have you been idle. One might even say that this whole situation is your fault, as it was you who sent Saphira's egg to Eragon. However, I hold no enmity toward you. If not for you, Saphira might not have hatched and I might never have been able to flush the last of my enemies from hiding. For that, I thank you.

"And then there is you, Elva. The girl with the sigil of a Rider upon her brow. Dragon-marked and blessed with the wherewithal to perceive all that pains a person and all that *will* pain them. How you must have suffered these past months. How you must despise those around you for their weaknesses, even as you are forced to share in their misery. The Varden have used you poorly. Today I shall end the battles that have so tormented you, and you shall no longer have to endure the mistakes and misfortunes of others. That I promise. On occasion, I may have need of your skill, but in the main, you may live as you please, and peace shall be yours."

Elva frowned, but it was obvious that the king's offer tempted her. Listening to Galbatorix, Eragon realized, could be as dangerous as listening to Elva herself.

Galbatorix paused and fingered the wire-wrapped hilt of his sword while he regarded them with a hooded gaze. Then he looked past them toward the point in the air where the Eldunarí floated hidden from sight, and his mood seemed to darken. "Convey my words to Umaroth as I speak them," he said. "Umaroth! We are ill met once again. I thought I killed you on Vroengard."

Umaroth responded, and Eragon began to relay his words: "He says —"

"—that you killed only his body," Arya finished.

"That much is obvious," said Galbatorix. "Where did the Riders hide you and those with you? On Vroengard? Or was it elsewhere? My servants and I searched the ruins of Doru Araeba most closely."

Eragon hesitated to deliver the dragon's answer, as it was sure to displease the king, but he could think of no other option. "He says … that he will never share that information with you of his own free will."

Galbatorix's eyebrows met above his nose. "Does he now? Well, he'll tell me soon enough, whether he wishes to or not." The king tapped the pommel of his glaringly white sword. "I took this blade from his Rider, you know, when I killed him—when I killed Vrael—in the watchtower that overlooks Palancar Valley. Vrael had his own name for this sword. He called it Islingr, 'Light-bringer.' I thought

Vrangr was more … appropriate."

Vrangr meant "awry," and Eragon agreed that it fitted the sword better.

A dull boom sounded behind them, and Galbatorix smiled again. "Ah, good. Murtagh and Thorn shall be joining us shortly, and then we can begin properly." Another sound filled the chamber, then a great gusting noise that seemed to come from several directions at once. Galbatorix glanced over his shoulder and said, "It was inconsiderate of you to attack so early in the morning. I was already awake—I rise well before dawn—but you woke Shruikan. He gets rather irritated when he's tired, and when he's irritated, he tends to eat people. My guards learned long ago not to disturb him when he's resting. You would have done well to follow their example."

As Galbatorix spoke, the curtains behind his throne shifted and rose toward the ceiling.

With a sense of shock, Eragon realized that they were actually Shruikan's wings.

The black dragon lay curled on the floor with his head close to the throne, the bulk of his massive body forming a wall too steep and too high for any to climb without magic. His scales had not the radiance of Saphira's or Thorn's but rather sparkled with a dark, liquid brilliance. Their inky color made them almost opaque, which gave them an appearance of strength and solidity that Eragon had not seen in a dragon's scales before; it was as if Shruikan were plated with stone or metal, not gems.

The dragon was enormous. Eragon at first had difficulty comprehending that the entire shape before them was a single living creature. He saw part of Shruikan's corded neck and thought he was seeing the main part of the dragon's body; he saw the side of one of Shruikan's hind feet and mistook it for a shin. A fold of a wing was an entire wing in his mind. Only when he looked up and found the spikes atop the dragon's spine did Eragon grasp the full extent of Shruikan's size. Each spike was as wide as the trunk of an ancient oak tree; the scales surrounding them were a foot thick, if not more.

Then Shruikan opened an eye and looked down at them. His iris was a pale blue white, the color of a high mountain glacier, and it appeared startlingly bright amid the black of his scales.

The dragon's huge slitted orb darted back and forth as he studied their faces. His gaze seemed to contain nothing but fury and madness, and Eragon felt certain that Shruikan would kill them in an instant if Galbatorix allowed it.

The stare of the enormous eye—especially when it held such evident malice—made Eragon want to run and hide in a burrow deep, deep underground. It was, he imagined, very much how a rabbit must

feel when confronted by a large, toothy creature.

Beside him, Saphira growled, and the scales along her back rippled and lifted like hackles.

In response, jets of fire appeared in the yawning pits of Shruikan's nostrils, and then he growled as well, drowning out Saphira and filling the chamber with a rumble like that of a rockslide.

On the dais, the two children squeaked and curled into balls, tucking their heads between their knees.

"Peace, Shruikan," said Galbatorix, and the black dragon grew silent again. His eyelid descended, but it did not close completely; the dragon continued to watch them through a gap a few inches wide, as if waiting for the right moment to pounce.

"He does not like you," said Galbatorix. "But then, he does not like anyone … do you now, Shruikan?" The dragon snorted, and the smell of smoke tinged the air.

Hopelessness again overwhelmed Eragon. Shruikan could kill Saphira with a bat of his paw. And as large as the chamber was, it was still too small for Saphira to evade the great black dragon for long.

His hopelessness turned to frustrated rage, and he wrenched at his invisible bonds. "How is it you can do this?" he shouted, straining every muscle in his body.

"I would like to know that as well," said Arya.

Galbatorix's eyes seemed to gleam beneath the dark eaves of his brow. "Can you not guess, elfling?"

"I would prefer an answer to a guess," she replied.

"Very well. But first you must do something so that you may know that what I say is indeed the truth. You must try to cast a spell, both of you, and then I shall tell you." When neither Eragon nor Arya made to speak, the king gestured with his hand. "Go on; I promise that I will not punish you for it. Now try.… I insist."

Arya went first. "Thrautha," she said, her voice hard and low. She was, Eragon guessed, trying to send the Dauthdaert flying toward Galbatorix. The weapon, however, remained fixed to her hand.

Then Eragon spoke: "Brisingr!" He thought that perhaps his bond with his sword would allow him to use magic where Arya could not, but to his disappointment, the blade remained as it was, glittering dimly in the dull light of the lanterns.

Galbatorix's gaze grew more intense. "The answer must be obvious to you now, elfling. It has taken me most of the past century, but at long last I have found what I was searching for: a means of governing the spellcasters of Alagaësia. The search was not easy; most men would have given up in frustration or, if they had the required patience, fear. But not I. I persisted. And through my study, I discovered what I had for so long desired: a tablet written in another

land and another age, by hands that were neither elf nor dwarf nor human nor Urgal. And upon that tablet, there was scribed a certain Word—a name that magicians throughout the ages have hunted for with nothing but bitter disappointment as their reward." Galbatorix lifted a finger. "The name of all names. The name of the ancient language."

Eragon bit back a curse. He had been right. *That's what the Ra'zac was trying to tell me*, he thought, remembering what one of the insect-like monsters had said to him in Helgrind: "He has almossst found the *name*.… The true *name*!"

As disheartening as Galbatorix's revelation was, Eragon clung to the knowledge that the name could not stop him or Arya—or Saphira for that matter—from using magic *without* the ancient language. Not that it would do much good. The king's wards were sure to protect him and Shruikan from any spells they might cast. Still, if the king did not know that it was possible to use magic without the ancient language, or even if he did but he believed that *they* did not, then they might be able to surprise him and maybe distract him for a moment, although Eragon was not sure how that might help.

Galbatorix continued: "With this Word, I can reshape spells as easily as another magician might command the elements. All spells shall be subject to me, but I am subject to none, except for those of my choosing."

Perhaps he doesn't *know*, Eragon thought, a spark of determination kindling in his heart.

"I shall use the name of names to bring every magician in Alagaësia to heel, and no one shall cast a spell but with my blessing, not even the elves. At this very moment, the magicians of your army are discovering the truth of this. Once they venture a certain distance into Urû'baen, past the front gate, their spells cease to work as they should. Some of their enchantments fail outright, while others twist and end up affecting your troops instead of mine." Galbatorix tilted his head and his gaze grew distant, as if he were listening to someone whispering in his ear. "It has caused much confusion among their ranks."

Eragon fought the urge to spit at the king. "It doesn't matter," he growled. "We'll still find a way to stop you."

Galbatorix seemed grimly amused. "Is that so. How? And why? Think what you are saying. You would stop the first opportunity that Alagaësia has had for true peace in order to sate your over-developed sense of vengeance? You would allow magicians everywhere to continue to have their way, regardless of the harm they cause others? That seems far worse than anything I have done. But this is idle speculation. The finest warriors of the Riders could not defeat me, and

you are far from their equal. You never had any hope of overthrowing me. None of you did."

"I killed Durza, and I killed the Ra'zac," said Eragon. "Why not you?"

"I am not as weak as those who serve me. You could not even trounce Murtagh, and he is but a shadow of a shadow. Your father, Morzan, was far more powerful than either of you, and even he could not withstand my might. Besides," said Galbatorix as a cruel expression settled on his face, "you are mistaken if you think you destroyed the Ra'zac. The eggs in Dras-Leona weren't the only ones I took from the Lethrblaka. I have others, hidden elsewhere. Soon they shall hatch, and soon the Ra'zac shall once more roam the earth to do my bidding. As for Durza, Shades are easy to make, and they are often more trouble than they are worth. So you see, you have won *nothing*, boy—nothing but false victories."

Above all, Eragon hated Galbatorix's smugness and his air of overwhelming superiority. He wanted to rage at the king and curse him with every oath he knew, but for the sake of the children's safety, he held his tongue.

Do you have any ideas? he asked Saphira, Arya, and Glaedr.

No, said Saphira. The others remained silent.

Umaroth?

Only that we should attack while we still can.

A minute passed wherein no one spoke. Galbatorix leaned on one elbow and rested his chin on his fist while he continued to watch them. By his feet, the boy and the girl cried softly. Above, Shruikan's eye remained fixed on Eragon and those with him, like a great ice-blue lantern.

Then they heard the doors to the chamber open and close, and the sound of approaching footsteps—the footsteps of both a man and a dragon.

Murtagh and Thorn soon appeared in their field of vision. They stopped next to Saphira, and Murtagh bowed. "Sir."

The king motioned, and Murtagh and Thorn walked over to the right of the throne.

As Murtagh took up his position, he gave Eragon a look of disgust; then he clasped his hands behind his back and stared toward the far end of the chamber, ignoring him.

"You took longer than I expected," said Galbatorix in a deceptively mild voice.

Without looking, Murtagh said, "The gate was more damaged than I originally thought, sir, and the spells you placed on it made it difficult to repair."

"Do you mean that it's my fault you are tardy?"

Murtagh's jaw tightened. "No, sir. I only mean to explain. Also, part of the hallway was rather … messy, and that slowed us."

"I see. We shall speak of this later, but for now, there are other matters we must attend to. For one, it is time our guests meet the final member of our party. Moreover, it is high time we had some proper light in here."

And Galbatorix struck the flat of his blade against one arm of his throne, and in a deep voice, he cried, "Naina!"

At his command, hundreds of lanterns sprang to life along the walls of the chamber, bathing it with warm, candle-like illumination. The room was still dim about the corners, but for the first time Eragon could make out the details of their surroundings. Scores of pillars and doorways lined the walls, and all about were sculptures and paintings and gilt scrollwork. Gold and silver had been used with abundance, and Eragon glimpsed the sparkle of many jewels. It was a staggering display of wealth, even when compared with the riches of Tronjheim or Ellesméra.

After a moment, he noticed something else: a block of gray stone—granite perhaps—eight feet tall, which stood off to their right, beyond where the light had previously reached. And chained standing to the block was Nasuada, wearing a simple white tunic. She was watching them with wide-open eyes, though she could not speak, for a knotted cloth was tied over her mouth. She looked worn and tired but otherwise healthy.

Relief shot through Eragon. He had not dared hope to find her alive. "Nasuada!" he shouted. "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

"Has he forced you to swear fealty to him?"

She shook her head.

"Do you think I would let her tell you if I had?" asked Galbatorix. As Eragon looked back at the king, he saw Murtagh cast a quick, concerned glance toward Nasuada, and he wondered at its significance.

"Well, have you?" Eragon asked in a challenging tone.

"As it so happens, no. I decided to wait until I had gathered all of you together. Now that I have, none shall leave until you have pledged yourself in service to me, nor shall you leave until I have learned the true name of each and every one of you. *That* is why you are here. Not to kill me, but to bow down before me and to finally put an end to this noisome rebellion."

Saphira growled again, and Eragon said, "We won't give in." Even to his own ears, his words seemed weak and toothless.

"Then they will die," Galbatorix replied, pointing at the two children. "And in the end, your defiance will change nothing. You do

not seem to understand; you have already lost. Outside, the battle fares badly for your friends. Soon my men will force them to surrender, and this war will arrive at its destined conclusion. Fight if you wish. Deny what is before you if it comforts you. But nothing you do can change your fate, or that of Alagaësia."

Eragon refused to believe that he and Saphira would have to spend the rest of their lives answering to Galbatorix. Saphira felt the same, and her anger joined with his, burning away every last bit of his fear and caution, and he said, "Vae weohnata ono vergarí, eka thäet otherúm." We will kill you, I swear it.

For a moment, Galbatorix appeared aggravated; then he spoke the Word again—as well as other words in the ancient language besides—and the vow Eragon had uttered seemed to lose all meaning; the words lay in his mind like a handful of dead leaves, devoid of any power to impel or inspire.

The king's upper lip curved in a sneer. "Swear all the oaths you want. They shall not bind you, not unless I allow them to."

"I'll still kill you," Eragon muttered. He understood that if he continued to resist, it might mean the lives of the two children, but Galbatorix *had* to be killed, and if the price of his death was the deaths of the boy and the girl, then that was a cost Eragon was willing to accept. He knew he would hate himself for it. He knew that he would see the faces of the children in his dreams for the rest of his life. But if he did not challenge Galbatorix, then all would be lost.

Do not hesitate, said Umaroth. *Now is the time to strike*.

Eragon raised his voice. "Why won't you fight me? Are you a coward? Or are you too weak to match yourself against me? Is that why you hide behind these children like a frightened old woman?"

Eragon …, said Arya in a warning tone.

"I am not the only one who brought a child here today," replied the king, the lines on his face deepening.

"There is a difference: Elva agreed to come. But you didn't answer the question. Why won't you fight? Is it that you've spent so long sitting on your throne and eating sweets that you've forgotten how to swing a sword?"

"You would not want to fight me, youngling," growled the king.

"Prove it, then. Release me and meet me in honest battle. Show that you are still a warrior to be reckoned with. Or live with the knowledge that you are a sniveling coward who dares not face even a single opponent without the help of your Eldunarí. You killed Vrael himself! Why should you fear me? Why should—"

"Enough!" said Galbatorix. A flush had crept onto his hollow cheeks. Then, like quicksilver, his mood changed, and he bared his teeth in a fearsome approximation of a smile. He rapped the arm of

his seat with his knuckles. “I did not gain this throne by accepting every challenge put to me. Nor have I held it by meeting my foes in ‘honest battle.’ What you have yet to learn, youngling, is that it does not matter how you achieve victory, only that you achieve it.”

“You’re wrong. It does matter,” said Eragon.

“I will remind you of that when you are sworn to me. However …” Galbatorix tapped the pommel of his sword. “Since you wish so badly to fight, I will grant your request.” The flare of hope that Eragon felt vanished when Galbatorix added, “But not with me. With Murtagh.”

At those words, Murtagh flashed an angry look at Eragon.

The king stroked the fringe of his beard. “I would like to know, once and for all, which of you is the better warrior. You will fight as you are, without magic or Eldunarí, until one of you is unable to continue. You may not kill each other—that I forbid—but short of death, I will allow most anything. It will be rather entertaining, I think, to watch brother fight brother.”

“No,” said Eragon. “Not brothers. Half brothers. Brom was my father, not Morzan.”

For the first time, Galbatorix appeared surprised. Then one corner of his mouth twisted upward. “Of course. I should have seen it; the truth is in your face for any who know what to look for. This duel will be all the more fitting, then. The son of Brom pitted against the son of Morzan. Fate indeed has a sense of humor.”

Murtagh also reacted with surprise. He controlled his face too well for Eragon to determine whether the information pleased or upset him, but Eragon knew that it had thrown him off balance. That had been his plan. If Murtagh was distracted, it would be that much easier for Eragon to defeat him. And he did intend to defeat him, regardless of the blood they shared.

“Letta,” said Galbatorix with a slight motion of his hand.

Eragon staggered as the spell holding him vanished.

Then the king said, “Gánga aptr,” and Arya, Elva, and Saphira slid backward, leaving a wide space between them and the dais. The king muttered a few other words, and most of the lanterns in the chamber dimmed so that the area in front of the throne was the brightest spot in the room.

“Come now,” said Galbatorix to Murtagh. “Join Eragon, and let us see which of you is the more skilled.”

Scowling, Murtagh walked to a spot several yards from where Eragon stood. He drew Zar’roc—the blade of the crimson sword looked as if it were already coated in blood—then lifted his shield and settled into a crouch.

After glancing at Saphira and Arya, Eragon did the same.

“Now fight!” cried Galbatorix, and clapped his hands.

Sweating, Eragon began to move toward Murtagh, even as Murtagh moved toward him.

Muscle Against Metal

Roran yelped and jumped aside as a brick chimney smashed to the ground in front of him, followed by the body of one of the Empire's archers.

He shook the sweat from his eyes, then moved around the body and the pile of scattered bricks, hopping from one patch of open ground to the next, much as he used to hop along the stones by the Anora River.

The battle was going badly. That much was obvious. He and his warriors had remained close to the outer wall for at least a quarter of an hour, fighting off the advancing waves of soldiers, but then they had allowed the soldiers to lure them back among the buildings. In retrospect, that had been a mistake. Fighting in the streets was desperate and bloody and confusing. His battalion had become spread out, and only a small number of his warriors remained close by—men from Carvahall, mostly, along with four elves and several Urgals. The rest were scattered among the nearby streets, fighting on their own, without direction.

Worse, for some reason that the elves and other spellcasters could not explain, magic no longer seemed to be working as it should. They had discovered this when one of the elves had tried to kill a soldier with a spell, only to have a Varden warrior fall down dead instead, consumed by the swarm of beetles the elf had summoned forth. His death had sickened Roran; it was a horrible, senseless way to die, and it might have happened to any of them.

Off to their right, closer to the main gate, Lord Barst was still rampaging through the main body of the Varden's army. Roran had caught sight of him several times: on foot now, striding among the humans, elves, and dwarves and dashing them aside like so many ninepins with his huge black mace. No one had been able to stop the hulking man, much less wound him, and those around him scrambled to stay out of reach of his fearsome weapon.

Roran had also seen King Orik and a group of dwarves hewing their way through a group of soldiers. Orik's jeweled helm flashed in the light as he swung his mighty war hammer, Volund. Behind him, his warriors shouted, "Vor Orikz korda!"

Fifty feet past Orik, Roran had glimpsed Queen Islanzadí whirling through the battle, her red cape flying and her shining armor as bright as a star amid the dark mass of bodies. About her head had flitted the white raven that was her companion. What little Roran saw of

Islanzadí impressed him with her skill, ferocity, and bravery. She reminded him of Arya, but he thought that the queen might be the greater warrior.

A cluster of five soldiers charged around the corner of a house and nearly ran into Roran. Shouting, they leveled their spears and did their best to skewer him like a roast chicken. He ducked and dodged and, with his own spear, caught one of the men in the throat. The soldier remained on his feet for a minute more, but he could not breathe properly and soon he fell to the ground, tangling the legs of his companions.

Roran seized the opportunity, stabbing and cutting with abandon. One of the soldiers managed to land a blow on Roran's right shoulder, and Roran felt the familiar decrease in his strength as his wards deflected the blade.

He was surprised that the wards protected him. Only a few moments before, they had failed to stop the rim of a shield from tearing open the skin on his left cheek. He wished that whatever was happening with the magic would resolve itself one way or another. As it was, he dared not risk leaving himself open for even the slightest blow.

Roran advanced toward the last two soldiers, but before he reached them, there was a blur of steel, and then their heads dropped to the cobblestones, surprised expressions on their faces. The bodies collapsed, and behind them Roran saw the herbalist Angela, garbed in her green and black armor and carrying her sword-staff. Close by her side were a pair of werecats, one in the shape of a brindle-haired girl with sharp, bloodstained teeth and a long dagger, the other in the shape of an animal. He thought it might have been Solembum, but he was not sure.

"Roran! How nice to see you," said the herbalist with a smile that seemed altogether too cheery considering the circumstances. "Imagine meeting here!"

"Better here than in the grave!" he shouted, picking up an extra spear and heaving it at a man farther down the street.

"Well said!"

"I thought you went with Eragon?"

She shook her head. "He didn't ask me, and I wouldn't have gone if he had. I'm no match for Galbatorix. Besides, Eragon has the Eldunarí to help him."

"You know?" he asked, shocked.

She winked at him from under the lip of her helm. "I know lots of things."

He grunted and tucked his shoulder behind his shield as he rammed into another group of soldiers. The herbalist and the werecats joined

him, as did Horst, Mandel, and several others.

"Where's your hammer?" shouted Angela as she spun her bladed staff, blocking and cutting at the same time.

"Lost! I dropped it."

Someone howled with pain behind him. As soon as he dared, Roran looked back and saw Baldor clutching the stump of his right arm. On the ground, his hand lay twitching.

Roran ran back to him, leaping over several corpses along the way. Horst was already by his son's side, fending off the soldier who had severed Baldor's hand.

Drawing his dagger, Roran cut a strip of cloth from the tunic of a fallen soldier, then said, "Here!" and tied it around the stump of Baldor's arm, stanching the bleeding.

The herbalist knelt next to them, and Roran said, "Can you help him?"

She shook her head. "Not here. If I use magic, it might end up killing him. If you can get him out of the city, though, the elves can probably save his hand."

Roran hesitated. He was not sure he dared spare anyone to escort Baldor safely out of Urû'baen. However, without a hand, Baldor would face a hard life, and Roran had no desire to condemn him to that.

"If you won't take him, I will," bellowed Horst.

Roran ducked as a stone the size of a hog flew past overhead and glanced off the front of a house, scattering pieces of masonry through the air. Inside the building, someone screamed.

"No. We need you." Turning, Roran whistled and picked two warriors: the old cobbler Loring and an Urgal. "Get him to the elves' healers as fast as you can," he said, pushing Baldor toward them. As he went, Baldor picked up his hand and tucked it under his hauberk.

The Urgal snarled and said in a thick accent that Roran barely understood, "No! I stay. I fight!" He struck his sword against his shield.

Roran stepped over, grabbed one of the creature's horns, and pulled on it until he had twisted the Urgal's head halfway around. "You'll do as I say," Roran growled. "Besides, it's not an easy task. Protect him and you'll win much glory for you and your tribe."

The Urgal's eyes seemed to brighten. "Much glory?" he said, mashing the words between his heavy teeth.

"Much glory!" Roran confirmed.

"I do it, Stronghammer!"

With a sense of relief, Roran watched the three of them depart, heading toward the outer wall, so that they might skirt most of the fighting. He was also pleased to see the human-shaped werecat follow after them, the feral, brindle-haired girl swinging her head from side

to side as she scented the air.

Then another group of soldiers attacked, and all thoughts of Baldor left Roran's mind. He hated fighting with a spear instead of a hammer, but he made do, and after a time, the street again grew calm. He knew the respite would be short.

He took the opportunity to sit on the front doorstep of a house and try to regain his breath. The soldiers seemed as fresh as ever, but he could feel exhaustion dragging on his limbs. He doubted he could keep going for much longer without making a fatal mistake.

As he sat panting, he listened to the shouts and screams coming from the direction of Urû'baen's ruined front gate. It was difficult to tell what was happening from the general clamor, but he suspected the Varden were getting pushed back, for the noise seemed to be receding slightly. Amid the commotion, he could hear the regular *crack* of Lord Barst's mace striking warrior after warrior, and then the increase in cries that invariably followed.

Roran made himself stand. If he sat for much longer, his muscles would start to stiffen. A moment after he moved away from the doorstep, the contents of a chamber pot splashed across the spot where he had just been.

"Murderers!" shouted a woman above him, and then a pair of shutters banged shut.

Roran snorted and picked his way around bodies as he led his remaining warriors over to the nearest cross street.

They paused, wary, when a soldier raced past, panic upon his face. Close behind, a pack of yowling housecats chased after him, blood dripping from the fur around their mouths.

Roran smiled and started forward again.

He stopped a second later when a group of dwarves with red beards ran toward them from deeper within the city. "Ready yourself!" one shouted. "We have a whole pack of soldiers nipping at our heels, a few hundred of them, at least."

Roran looked back up the empty cross street. "Perhaps you lost—" he began to say, and then stopped when a line of crimson tunics appeared around the corner of a building a few hundred feet away. More and more soldiers followed, pouring into the street like a swarm of red ants.

"Back!" Roran shouted. "Back!" *We have to find somewhere defensible*. The outer wall was too far away, and none of the houses were large enough to have enclosed courtyards.

As Roran ran down the street with his warriors, a dozen or so arrows landed around them.

Roran stumbled and fell, writhing, as a bolt of pain shot up his spine from the small of his back. It felt as if someone had jabbed him

with a large iron bar.

A second later, the herbalist was by his side. She tugged at something behind him, and Roran screamed. Then the pain decreased, and he found himself able to see clearly again.

The herbalist showed him an arrow with a bloody tip before throwing it away. “Your mail stopped most of it,” she said as she helped him to his feet.

Gritting his teeth, Roran ran with her to rejoin their group. Every step pained him now, and if he bent at the waist too far, his back spasmed and he found it almost impossible to move.

He saw no good places to make a stand, and the soldiers were getting closer, so at last he shouted, “Stop! Form up! Elves to the sides! Urgals front and center!”

Roran took his place near the front, along with Darmmen, Albriech, the Urgals, and one of the red-bearded dwarves.

“So you are the one they call Stronghammer,” said the dwarf as they watched the advance of the soldiers. “I fought alongside your hearth-brother in Farthen Dûr. It is mine honor to fight with you as well.”

Roran grunted. He just hoped he could stay on his feet.

Then the soldiers crashed into them, shoving them back through sheer weight. Roran set his shoulder against his shield and pushed with all his might. Swords and spears stuck through the gaps in the wall of overlapping shields; he felt one scrape against his side, but his hauberk protected him.

The elves and the Urgals proved invaluable. They broke the soldiers’ lines and earned Roran and the other warriors room to swing their weapons. At the edge of his vision, Roran saw the dwarf stabbing the soldiers in the legs, feet, and groin, causing many to fall.

The supply of soldiers seemed endless, however, and Roran found himself forced backward step by step. Not even the elves could stem the tide of men, try though they might. Othíara, the elf woman Roran had spoken to outside the city wall, died from an arrow in the neck, and the remaining elves received many wounds.

Roran was injured several more times himself: a cut on the upper part of his right calf, which would have hamstrung him if it had been a little bit higher; another cut on the thigh of the same leg, where a sword had slipped under the edge of his hauberk; a nasty scrape on his neck, where he hit himself with his own shield; a stab wound on the inner part of his right leg that fortunately missed the major arteries; and more bruises than he could count. He felt as if every part of himself had been beaten soundly with a wooden mallet and then a pair of clumsy men had used him as a target for knife throwing.

He dropped back from the front line a few times to rest his arms and catch his breath, but he always rejoined the fight soon afterward.

Then the buildings opened up around them, and Roran realized that the soldiers had succeeded in driving them into the square before Urû'baen's broken gate, and that there were now enemies behind them as well as before them.

He chanced a look over his shoulder and saw the elves and the Varden retreating before Barst and his soldiers.

"Right!" shouted Roran. "Right! Up against the buildings!" He pointed with his bloody spear.

With some difficulty, the warriors packed behind him edged to the side and onto the steps of a huge stone building fronted with a double row of pillars as tall as any of the trees in the Spine. Between the pillars, Roran glimpsed the dark, yawning shape of an open archway big enough to accommodate Saphira, if not Shruikan.

"Up! Up!" Roran shouted, and the men, dwarves, elves, and Urgals ran with him to the top of the stairs. There they set themselves among the pillars and repelled the wave of soldiers that charged after them. From their vantage point, which was perhaps twenty feet above the level of the streets, Roran saw that the Empire had nearly forced the Varden and the elves back out the gaping hole in the outer wall.

We're going to lose, he thought with sudden desperation.

The soldiers charged up the steps once again. Roran dodged a spear and kicked its owner in the belly, knocking the soldier and two other men down the stairs.

From one of the ballistae on a nearby wall tower, a javelin streaked down toward Lord Barst. When it was still a few yards from him, the javelin burst into flames, then crumbled into dust, as did every arrow shot at the armored man.

We have to kill him, thought Roran. If Barst fell, then the soldiers would likely break and lose confidence. But given that both the elves and the Kull had failed to stop him, it seemed doubtful that anyone other than Eragon could.

Even as he continued to fight, Roran kept glancing at the large, armored figure, hoping to see something that might provide a way to defeat him. He noticed that Barst walked with a slight hitch in his stride, as if he had once injured his left knee or hip. And the man seemed a hair slower than before.

So he does have his limits, thought Roran. *Or rather, the Eldunarí does*.

With a shout, he parried the sword of the soldier who had been pressing him. Jerking his shield up, he caught the soldier underneath the jaw, killing the man instantly.

Roran was out of breath and faint from his wounds, so he withdrew behind one of the pillars and leaned against it. He coughed and spat; his spittle contained blood, but he thought that was just from where he had bitten the inside of his mouth and not from a punctured lung.

At least he hoped so. His ribs felt sore enough that one of them might be broken.

A great shout rose from the Varden, and Roran looked around the pillar to see Queen Islanzadí and eleven other elves riding through the battle toward Lord Barst. Again upon Islanzadí's left shoulder sat the white raven, and he cawed and lifted his wings, the better to balance upon his moving perch. In her hand, Islanzadí carried her sword, while the rest of the elves carried spears with banners attached close to their leaf-shaped blades.

Roran leaned against the pillar, hope rising within him. "Kill him," he growled.

Barst made no move to avoid the elves but stood waiting for them with his feet spread wide and his mace and shield by his sides, as if he had no need to defend himself.

Throughout the streets, the fighting slowed to a standstill as everyone turned to watch what was about to happen.

The two elves in the lead lowered their spears, and their horses sprang forward into a gallop, the muscles beneath their glossy hides flexing and relaxing as they raced across the short distance that separated them from Barst. For a moment, it looked as if Barst would surely fall; it seemed impossible that anyone on foot could withstand such a charge.

The spears never touched Barst. His wards stopped them an arm's length from his body, and the hafts shattered in the elves' hands, leaving them holding useless shards of wood. Then Barst lifted his mace and his shield, and with them he struck the horses on the sides of their heads, breaking their necks and killing them.

The horses fell, and the elves upon them jumped free, twisting in the air as they did.

The next two elves did not have time to change course before they reached Barst. Like their predecessors, they split their spears on his wards, and then they too jumped free of their horses as Barst struck the animals down.

By then, the eight other elves, including Islanzadí, had managed to turn and rein in their steeds. They trotted in a circle around Barst, keeping their weapons pointed at him, while the four elves on the ground drew their swords and cautiously advanced toward Barst.

The man laughed and hefted his shield as he prepared for their attack. The light caught his face under his helm, and even from a distance Roran could see that it was broad and heavy-browed, with prominent cheekbones. In some ways, it reminded him of the face of an Urgal.

The four elves ran at Barst, each from a different direction, and they cut and stabbed at him in unison. Barst caught one of the swords on

his shield, deflected another with his mace, and let his wards stop the blades of the two elves behind him. He laughed again and swung his weapon.

A silver-haired elf threw himself to the side, and the mace flew past harmlessly.

Twice more Barst swung, and twice more the elves evaded him. Barst showed no signs of frustration, but hunched behind his shield and bided his time, like a cave bear waiting for whosoever might be foolish enough to venture into his lair.

Outside the ring of elves, a block of halberd-wielding soldiers took it upon themselves to run screaming toward Queen Islanzadí and her companions. Without pause, the queen lifted her sword over her head, and at her signal, a swarm of buzzing arrows shot out from the ranks of the Varden and felled the soldiers.

Roran shouted with excitement, along with many of the Varden.

Barst had been edging ever closer to the bodies of the four horses he had slain, and now he stepped into their midst so that the bodies formed a low, tumbled wall on either side of him. The elves to his left and his right would have no choice but to leap over the horses if they wished to attack him.

Clever, Roran thought, frowning.

The elf in front of Barst darted forward, shouting something in the ancient language. Barst seemed to hesitate, and his hesitation encouraged the elf to come closer. Then Barst lunged forward, his mace came crashing down, and the elf crumpled to the ground, broken.

A groan went up from the elves.

The three remaining elves on foot were more cautious thereafter. They continued to circle Barst, running in to attack him on occasion, but mostly keeping their distance.

"Surrender!" exclaimed Islanzadí, and her voice could be heard throughout the streets. "There are more of us than you. No matter how strong you are, in time you will tire and your wards will fail. You cannot win, human."

"No?" said Barst. He straightened and dropped his shield with a loud clatter.

Sudden dread filled Roran. *Run,* he thought. "Run!" he shouted a half second later.

He was too late.

Bending at the knees, Barst grabbed the neck of one of the horses and, with his left arm alone, threw the horse at Queen Islanzadí.

If she spoke in the ancient language, Roran did not hear it, but she lifted her hand—and the body of the horse stopped in midair, then dropped to the cobblestones, where it landed with an unpleasant

sound. On her shoulder, the raven screeched.

Barst was not looking, however. As soon as the carcass left his hand, he scooped up his shield and sprinted toward the nearest of the mounted elven riders. One of the three remaining elves on foot—a woman with a red sash tied around her upper arm—ran toward him and slashed at his back. Barst ignored her.

Over a flat stretch of land, the elves' horses might have been able to outdistance Barst, but in the limited space between the buildings and the closely packed warriors, Barst was both faster and more nimble. He rammed his shoulder into the ribs of one of the horses, toppling it over, and then swung his mace at an elf upon another horse, knocking the elf from his seat. A horse screamed.

The circle of elven riders disintegrated, each turning in a different direction as they tried to calm their mounts and address the threat before them.

A half-dozen elves ran out from the nearby press of warriors and surrounded Barst, all hacking at him with frenzied speed. Barst disappeared behind them for a moment; then his mace rose up, and three of the elves flew tumbling away. Then another two, and Barst strode forward, blood and gore clinging to the flanges of his black weapon.

"Now!" roared Barst, and throughout the square, hundreds of soldiers ran forward and assailed the elves, forcing them to defend themselves.

"No," Roran growled, agonized. He would have gone with his warriors to help, but too many bodies—both living and dead—separated them from Barst and the elves. He glanced over at the herbalist, who looked as worried as he felt, and said, "Can't you do something?"

"I could, but it would mean my life and that of everyone here."

"Galbatorix as well?"

"He's too well shielded, but our army would be destroyed along with most everyone in Urû'baen, and even those at our camp might die. Is that what you want?"

Roran shook his head.

"I thought not."

Moving with uncanny speed, Barst struck elf after elf, felling them with ease. With one of his swings, he caught the shoulder of the elf woman with the red sash and knocked her sprawling onto her back. She pointed at Barst and screamed in the ancient language, but the spell went awry, for another elf slumped forward and toppled out of his saddle, the front of his body split from head to seam.

Barst slew the elf woman with a jab of his mace and then continued to run from horse to horse until he reached Islanzadí on her white

mare.

The elf queen did not wait for Barst to kill her steed. She leaped out of her saddle, her red cape billowing, and her companion, the white raven, beat his wings as he took flight from her shoulder.

Before she alit, Islanzadí lashed out at Barst, her sword a streak of shining steel. Her blade rang as it collided with his wards.

Barst retaliated with a counterstroke, which Islanzadí parried with a deft turn of her wrist, sending the spiked ball of his mace crashing into the cobblestones. Around them, a space formed as friend and foe alike paused to watch them duel. Overhead, the raven circled, shrieking and cursing in the harsh manner of his kind.

Never had Roran seen such a fight. The blows from both Islanzadí and Barst were too fast to follow—only a blur was visible when they struck—and the sound of their weapons clashing was louder than all of the other noises in the city.

Again and again, Barst tried to crush Islanzadí with his mace, even as he had crushed the other elves. But she was too fast for him to catch, and she seemed, if not his equal in strength, at least strong enough to knock aside his blows without difficulty. The other elves, Roran thought, must be aiding her, for she appeared not to tire, despite her exertions.

A Kull and two elves joined Islanzadí. Barst paid them no mind, other than to kill them, one by one, when they made the mistake of venturing within his reach.

Roran found himself gripping the pillar so hard, his hands began to cramp.

Minutes passed as Islanzadí and Barst fought back and forth across the street. In motion, the elf queen was glorious: swift, lithe, and powerful. Unlike Barst, she could not afford to make a single mistake —nor did she—for her wards would not protect her. With every moment, Roran's admiration for Islanzadí increased, and he felt he was witnessing a battle that would be sung about for centuries to come.

The raven often dove at Barst, seeking to distract him from Islanzadí. After the raven's first few attempts, Barst ignored the bird, for the maddened creature could not touch him, and it took pains to keep away from his mace.

The raven seemed to grow frustrated; it shrieked louder and more frequently, and was bolder with its attacks, and with each sally, it edged ever closer to Barst's head and neck.

Finally, as the bird again swooped toward Barst, the man twisted his mace upward, changing its path in midair, and clipped the raven on its right wing. The bird cried out in pain and dropped a foot toward the ground before struggling to climb back into the sky.

Barst swung at the raven again, but Islanzadí stopped his mace with her sword, and they stood facing each other with their weapons locked together at the top, the blade of her sword wedged between the flanges of his mace.

Elf and human swayed as they pushed against one another. Neither was able to gain the advantage. Then Queen Islanzadí shouted a word in the ancient language, and where their weapons met, a harsh, brilliant light shone forth.

Squinting, Roran shaded his eyes with his hand and averted his gaze.

For a minute, the only sounds were the cries of the wounded and a ringing, bell-like tone that grew louder and louder until it was nearly unbearable. To the side, Roran saw the werecat with Angela cringing and covering its tasseled ears with its paws.

When the sound was at the very height of its intensity, the blade of Islanzadí's sword cracked, and the light and the bell-like tone vanished.

Then the elf queen smote at Barst's face with the broken end of her sword, and she said, "Thus I curse you, Barst, son of Berengar!"

Barst allowed her sword to fall upon his wards. Then he swung his mace once more and caught Queen Islanzadí between her neck and her shoulder, and she collapsed to the ground, blood staining her corselet of golden scale armor.

And all was still.

The white raven circled once over Islanzadí's body and uttered a doleful cry, then flew slowly toward the breach in the outer wall, the feathers of its wounded wing red and crumpled.

A great wail went up from the Varden. Throughout the streets, men cast down their weapons and fled. The elves shouted with rage and grief—a most terrible sound—and every elf with a bow began to fire arrows toward Barst. The arrows burst into flame before they touched him. A dozen elves charged him, but he swatted them aside as if they weighed no more than children. In that moment, another five elves darted in, lifted up Islanzadí's body, and bore her away upon their leaf-shaped shields.

A sense of disbelief gripped Roran. Of them all, Islanzadí was the one he had least expected to die. He glared at the men who were fleeing and silently cursed them for traitors and cowards; then he returned his gaze to Barst, who was rallying his troops in preparation for driving the Varden and their allies back out of Urû'baen.

The pit in Roran's stomach grew larger. The elves might continue to fight, but the men, dwarves, and Urgals no longer had a taste for battle. He could see it in their faces. They would break and retreat, and Barst would slaughter them by the hundreds from behind. Nor,

Roran was sure, would Barst halt at the city walls. No, he would continue on to the fields beyond and chase the Varden back to their camp, scattering and killing as many as he could.

It was what Roran would do.

Worse, if Barst reached the camp, Katrina would be in danger, and Roran had no illusions as to what would happen if the soldiers caught her.

Roran stared down at his bloody hands. Barst had to be stopped. But how? Roran thought and he thought, running through everything he knew about magic until, at last, he remembered how it had felt when the soldiers were holding him and striking him.

Roran took a deep, shuddering breath.

There was a way, but it was dangerous, incredibly dangerous. If he did what he was contemplating, he knew that he would probably never see Katrina again, much less their unborn child. Yet the knowledge brought him a certain peace. His life for theirs was a fair trade, and if he could help save the Varden at the same time, then he would be happy to give it.

Katrina …

The decision was an easy one.

Raising his head, he strode over to the herbalist. She looked as shocked and grief-ridden as any of the elves. He touched her on the shoulder with the edge of his shield and said, “I need your help.”

She gazed at him with red-rimmed eyes. “What do you intend to do?”

“Kill Barst.” His words captivated all of the warriors nearby.

“Roran, no!” exclaimed Horst.

The herbalist nodded. “I’ll help however I can.”

“Good. I want you to fetch Jörmundur, Garzhvog, Orik, Grimrr, and one of the elves who still has some authority.”

The curly-haired woman sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Where do you want them to meet you?”

“Right here. And hurry, before any more men flee!”

Angela nodded, then she and the werecat trotted away, sticking close to the sides of the buildings for protection.

“Roran,” said Horst, clutching his arm, “what do you have in mind?”

“I’m not going to go up against him by myself, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Roran, nodding toward Barst.

Horst appeared somewhat relieved. “Then what are you going to do?”

“You’ll see.”

Several soldiers carrying pikes ran up the steps of the building, but the red-haired dwarves who had joined Roran’s force held them off

with ease, the steps for once giving them the advantage of height over their opponents.

While the dwarves fenced with the soldiers, Roran went to a nearby elf who—with a snarl fixed on his face—was emptying his quiver at a prodigious speed, sending each of his arrows arcing toward Barst. None of them, of course, found their mark.

"Enough," said Roran. When the dark-haired elf ignored him, Roran grabbed the elf's right hand, his bow hand, and pulled it to the side. "That's enough, I said. Save your arrows."

A growl sounded, and then Roran felt a hand around his throat.

"Do not touch me, human."

"Listen to me! I can help you kill Barst. Just … let me go."

After a second or two, the fingers gripping Roran's neck relaxed. "How, Stronghammer?" The bloodthirstiness of the elf's voice contrasted with the tears on his cheeks.

"You'll find out in a minute. But I have a question for you first. Why can't you kill Barst with your minds? He's only one man, and there are so many of you."

An anguished expression crossed the elf's face. "Because his mind is hidden from us!"

"How?"

"I do not know. We can feel nothing of his thoughts. It is as if there is a sphere around his mind. We can see nothing within the sphere, nor can we pierce it."

Roran had expected something like that. "Thank you," he said, and the elf made a slight motion of his head in acknowledgment.

Garzhvog was the first to reach the building; he emerged from a nearby street and ran up the steps with two huge strides, then turned and roared at the thirty soldiers following him. Seeing the Kull safe among friends, the soldiers wisely dropped back.

"Stronghammer!" exclaimed Garzhvog. "You asked, and I have come."

After a few more minutes, the others Roran had sent the herbalist to fetch arrived at the great stone building. The silver-haired elf who presented himself was one Roran had seen with Islanzadí on several occasions. Lord Däthedr was his name. The six of them, all bloody and weary, stood in a clump among the fluted pillars.

"I have a plan to kill Barst," Roran said, "but I need your help, and we have little time. Can I count on you?"

"That depends on your plan," said Orik. "Tell it to us first."

So Roran explained it as quickly as he could. When he finished, he asked Orik, "Can your engineers aim the catapults and ballistae as accurately as needed?"

The dwarf made a noise in his throat. "Not with how humans build

their war machines. We can put a stone within twenty feet of the target, but any closer than that is up to luck."

Roran looked at the elf lord Däthedr. "Will the others of your kind follow you?"

"They will obey my orders, Stronghammer. Do not doubt it."

"Then will you send some of your magicians to accompany the dwarves and help guide the stones?"

"There would be no guarantee of success. The spells might easily fail or go astray."

"We'll have to risk it." Roran swept his gaze over the group. "So, I ask again: can I count on you?"

Out by the city wall, a chorus of fresh screams erupted as Barst smashed his way through a bank of men.

Garzhvog surprised Roran by being the first to answer. "You are battle-mad, Stronghammer, but I will follow you," he said. He made a *ruk-ruk* sound that Roran thought might be laughter. "There will be much glory in killing Barst."

Then Jörmundur said, "Aye, I'll follow you as well, Roran. We have no other choice, I think."

"Agreed," said Orik.

"Agrrreed," said Grimrr, king of the werecats, drawing the word out into a throaty growl.

"Agreed," said Lord Däthedr.

"Then go!" said Roran. "You know what you need to do! Go!"

As the others departed, Roran called his warriors together and told them his plan. Then they hunkered between the pillars and waited. It took three or four minutes—precious time in which Barst and his soldiers pushed the Varden ever closer to the breach in the outer wall—but then Roran saw groups of dwarves and elves run up to twelve of the nearest ballistae and catapults on the walls and free them from the soldiers.

Several more tense minutes passed. Then Orik hurried up the steps to the building, along with thirty of his dwarves, and said to Roran, "They're ready."

Roran nodded. To everyone with him, he said, "Take your places!"

The remnants of Roran's battalion formed a dense wedge, with him at the tip and the elves and Urgals directly behind him. Orik and his dwarves took up the rear.

Once all of the warriors were in place, Roran shouted, "Forward!" and trotted down the steps into the midst of the enemy soldiers, knowing that the rest of the group was close behind him.

The soldiers had not been expecting the charge; they parted before Roran like water before the prow of a ship.

One man tried to bar Roran's way, and Roran stabbed him through the eye without breaking stride.

When they were about fifty feet from Barst, who had his back turned, Roran stopped, as did the warriors behind him. To one of the elves, he said, "Make it so everyone in the square can hear me."

The elf muttered in the ancient language, then said, "It is done."

"Barst!" shouted Roran, and was relieved to hear his voice echo over the whole of the battle. The fighting throughout the streets came to a halt, save for a few individual skirmishes here and there.

Sweat dripped down Roran's brow and his heart was pounding, but he refused to feel afraid. "Barst!" he shouted again, and slapped the front of his shield with his spear. "Turn and fight me, you maggot-ridden cur!"

A soldier ran at him. Roran blocked his sword and, in one easy motion, swept the man off his feet and dispatched him with two quick jabs. Pulling his spear free, Roran repeated his call: "Barst!"

The broad, heavy figure slowly turned to face him. Now that he was closer, Roran could see the sly intelligence that lay in Barst's eyes and the small, mocking smile that lifted the corners of his childlike mouth. His neck was as thick as Roran's thigh, and beneath his mail hauberk, his arms were knotted with muscles. The reflections from his protruding breastplate kept snaring Roran's gaze, despite his efforts to ignore them.

"Barst! My name is Roran Stronghammer, cousin to Eragon Shadeslayer! Fight me if you dare, or be branded a coward before all here today."

"No man scares me, Stronghammer. Or should I say Lackhammer, for I see no hammer upon you."

Roran drew himself up. "I need no hammer to kill you, you beardless bootlicker."

"Is that so?" Barst's tiny smile grew wider. "Give us room!" he shouted, and waved his mace at the soldiers and Varden alike.

With the soft thunder of thousands of feet treading backward, the armies withdrew, and a wide, circular area formed around Barst. He pointed his mace at Roran. "Galbatorix told me of you, Lackhammer. He said that I was to break every bone in your body before I killed you."

"What if we break *your* bones instead?" said Roran. *Now!* he thought as hard as he could, trying to shout his thoughts into the darkness that surrounded his mind. He hoped the elves and the other spellcasters were listening as promised.

Barst frowned and opened his mouth. Before he could speak, a low, whistling noise sounded over the city, and six stone projectiles—each the size of a barrel—hurtled over the tops of the houses from the

catapults on the walls. A half-dozen javelins accompanied the stones.

Five of the stones landed directly on Barst. The sixth missed and went bouncing across the square like a rock across water, bowling over men and dwarves alike.

The stones cracked and exploded as they struck Barst's wards, sending fragments flying in every direction. Roran ducked behind his shield and nearly fell as a fist-sized chunk of stone slammed into it, bruising his arm. The javelins vanished in a flare of yellow fire, which gave a ghoulish light to the clouds of dust that floated upward from Barst's location.

When he was sure it was safe, Roran looked over his shield.

Barst was lying on his back amid the rubble, his mace on the ground next to him.

"Get him!" Roran bellowed, and ran forward.

Many of the gathered Varden started toward Barst, but the soldiers they had been fighting shouted and attacked, stopping them from covering more than a few steps. With a roar, the two armies turned on each other once again, both factions inflamed with a desperate anger.

As they did, Jörmundur emerged from a side street, leading a hundred men whom he had collected from the edges of the battle. He and those with him would help hold back the scrum of combatants while Roran and the others dealt with Barst.

From the opposite side of the square, Garzhvog and six other Kull charged out from behind the houses they had been using for cover. Their pounding footsteps shook the ground, and men of both the Empire and the Varden scrambled to move out of their way.

Then hundreds of werecats, most in their animal forms, slipped out from the main body of the intermingled armies and streamed across the cobblestones, teeth bared, toward where Barst lay.

Barst had just begun to stir when Roran reached him. Grabbing his spear with both hands, Roran brought it down on Barst's neck.

The blade of the weapon stopped a foot away, and the tip bent and snapped as if it had struck a block of granite.

Roran cursed and continued to stab as quickly as he could, trying to keep the Eldunarí within Barst's breastplate from recovering its strength.

Barst groaned.

"Hurry!" Roran bellowed at the Urgals.

Once they were close enough, Roran sprang aside so that the Kull would have the room they needed. Taking turns, each of the massive Urgals struck at Barst with their weapons. His wards blocked them, but the Kull continued to hammer away. The sound was deafening.

Werecats and elves gathered around Roran. Behind them, he was half-aware of the warriors he had brought with him holding off the

soldiers, along with Jörmundur's men.

Just when Roran was beginning to think that Barst's wards would never give way, one of the Kull uttered a triumphant shout, and Roran saw the creature's ax glance off the front of Barst's armor, denting it.

"Again!" shouted Roran. "Now! Kill him!"

The Kull lifted his ax out of the way, and Garzhvog swung his ironbound club toward Barst's head.

Roran saw a flurry of motion, and then there was a loud *thud* as the club struck Barst's shield, which the man had pulled over himself.

Blast it!

Before the Urgals could attack again, Barst rolled up against the legs of one of the Kull, and his hand latched on to the back of the Kull's right knee. The Kull bellowed with pain and hopped backward, pulling Barst out of the knot of Kull.

The Urgals and two elves closed in around Barst once more, and for a number of heartbeats, it seemed as if they might subdue him.

Then one of the elves went flying, her neck crooked at an odd angle. A Kull fell onto his side, shouting in his native language. Bone protruded from his left forearm. Garzhvog snarled and jumped back, blood streaming from a fist-sized hole in his side.

No! thought Roran, going cold. *It can't end like this. I won't let it!*

Shouting, he ran forward and slipped between two of the giant Urgals. He barely had time to see Barst—bloody and enraged, with his shield in one hand and a sword in the other—before Barst swung his shield and struck Roran on the left side of his body.

The air rushed out of Roran's lungs, and the sky and the ground spun around him, and he felt his helmet-covered head bouncing against the cobblestones.

The world seemed to keep moving beneath him even when he rolled to a stop.

He lay where he was for a time, struggling to breathe. At last he was able to fill his lungs with air, and he thought he had never been so grateful for anything as he was for that breath. He gasped. Then he howled as his body filled with pain. His left arm felt numb, but every other muscle and sinew burned with agony.

He tried to push himself upright and fell back onto his stomach, too dizzy and hurt to stand. Before him was a fragment of yellowish stone, veined with coiled branches of red agate. He stared at it for a while, panting, and the whole time, the only thought running through his mind was: *Have to get up. Have to get up. Have to get up.…*

When he felt ready, he tried again. His left arm refused to work, so he was forced to rely on his right alone. Hard as it was, he got his legs underneath him, and then he slowly rose to his feet, shaking and unable to take more than shallow breaths.

As he straightened, something pulled in his left shoulder, and he uttered a silent scream. It felt as if a red-hot knife were buried in the joint. Looking down, he saw that his arm was dislocated. Of his shield, nothing remained but a splintered board still attached to the strap around his forearm.

Roran turned, searching for Barst, and saw the man thirty yards away, covered in clawing werecats.

Satisfied that Barst would be occupied for at least a few more seconds, Roran returned his gaze to his dislocated arm. At first he could not remember what his mother had taught him, but then her words returned to him, faint and blurred by the passage of time. He pulled off the remnants of his shield.

"Make a fist," mumbled Roran, and he did so with his left hand. "Bend your arm so your fist points forward." That he did, though it worsened his pain. "Then turn your arm outward, away from your …" He screamed a curse as his shoulder grated, the muscles and tendons pulling in ways they were not supposed to stretch. He kept turning his arm and he kept clenching his fist, and after a few seconds, the bone popped back into the socket.

His relief was immediate. He still hurt elsewhere—especially his lower back and ribs—but at least he could use his arm again, and the pain was not so excruciating.

Then Roran looked toward Barst again.

What he saw sickened him.

Barst was standing in a circle of dead werecats. Blood streaked his dented breastplate, and clumps of fur clung to his mace, which he had retrieved. His cheeks were scratched deeply, and the right sleeve of his mail hauberk was torn, but otherwise he appeared unharmed. The few werecats who still faced him were careful to keep their distance, and it looked to Roran as if they were about to turn tail and run. Behind Barst lay the bodies of the Kull and the elves he had been fighting. All of Roran's warriors seemed to have disappeared, for none but soldiers surrounded Roran, Barst, and the werecats: a seething mass of crimson tunics, the men pushing and shoving as they struggled against the eddies of the battle.

"Shoot him!" Roran shouted, but no one seemed to hear.

Barst noticed, however, and he began to lumber toward Roran. "Lackhammer!" he roared. "I'll have your head for this!"

Roran saw a spear on the ground. He knelt and picked it up. The motion made him light-headed. "Let's see you try!" he replied. But the words sounded hollow, and his mind filled with thoughts of Katrina and their child who was yet to be.

Then one of the werecats—who was in the form of a white-haired woman no taller than Roran's elbow—ran forward and cut Barst along

the side of his left thigh.

Barst snarled and twisted, but the werecat was already retreating, hissing at him while she did. A moment more Barst waited, to ensure that she would not trouble him again, and then he continued walking toward Roran, limping now as his new wound exacerbated the hitch in his stride. Blood sheeted down his leg.

Roran wet his lips, unable to look away from his approaching foe. He had only the spear. He had no shield. He could not outrun Barst, and he could not hope to match Barst's unnatural strength or speed. Nor was there anyone nearby to help him.

It was an impossible situation, but Roran refused to admit defeat. He had given up once before, and he would never do so again, even though reason told him that he was about to die.

Then Barst was upon him, and Roran stabbed at his right knee, in the desperate hope that he might by some chance cripple him. Barst deflected the spear with his mace, then swung at Roran.

Roran had anticipated the counterattack and was already stumbling backward as fast as his legs would allow. A gust of wind touched his face as the head of the mace swept past, inches from his skin.

Barst showed his teeth in a grim smile, and he was about to strike again when a shadow fell on him from above, and he looked up.

Islanzadí's white raven dropped out of the sky and landed on Barst's face. The raven screeched with fury as it pecked and clawed at Barst, and Roran was astonished to hear the raven say, "Die! Die! Die!"

Barst swore and dropped his shield. With his free hand, he batted the raven away, breaking its already-injured wing. Ribbons of flesh hung loose from his brow, and blood painted his cheeks and chin crimson.

Roran lunged forward and stabbed Barst's other hand with his spear, causing Barst to drop his mace as well.

Then Roran seized his chance and stabbed at Barst's exposed throat. However, Barst caught the spear with one hand, tore it from Roran's grip, and broke it between his fingers as easily as Roran might break a dry twig.

"Now you die," said Barst, spitting blood. His lips were torn and his right eye was ruined, but he could still see out of his remaining orb.

The man reached for Roran, seeking to envelop him in a deadly embrace. Roran could not have escaped even if he had wanted to, but as Barst's arms closed about him, Roran grasped Barst's waist and twisted with all his might, putting as much weight and pressure as he could on Barst's wounded leg, the leg with the hitch.

Barst held for a moment; then his knee buckled, and with a cry of pain, he fell forward onto one leg and caught himself with his left hand. Squirming around, Roran slipped out from under Barst's right

arm. The blood on Barst's breastplate made it that much easier to work free, despite the man's immense strength.

Roran tried to grab Barst's throat from behind, but Barst tucked his chin, preventing Roran from getting a grip. So, instead, Roran wrapped his arms around Barst's chest, hoping to restrain him until someone else could help kill him.

Barst growled and threw himself onto his side, jarring Roran's injured shoulder and causing him to grunt with pain. The cobblestones dug into Roran's arms and back as Barst rolled three times. When the bulk of the man was atop him, Roran had trouble breathing. Yet still Roran maintained his grip. One of Barst's elbows slammed into his side, and Roran felt several of his ribs break.

Roran clenched his teeth and tightened his arms, squeezing as hard as he could.

Katrina, he thought.

Again Barst's elbow slammed into him.

Roran howled, and flashing lights appeared before his eyes. He squeezed even harder.

Again the elbow, like an anvil pounding into his side.

"You … shall … not … win, … Lackhammer," grunted Barst. He staggered to his feet, dragging Roran with him.

Though he thought he might tear the muscles from his bones, Roran tightened his embrace even further. He screamed, but he could not hear his voice, and he felt veins pop and tendons snap.

And then Barst's breastplate caved in, giving way where the Kull had dented it, and there was the sound of crystal breaking.

"No!" shouted Barst even as a pure white light erupted from the edges of his armor. He went rigid, as if chains had pulled every limb to its farthest reach, and he began to shake uncontrollably.

The light blinded Roran and burned his arms and face. He released Barst and fell to the ground, where he covered his eyes with his forearm.

The light continued to pour out from under Barst's breastplate until the edges of the metal began to glow. Then the blaze ceased, leaving the world darker than before, and what little remained of Lord Barst tumbled backward and lay smoking on the cobblestones.

Roran blinked as he stared at the featureless sky. He knew he should rise, for there were soldiers nearby, but the cobblestones seemed soft beneath him, and all he really wanted to do was to close his eyes and rest.…

When he next opened his eyes, he saw Orik and Horst and a number of elves gathered around him.

"Roran, can you hear me?" said Horst, peering at him with concern.

Roran tried to speak, but he could not form the words.

“Can you hear me? Listen to me. You have to stay awake. Roran! Roran!”

Again Roran felt himself sinking into blackness. It was a comforting sensation, like wrapping himself in a soft woolen blanket. Warmth spread through him, and the last thing he remembered was Orik bending over him and saying something in Dwarvish that sounded like a prayer.

THE GIFT OF KNOWLEDGE

Eyes locked, Eragon and Murtagh slowly circled each other, trying to anticipate where and how the other would move. Murtagh appeared fit as ever, but there were dark circles under his eyes and his face was haggard; Eragon suspected that he had been under a great strain. He wore the same pieces of armor as did Eragon: mail hauberk, gauntlets, bracers, and greaves, but his shield was longer and thinner than Eragon's. As for their swords, Brisingr, with its hand-and-a-half hilt, had the advantage of length, while Zar'roc, with its wider blade, had the advantage of weight.

They began to edge closer, and when they were about ten feet apart, Murtagh, who had his back to Galbatorix, said in a low, anger-filled voice, "What are you doing?"

"Buying time," Eragon muttered, keeping his lips as still as possible.

Murtagh scowled. "You're a fool. He'll watch us cut each other to shreds, and what will it change? *Nothing*."

Instead of answering, Eragon shifted his weight forward and twitched his sword arm, causing Murtagh to flinch in response.

"Blast you," growled Murtagh. "If you had waited just one more day, I could have freed Nasuada."

That surprised Eragon. "Why should I believe you?"

The question angered Murtagh further, for his lip curled and he quickened his step, causing Eragon to increase his pace as well. Then, in a louder tone, Murtagh said, "So, you finally found a proper sword for yourself. The elves made it for you, didn't they?"

"You know they d—"

Murtagh lunged toward him, swinging Zar'roc at his gut, and Eragon skipped backward, barely parrying the red sword.

Eragon replied with a looping, overhead blow—he allowed his hand to slide down to Brisingr's pommel to give himself more reach—and Murtagh danced out of the way.

They both paused to see if the other would attack again. When neither did, they resumed circling, Eragon more wary than before.

From their exchange, it was obvious that Murtagh was still as fast and as strong as Eragon—or an elf. Galbatorix's prohibition on the use of magic apparently did not extend to the spells that fortified Murtagh's limbs. For selfish reasons, Eragon disliked the king's edict, but he could understand the rationale behind it; the fight would hardly have been fair otherwise.

But Eragon did not want a fair fight. He wanted to control the course of the duel so that he could decide when it should end, and how. Unfortunately, Eragon doubted that he would have the opportunity, given Murtagh's skill with a blade, and even if he did, he was not sure how he could use the fight to strike against Galbatorix. Nor did he have time to think about it, though he trusted that Saphira, Arya, and the dragons would try to devise a solution for him.

Murtagh feinted with his left shoulder, and Eragon ducked behind his shield. An instant later, he realized that it had been a ruse and that Murtagh was moving around toward his right in an attempt to get past his guard.

Eragon twisted and saw Zar'roc arcing toward his neck, the edge a glittering, wire-thin line. He knocked it aside with a clumsy push of Brisingr's crossguard. Then he retaliated with a quick slash at Murtagh's lower arm. To his grim delight, he struck Murtagh on the side of his wrist. Brisingr failed to cut through Murtagh's gauntlet and the sleeve of the tunic beneath, but the impact still hurt Murtagh and pushed his arm away from his body, leaving his chest exposed.

Eragon stabbed, and Murtagh used his shield to deflect the attack. Three more times Eragon stabbed, but Murtagh stopped each blow, and when Eragon drew back his arm to strike again, Murtagh countered with a backhanded cut at his knee, which would have crippled him had it landed.

Seeing what Murtagh intended, Eragon altered his swing and stopped Zar'roc an inch from his leg. Then he countered with a cut of his own.

For several minutes, they exchanged blows, trying to disrupt each other's rhythms, but to no avail. They knew each other too well. Whatever Eragon attempted, Murtagh was able to thwart, and the same was true in reverse. It was like a game where they both had to think many moves in advance, which fostered a certain sense of intimacy as Eragon focused on divining the inner workings of Murtagh's mind and, from them, predicting what Murtagh would do next.

Right from the beginning, Eragon noticed that Murtagh was playing the game differently than the previous times they'd fought. He attacked with a ruthlessness that heretofore had been lacking, as if, for the first time, he wanted to defeat Eragon, and quickly too. Moreover, after his initial outburst, his anger seemed to vanish, and he displayed only a cool, implacable determination.

Eragon found himself fighting to the limit of his abilities, and though he was able to hold Murtagh off, he ended up on the defensive more than he would have liked.

After a while, Murtagh lowered his sword and turned toward the

throne and Galbatorix.

Eragon kept his guard up, but he hesitated, unsure whether it was appropriate to attack.

In that moment of hesitation, Murtagh leaped toward him. Eragon stood his ground and swung. Murtagh caught the blow on his shield, and then, instead of following up with a strike of his own as Eragon expected, he slammed his shield against Eragon's and pushed.

Eragon growled and pushed back. He would have reached around his shield to slash at Murtagh's back or legs, but Murtagh was shoving too hard for Eragon to risk it. Murtagh was an inch or two taller, and the extra height allowed him to bear down on Eragon's shield in a way that made it difficult for Eragon to keep from sliding back across the polished stone floor.

At last, with a roar and a mighty heave, Murtagh sent Eragon stumbling away. As Eragon flailed and struggled to regain his balance, Murtagh stabbed at his neck.

"Letta!" said Galbatorix.

The tip of Zar'roc stopped less than a finger's-breadth from Eragon's skin. He froze, panting, not sure what had just happened.

"Restrain yourself, Murtagh, or I shall do it for you," said Galbatorix from where he sat watching. "I dislike having to repeat myself. You are not to kill Eragon, nor is he to kill you.… Now, continue."

The realization that Murtagh had just tried to kill him—and that he would have succeeded if not for Galbatorix's intervention—shocked Eragon. He searched Murtagh's face for an explanation, but Murtagh remained stubbornly expressionless, as if Eragon meant little or nothing to him.

Eragon could not understand. Murtagh was definitely playing the game differently than he ought to be. Something had changed in him, but what it was, Eragon could not tell.

In addition, the knowledge that he had lost—and that, by all rights, he should be dead—undermined Eragon's confidence. He had confronted death many times before, but never in such a stark and uncompromising manner. There was no question of it; Murtagh had bested him, and only Galbatorix's mercy—such as it was—had saved him.

Eragon, do not dwell on it, said Arya. *You had no reason to suspect he would try to kill you. Nor were you trying to kill him. If you had, the fight would have gone differently, and Murtagh would never have had the chance to attack you as he did.*

Doubtful, Eragon glanced over to where she stood by the edge of the pool of light, along with Elva and Saphira. Then Saphira said, *If he wishes to rip out your throat, then cut his hamstrings and make sure that he cannot do it again.*

Eragon nodded, acknowledging what they had said.

He and Murtagh separated and again took up their positions opposite each other while Galbatorix looked on approvingly.

This time Eragon was the first to attack.

They fought for what felt like hours. Murtagh did not attempt any more killing blows, whereas Eragon—to his satisfaction—succeeded in touching Murtagh on the collarbone, although he stopped the blow before Galbatorix saw fit to do so himself. Murtagh looked unsettled by the touch, and Eragon allowed himself a brief smile at Murtagh's reaction.

There were other blows that they failed to block as well. For all their speed and skill, neither he nor Murtagh was infallible, and without an easy means to end the fight, it was inevitable that they would make mistakes and that those mistakes would result in injuries.

The first wound was a cut Murtagh gave Eragon on his right thigh, in the gap between the edge of his hauberk and the upper part of his greave. It was a shallow cut, but exceedingly painful, and every time Eragon put his weight on the leg, blood surged from the wound.

The second wound was also Eragon's: a gash above one eyebrow after Murtagh landed a blow upon his helm and the edge of it drove into his flesh. Of the two wounds, Eragon found the second by far the most aggravating, because blood kept dripping into his eye, obscuring his vision.

Then Eragon caught Murtagh on the wrist again and, this time, sliced all the way through the cuff of his gauntlet, the sleeve of his tunic, and a thin layer of skin to the bone beneath. He failed to sever any muscles, but the wound seemed to pain Murtagh a great deal, and the blood that seeped into his gauntlet caused him to lose his grip at least twice.

Eragon took a nick to his right calf, and then—when Murtagh was still recovering from a failed attack—he moved around to Murtagh's shield side and brought down Brisingr as hard as he could upon the middle of Murtagh's left greave, denting the steel.

Murtagh howled and jumped back on one leg. Eragon followed, swinging Brisingr in an attempt to batter him to the floor. Despite his injury, Murtagh was able to defend himself, and a few seconds later, Eragon was the one who was hard-pressed to remain on his feet.

For a time, their shields resisted the relentless pounding—Galbatorix, Eragon was pleased to realize, had left intact the enchantments upon their swords and armor—but then the spells on Eragon's shield gave way, as did those on Murtagh's, which was apparent from the chips and splinters that flew every time their swords landed. Soon afterward, Eragon cracked Murtagh's shield with

a particularly heavy blow. His victory was short-lived, for Murtagh grasped Zar'roc with both hands and struck at Eragon's own shield twice in quick succession, and it split as well, leaving them equally matched once again.

As they fought, the stone beneath them grew slippery with smears and splashes of blood, and it became increasingly difficult to keep their footing. The massive presence chamber returned distant echoes of their clashing weapons—like the sounds of a long-forgotten battle—and it felt as if they were the center of all that existed, for theirs was the only light, and the two of them were alone within its compass.

And all the while, Galbatorix and Shruikan continued to watch from within the bordering shadows.

Without their shields, Eragon found it easier to land blows upon Murtagh—mainly upon his arms and legs—even as it was easier for Murtagh to do the same to him. For the most part, their armor protected them from cuts, but it did not protect them from lumps and bruises, of which they accrued many.

In spite of the wounds he gave Murtagh, Eragon began to suspect that, of the two of them, Murtagh was the better swordsman. Not by much, but enough that Eragon was never really able to gain the upper hand. If the course of their duel continued, Murtagh would end up wearing him down until he was too hurt or too tired to go on, an outcome that seemed to be fast approaching. With every step, Eragon could feel the blood gushing over his knee from the cut on his thigh, and with every moment that passed, it became harder to defend himself.

He had to end the duel now or else he would be unable to take on Galbatorix afterward. As it was, he doubted he would pose much of a challenge to the king, but he had to try. If nothing else, he had to try.

The heart of the problem, he realized, was that Murtagh's reasons for fighting were a mystery to him, and unless he could figure them out, Murtagh would continue to catch him by surprise.

Eragon thought back to what Glaedr had told him outside Dras-Leona: *You must learn to see what you are looking at*. And also: *The way of the warrior is the way of knowing*.

So he looked at Murtagh. He looked at him with the same intensity with which he had gazed upon Arya during their sparring sessions, the same intensity with which he had studied himself during his long night of introspection on Vroengard. By it, he sought to decipher the hidden language of Murtagh's body.

He met with some success; it was clear that Murtagh was drawn and hard-worn, and his shoulders were hunched in a way that spoke of deep-rooted anger, or perhaps it was fear. And then there was his ruthlessness, hardly a new characteristic, but newly applied to Eragon.

Those things Eragon discerned, along with other, subtler details, and then he strove to reconcile them with what he knew of Murtagh from days past, with his friendship and his loyalty and his resentment of Galbatorix's control.

It took a few seconds—seconds filled with strained breathing and a pair of awkward blows that gained him another bruise on his elbow—until the truth came to Eragon. It seemed so obvious when it did. There had to be something in Murtagh's life, something their duel would affect, that was so important to Murtagh, he felt compelled to win by any means necessary, even if that meant killing his own half brother. Whatever that something was—and Eragon had his suspicions, some more disturbing than others—it meant that Murtagh would never give up. It meant Murtagh would fight like a cornered animal until his very last breath, and it meant Eragon would never be able to defeat him through conventional measures, for the duel did not mean as much to him as it did to Murtagh. For Eragon, the duel was a convenient distraction, and he cared little who won or lost as long as he was still able to face Galbatorix afterward. But for Murtagh, the duel was of far more significance, and from experience, Eragon knew that determination such as his was costly, if not impossible, to overcome by force alone.

The question, then, was how to stop a man who was resolved to persist and prevail in spite of whatever obstacles barred his way.

It was an unsolvable conundrum until, at last, Eragon realized that the only way to best Murtagh was to give him what he wanted. In order to achieve his own desire, Eragon would have to accept defeat.

But not entirely. He could not leave Murtagh free to carry out Galbatorix's bidding. Eragon would grant Murtagh his victory, and then he would take his own.

As she listened to his thoughts, Saphira's anguish and concern grew more pronounced, and she said, *No, Eragon. There must be another way*.

Then tell me what it is, he said, *for I cannot see it.*

She snarled, and Thorn growled back at her from across the pool of light.

Choose wisely, said Arya, and Eragon understood her meaning.

Murtagh rushed at him, and their blades met with a clamorous ring, and then they disengaged and paused a moment to gather their strength. As they started toward each other once again, Eragon sidled to Murtagh's right, while at the same time allowing his sword arm to drift away from the side of his body, as if through exhaustion or carelessness. It was a slight motion, but he knew that Murtagh would notice and that he would attempt to exploit the opening he had provided.

At that moment, Eragon felt nothing. He still registered the pain

from his wounds, but at a remove, as if the sensations were not his own. His mind was like a pool of deep water on a breathless day, flat and motionless, and yet filled with the reflection of those things around it. What he saw, he registered without conscious thought. The need for that had passed. He understood all that was before him, and further contemplation would only hamper him.

As Eragon expected, Murtagh lunged toward him, stabbing at the middle of his belly.

When the time was ripe, Eragon turned. He moved neither fast nor slow but at just the right speed the situation required. The motion felt preordained, as if it were the only action he could have taken.

Instead of striking him in the gut, as Murtagh had intended, Zar'roc struck Eragon in the muscles along his right side, directly below his ribcage. The impact felt like a hammerblow, and there was a steely slither as Zar'roc slid past the broken links of his mail and into his flesh. The coldness of the metal made Eragon gasp more than the pain itself.

Behind him, the tip of the blade tugged at his hauberk as it emerged from his body.

Murtagh stared, seemingly taken aback.

Before Murtagh could recover, Eragon drew back his arm and thrust Brisingr into Murtagh's abdomen, close to his navel: a far worse wound than the one Eragon had just received.

Murtagh's face went slack. His mouth opened as if he were going to speak, and he fell to his knees, still clutching Zar'roc.

Off to the side, Thorn roared.

Eragon pulled Brisingr free, then stepped back and grimaced in a soundless howl as Zar'roc slid out of his body.

There was a clatter as Murtagh released Zar'roc and it dropped to the floor. Then he wrapped his arms around his waist, doubled over, and pressed his head against the polished stone.

Now Eragon was the one to stare, hot blood dripping into one eye.

From on his throne, Galbatorix said, "Naina," and dozens of lanterns throughout the chamber sprang to life, once again revealing the pillars and carvings along the walls and the block of stone where Nasuada stood chained.

Eragon staggered over to Murtagh and knelt next to him.

"And to Eragon goes the victory," said the king, his sonorous voice filling the great hall.

Murtagh looked up at Eragon, his sweat-beaded face contorted with pain. "You couldn't just let me win, could you?" he growled in an undertone. "You can't beat Galbatorix, but you still had to prove that you are better than me.… Ah!" He shuddered and began to rock back and forth upon his shins.

Eragon put a hand on his shoulder. “Why?” he asked, knowing that Murtagh would understand the question.

The answer came as a barely audible whisper: “Because I hoped to gain his favor so that I could save *her*.” Tears blurred Murtagh’s eyes, and he looked away.

At that, Eragon realized that Murtagh had been telling the truth earlier, and he felt a sense of dismay.

Another moment passed, and Eragon was aware of Galbatorix watching them with keen interest.

Then Murtagh said, “You tricked me.”

“It was the only way.”

Murtagh grunted. “That was always the difference between you and me.” He eyed Eragon. “You were willing to sacrifice yourself. I wasn’t. … Not then.”

“But now you are.”

“I’m not the person I once was. I have Thorn now, and …” Murtagh hesitated; then his shoulders rose and fell in a tiny shrug. “I’m not fighting for myself anymore.… It makes a difference.” He took a shallow breath and winced. “I used to think you were a fool to keep risking your life as you have.… I know better now. I understand … why. I understand.…” His eyes widened and his grimace relaxed, as if his pain was forgotten, and an inner light seemed to illuminate his features. “I understand—*we* understand,” he whispered, and Thorn uttered a strange sound that was half whimper and half growl.

Galbatorix stirred on his throne, as if uneasy, and in a harsh voice, he said, “Enough of this talk. Your duel is over, and Eragon has won. Now the time has arrived for our guests to bend their knees and give to me their oaths of fealty.… Come closer, the both of you, and I shall heal your wounds, and then we shall proceed.”

Eragon started to stand, but Murtagh grabbed his forearm, stopping him.

“Now!” said Galbatorix, his heavy brows drawing together. “Or I will leave you to suffer from your wounds until we have finished.”

Ready yourself, Murtagh mouthed to Eragon.

Eragon hesitated, not sure what to expect; then he nodded and warned Arya, Saphira, Glaedr, and the other Eldunarí.

Then Murtagh pushed Eragon aside, and he rose up on his knees, still clutching his belly. He looked at Galbatorix. And he shouted the Word.

Galbatorix recoiled and lifted a hand, as if to shield himself.

Still shouting, Murtagh voiced other words in the ancient language, speaking too quickly for Eragon to understand the purpose of the spell.

The air around Galbatorix flashed red and black, and for an instant, his body appeared to be wreathed in flames. There was a sound like that of a high summer wind stirring the branches of an evergreen forest. Then Eragon heard a series of thin shrieks as twelve orbs of light appeared around Galbatorix's head and fled outward from him and passed through the walls of the chamber and thus vanished. They looked like spirits, but Eragon saw them for such a brief span, he could not be certain.

Thorn spun around—as fast as a cat whose tail has been stepped on—and he pounced on Shruikan's immense neck. The black dragon bellowed and scrambled backward, shaking his head in an attempt to throw Thorn off. The noise of his growls was painfully loud, and the floor shook from the weight of the two dragons.

On the steps of the dais, the two children screamed and covered their ears with their hands.

Eragon saw Arya, Elva, and Saphira lurch forward, no longer bound by Galbatorix's magic. Dauthdaert in hand, Arya started toward the throne, while Saphira loped toward where Thorn clung to Shruikan. Meanwhile, Elva put her hand to her mouth and seemed to say something to herself, but what it was Eragon could not hear over the sound of the dragons.

Fist-sized drops of blood rained down around them and lay smoking on the stone.

Eragon rose from where Murtagh had pushed him, and he followed Arya toward the throne.

Then Galbatorix spoke the name of the ancient language, along with the word *letta*. Invisible bonds seized hold of Eragon's limbs, and throughout the chamber, silence fell as the king's magic restrained everyone, even Shruikan.

Rage and frustration boiled within Eragon. They had been so close to striking at the king, and still they were helpless before his spells. *"Get him!"* he shouted, both with his mind and his tongue. They had already tried to attack Galbatorix and Shruikan; the king would kill the two children whether or not they continued. The only path left to Eragon and those with him—the only hope of victory that yet remained—was to break past Galbatorix's mental barriers and seize control of his thoughts.

Along with Saphira and Arya and the Eldunarí they had brought with them, Eragon stabbed outward with his consciousness toward the king, pouring all his hate, anger, and pain into the single, burning ray that he drove into the center of Galbatorix's being.

For an instant, Eragon felt the king's mind: a terrible, shadow-ridden vista swept with bitter cold and searing heat—ruled by bars of iron, hard and unyielding, which portioned off areas of his

consciousness.

Then the dragons under Galbatorix's command, the mad, howling, grief-stricken dragons, attacked Eragon's mind and forced him to withdraw within himself to avoid being torn to pieces.

Behind him, Eragon heard Elva start to say something, but she had barely uttered a sound when Galbatorix said, "Theyna!" and she stopped with a choked gurgle.

"I stripped him of his wards!" shouted Murtagh. "He's—"

Whatever Galbatorix said, it was too fast and too low for Eragon to catch, but Murtagh ceased speaking, and a moment later, Eragon heard him fall to the floor with a tinkle of mail and the sharp clink of his helm striking stone.

"I have plenty of wards," said Galbatorix, his hawklike face dark with fury. "You cannot harm me." He rose from his seat and strode down the steps of the dais toward Eragon, his cape billowing around him and his sword, Vrangr, white and deathly in his hand.

In the brief time he had, Eragon tried to capture the mind of at least one of the dragons battering at his consciousness, but there were too many, and his attempt left him scrambling to repel the horde of Eldunarí before they completely subjugated his thoughts.

Galbatorix stopped a foot in front of him and glared at him, a thick, forked vein prominent on his brow, the muscles of his heavy jaw knotting. "Think you to challenge me, *boy*?" he growled, fairly spitting with rage. "Think you to be my equal? That you could lay me low and steal my throne?" The cords in Galbatorix's neck stood out like a skein of twisted rope. He plucked at the edge of his cape. "I cut this mantle from the wings of Belgabad himself, and my gloves too." He lifted Vrangr and held its bleak blade before Eragon's eyes. "I took this sword from Vrael's hand, and I took this crown from the head of the mewling wretch who wore it before me. And yet you think to outwit me? *Me?* You come to my castle, and you kill my men, and you act as if you are *better* than I. As if you are more *noble* or *virtuous*."

Eragon's head rang, and a constellation of throbbing, swirling crimson motes appeared before his eyes as Galbatorix struck him on the cheek with Vrangr's pommel, tearing his skin.

"You need to be taught a lesson in humility, boy," said Galbatorix, moving closer, until his gleaming eyes were mere inches from Eragon's.

He struck Eragon on the other cheek, and for a second, all Eragon could see was a black immensity littered with flashing lights.

"I shall *enjoy* having you in my service," said Galbatorix. In a lower voice, he said, "Gánga," and the pressure from the Eldunarí assailing Eragon's mind vanished, leaving him free to think as he would. But not so the others, as he could see from the strain on their faces.

Then a blade of thought, honed to an infinitesimal point, pierced Eragon's consciousness and sheathed itself in the marrow of his being. The blade twisted and, like a cocklebur lodged within a batt of felt, it tore at the fabric of his mind, seeking to destroy his will, his identity, his very awareness.

It was an attack unlike any Eragon had experienced. He shrank from it and concentrated upon a single thought—revenge—as he struggled to protect himself. Through their contact, he could feel Galbatorix's emotions: anger, mainly, but also a savage joy at being able to hurt Eragon and watch him writhe in discomfort.

The reason, Eragon realized, that Galbatorix was so good at breaking the minds of his enemies was because it gave him a perverse pleasure.

The blade dug deeper into Eragon's being and he howled, unable to help himself.

Galbatorix smiled, the edges of his teeth translucent, like fired clay.

Defense alone was no way to win a fight, and so, despite the searing pain, Eragon forced himself to attack Galbatorix in return. He dove into the king's consciousness and grasped at his razor-sharp thoughts, trying to pin them in place and prevent the king from moving or thinking without his approval.

Galbatorix made no attempt to guard himself, however. His cruel smile widened, and he twisted the blade in Eragon's mind even further.

It felt to Eragon as if a nest of briars were ripping him apart from the inside. A scream racked his throat, and he went limp in the grip of Galbatorix's spell.

"Submit," said the king. He grabbed Eragon's chin with fingers of steel. "Submit." The blade twisted yet again, and Eragon screamed until his voice gave out.

The king's probing thoughts closed in around Eragon's consciousness, restricting him to an ever-smaller part of his mind, until all that was left to him was a small, bright nub overshadowed by the looming weight of Galbatorix's presence.

"Submit," the king whispered, almost lovingly. "You have nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.… This life is at an end for you, Eragon Shadeslayer, but a new one awaits. Submit, and all shall be forgiven."

Tears distorted Eragon's vision as he stared into the featureless abyss of Galbatorix's pupils.

They had lost.… *He* had lost.

The knowledge was more painful than any of the wounds he had received. A hundred years' worth of striving—all for naught. Saphira, Elva, Arya, the Eldunarí: none of them could overcome Galbatorix. He was too strong, too knowledgeable. Garrow and Brom and Oromis had

all died in vain, as had the many warriors of different races who had laid down their lives in the course of fighting the Empire.

The tears spilled from Eragon's eyes.

"Submit," whispered the king, and his grip tightened.

More than anything, it was the injustice of the situation that Eragon hated. It seemed *wrong* on a fundamental level that so many had suffered and died in pursuit of a hopeless goal. It seemed *wrong* that Galbatorix alone should be the cause of so much misery. And it seemed *wrong* that he should escape punishment for his misdeeds.

Why? Eragon asked himself.

He remembered, then, the vision the oldest of the Eldunarí, Valdr, had shown him and Saphira, where the dreams of starlings were equal to the concerns of kings.

"Submit!" shouted Galbatorix, and his mind bore down on Eragon with even greater force as splinters of ice and fire lanced through him from every direction.

Eragon cried out, and in his desperation he reached for Saphira and the Eldunarí—their minds besieged by the crazed dragons of Galbatorix's command—and without intending to, he drew from their stores of energy.

And with that energy, he cast a spell.

It was a spell without words, for Galbatorix's magic would not allow otherwise, and no words could have described what Eragon wanted, nor what he felt. A library of books would have been insufficient to the task. His was a spell of instinct and emotion; language could not contain it.

What he wanted was both simple and complex: he wanted Galbatorix to *understand* … to understand the wrongness of his actions. The spell was not an attack; it was an attempt to communicate. If Eragon was going to spend the rest of his life as a slave to the king, then he wanted Galbatorix to comprehend what he had done, fully and completely.

As the magic took effect, Eragon felt Umaroth and the Eldunarí turn their attention to his spell, fighting to ignore Galbatorix's dragons. A hundred years of inconsolable grief and anger welled up within the Eldunarí, like a roaring wave, and the dragons melded their minds with Eragon's and began to alter the spell, deepening it, widening it, and building upon it until it encompassed far more than he originally intended.

Not only would the spell show Galbatorix the wrongness of his actions; now it would also compel him to experience all the feelings, both good and bad, that he had aroused in others since the day he had been born. The spell was beyond any Eragon could have invented on his own, for it contained more than a single person, or a single

dragon, could conceive of. Each Eldunarí contributed to the enchantment, and the sum of their contributions was a spell that extended not only across the whole of Alagaësia but also back through every moment in time between then and Galbatorix's birth.

It was, Eragon thought, the greatest piece of magic the dragons had ever wrought, and he was their instrument; he was their weapon.

The power of the Eldunarí rushed through him, like a river as wide as an ocean, and he felt a hollow and fragile vessel, as if his skin might tear with the force of the torrent he channeled. If not for Saphira and the other dragons, he would have died in an instant, drained of all strength by the voracious demands of the magic.

Around them, the light of the lanterns dimmed, and in his mind, Eragon seemed to hear the echo of thousands of voices: an unbearable cacophony of pains and joys innumerable, echoing forth from both the present and the past.

The lines upon Galbatorix's face deepened, and his eyes began to bulge from their sockets. "What have you done?" he said, his voice hollow and strained. He stepped back and put his fists to his temples. *"What have you done!"*

With an effort, Eragon said, "Made you understand."

The king stared at him with an expression of horror. The muscles of his face jumped and twitched, and his whole body began to shake with tremors. Baring his teeth, he growled, "You will not get the better of me, boy. You … will … not.…" He groaned and staggered, and all at once the spell holding Eragon vanished and he fell to the floor, even as Elva, Arya, Saphira, Thorn, Shruikan, and the two children began to move again as well.

A deafening roar from Shruikan filled the chamber, and the huge black dragon shook Thorn off his neck, sending the red dragon flying halfway across the room. Thorn landed on his left side, and the bones in his wing broke with a loud *snap*.

"I … shall … not … give … in," said Galbatorix. Behind the king, Eragon saw Arya—who was closer to the throne than Eragon—hesitate and look back at them. Then she sprinted past the dais and ran with Saphira toward Shruikan.

Thorn struggled to his feet and followed.

His face contorted like a madman's, Galbatorix strode toward Eragon and swung Vrangr at him.

Eragon rolled to the side and heard the sword strike the stone by his head. He kept rolling for another few feet, then pushed himself into a standing position. Only the energy from the Eldunarí allowed him to remain upright.

Shouting, Galbatorix charged at him, and Eragon deflected the king's clumsy blow. Their swords rang like bells, sharp and clear amid

the roars of dragons and the whispers of the dead.

Saphira leaped high into the air and batted at Shruikan's enormous snout, bloodying it, then dropped back to the floor. He swung a paw at her, talons extended, and she hopped backward, half spreading her wings.

Eragon ducked a savage crosscut and stabbed at Galbatorix's left armpit. To his astonishment, he scored a hit, wetting the tip of Brisingr with the king's blood.

A spasm in Galbatorix's arm threw off his next strike, and they ended up with their swords locked at the hilt, both striving to push each other off balance. The king's face was twisted almost beyond recognition, and there were tears on his cheeks.

A sheet of flame erupted over their heads, and the air grew hot around them.

Somewhere the children were screaming.

Eragon's wounded leg gave way, and he fell back onto his hands and feet, bruising the fingers with which he held Brisingr.

He expected the king to be upon him within a second, but instead Galbatorix remained where he was, swaying from side to side.

"No!" cried the king. "I didn't…." He looked at Eragon and shouted, "Make it stop!"

Eragon shook his head even while he scrambled back onto his feet.

Pain shot through his left arm, and he looked over to see Saphira with a bloody gash on her corresponding foreleg. On the other side of the room, Thorn sank his teeth into Shruikan's tail, causing the black dragon to snarl and turn on him. While Shruikan's attention was directed elsewhere, Saphira sprang upward and landed atop his neck, close to the base of his bony skull. She hooked her claws under his scales and then bit down on his neck between two of the spikes that ran along his spine.

Shruikan let out a rumbling, savage yowl and began to thrash about even more.

Once again Galbatorix ran at Eragon, slashing at him as he did. Eragon blocked one blow, then another, and then took a hit on his ribs, which nearly caused him to black out.

"Make it stop," said Galbatorix, his tone more pleading than threatening. "The pain …"

Another yowl, this one more frantic than the last, came from Shruikan. Behind the king, Eragon saw Thorn clinging to Shruikan's neck, opposite Saphira. The combined weight of the two dragons pulled down Shruikan's head until it was close to the floor. However, the black dragon was still too large and strong for them to subdue. Moreover, his neck was so thick, Eragon did not think either Saphira or Thorn would be able to hurt him much with their teeth.

Then, like a shadow flitting through a forest, Eragon saw Arya dart out from behind a pillar and run toward the dragons. In her left hand, the green Dauthdaert glowed with its usual starry nimbus.

Shruikan saw her coming and jerked his body, trying to dislodge Saphira and Thorn. When they remained affixed, he snarled and opened his jaws and painted the area in front of him with a torrent of fire.

Arya dove forward, and for a moment, Eragon lost sight of her behind the wall of flames. Then she came into view again, not far from where Shruikan's head hung above the floor. The ends of her hair were on fire, but she seemed not to notice.

With three bounding steps, she leaped onto Shruikan's left forefoot, and from there flung herself toward the side of his head, trailing fire like a comet. Uttering a shout that could be heard throughout the throne room, Arya threw the Dauthdaert into the center of Shruikan's great, gleaming ice-blue eye and buried the full length of the spear within his skull.

Shruikan bellowed and twitched, and then he slowly fell sideways, liquid fire pouring from his mouth.

Saphira and Thorn jumped clear a moment before the gigantic black dragon struck the floor.

Pillars cracked; chunks of stone fell from the ceiling and shattered. A number of lanterns broke, and gouts of some molten substance dribbled out of them.

Eragon nearly fell as the room shuddered. He had not been able to see what had happened to Arya, but he feared that Shruikan's bulk might have crushed her.

"Eragon!" shouted Elva. "Duck!"

He ducked, and he heard a whistle of wind as Galbatorix's white blade swung over his lowered back.

Rising, Eragon lunged forward …

… and stabbed Galbatorix in the center of his stomach, even as he had stabbed Murtagh.

The king grunted, and then he stepped back, pulling himself off Eragon's blade. He touched the wound with his free hand and stared at the blood on the tips of his fingers. Then he looked back at Eragon and said, "The voices … the voices are terrible. I can't bear it.…" He closed his eyes, and fresh tears streamed down his cheeks. "Pain … so much pain. So much grief.… Make it stop! *Make it stop!*"

"No," said Eragon. Elva joined him, as did Saphira and Thorn from the other end of the room. With them, Eragon was relieved to see, was Arya, burned and bloodied, but otherwise unhurt.

Galbatorix's eyes snapped open—round and rimmed with an unnatural amount of white—and he stared into the distance, as if

Eragon and those before him no longer existed. He shook and trembled and his jaw worked, but no sound came from his throat.

Two things happened at once, then. Elva let out a shriek and fainted, and Galbatorix shouted, “Waíse néiat!”

Be not.

Eragon had no time for words. Again drawing upon the Eldunarí, he cast a spell to drag himself, Saphira, Arya, Elva, Thorn, Murtagh, and the two children on the dais over to the block of stone where Nasuada was chained. And he also cast a spell to stop or deflect whatever might harm them.

They were only halfway to the block when Galbatorix vanished in a flash of light brighter than the sun. Then all went black and silent as Eragon’s protective spell took effect.

Death Throes

Roran sat on a litter that the elves had placed upon one of the many blocks of stone just inside the ruined gate of Urû'baen, giving orders to the warriors in front of him.

Four of the elves had carried him out of the city, where they could use magic without fear of Galbatorix's enchantments distorting their spells. They had healed his dislocated arm and broken ribs, as well as the other wounds Barst had inflicted, although they warned him that it would be weeks before his bones were as strong as before, and they insisted that he remain off his feet for the rest of the day.

Likewise, he had insisted upon rejoining the battle. The elves argued with him, but he told them, "Either you take me back or I'll walk there myself." Their displeasure had been obvious, but at last they agreed and carried him to where he now sat looking over the square.

As Roran expected, the soldiers had lost their will to fight with the death of their commander, and the Varden were able to push them back up the narrow streets. By the time Roran returned, the Varden had already cleared a third or more of the city and were fast approaching the citadel.

They had lost many—the dead and dying littered the street, and the gutters ran red with blood—but with their recent advances, a renewed sense of victory gripped the army; Roran could see it in the faces of the men and dwarves and Urgals, though not the elves, who maintained a cold fury at the death of their queen.

The elves worried Roran; he had seen them kill soldiers who were trying to surrender, cutting them down without the slightest compunction. Once loosed, their bloodlust seemed to have few bounds.

Soon after Barst fell, King Orrin had taken a bolt to the chest while storming a guardhouse deeper within the city. It was a serious wound, one that even the elves, apparently, were unsure they could heal. The king's soldiers had taken Orrin back to the camp, and so far, Roran had heard no word of his fate.

Although he could not fight, Roran could still give orders. Of his own accord, he had started to organize the army from the rear, gathering up stray warriors and sending them on missions throughout Urû'baen—the first being to capture the rest of the catapults along the walls. When he received a piece of information that he thought

Jörmundur or Orik or Martland Redbeard or any of the other captains within the army ought to know, now he had runners seek them out among the buildings and convey the news.

"—and if you see any soldiers near the big domed building by the market, be sure to tell Jörmundur that as well," he said to the thin, high-shouldered swordsman who stood in front of him.

"Yes, sir," said the man, and the knob in his neck bobbed as he swallowed.

Roran stared for a moment, fascinated by the movement, then he waved and said, "Go."

As the man trotted away, Roran frowned and looked over the peaked roofs of the houses toward the citadel at the base of the overhanging shelf.

Where are you? he wondered. Nothing had been seen of Eragon or those with him since they entered the stronghold, and the length of their absence worried Roran. He could think of numerous explanations for the delay, but none boded well. The most benign was that Galbatorix was simply hiding, and that Eragon and his companions were having to search for the king. But after seeing the might of Shruikan during the previous night, Roran could not imagine that Galbatorix would flee from his enemies.

If his worst fears had come to pass, then the Varden's victories would be short-lived, and Roran knew it was unlikely that he or any of the other warriors within their army would live through the day.

One of the men he had sent off earlier—a bare-headed, sandy-haired archer with a ruddy spot in the center of each cheek—ran out of a street to Roran's right. The archer stopped in front of the block of stone and ducked his head while he panted for breath.

"You found Martland?" Roran asked.

The archer nodded again, his hair flopping over his glistening forehead.

"And you gave him my message?"

"Sir, yes sir. Martland told me to tell you that"—he paused for breath—"the soldiers have retreated from the baths, but now they've barricaded themselves in a hall close to the southern wall."

Roran shifted on the litter and a pang ran through his newly healed arm. "What of the wall towers between the baths and the granaries? Have they been secured yet?"

"Two of them; we're still fighting for the rest. Martland convinced a few elves to go and help, though. He also—"

A muffled roar from within the stone hill interrupted the man.

The archer blanched, save for the spots of color on his cheeks, which appeared even brighter and redder than before, like daubs of paint on the skin of a corpse. "Sir, is that—"

“Shh!” Roran cocked his head, listening. Only Shruikan could have roared that loud.

For a few moments, they heard nothing else of note. Then another roar sounded from inside the citadel, and Roran thought he could make out other, fainter noises, although he was not sure what they were.

Throughout the area in front of the ruined gate, men, elves, dwarves, and Urgals paused and looked toward the citadel.

Another roar, even louder than the last, rang forth.

Roran clutched the edge of the litter, his body rigid. “Kill him,” he muttered. “Kill the bastard.”

A vibration, subtle but noticeable, passed through the city, as if a great weight had struck the ground. With it, Roran heard what he thought was something breaking.

Then silence settled over the city, and every second that passed felt longer than the last.

“… Do you think he needs our help?” the archer asked in a soft voice.

“There’s nothing we can do for them,” said Roran, keeping his eyes fixed on the citadel.

“Couldn’t the elves—”

The ground rumbled and shook; then the front of the citadel exploded outward in a wall of white and yellow flame so bright, Roran saw the bones within the archer’s neck and head, his flesh like a red gooseberry held before a candle.

Roran grabbed the archer and rolled off the edge of the stone block, pulling the other man with him.

A blast of sound struck them as they fell. It felt as if spikes were being driven into Roran’s ears. He screamed, but he could not hear himself—nor, after the initial clap of thunder, could he hear anything else. The cobblestones bucked underneath them, a cloud of dust and debris hurtled over them, blotting out the sun, and a massive wind tore at Roran’s clothes.

The dust forced Roran to squeeze his eyes shut. All he could do was cling to the archer and wait for the upheaval to subside. He tried to take a breath, but the heated wind snatched the air from his lips and nose before he could fill his lungs. Something struck his head, and he felt his helmet fly off.

The shaking went on and on, but at last the ground grew still again, and Roran opened his eyes, afraid of what he would see.

The air was gray and dim; objects past a few hundred feet were lost in the haze. Small chunks of wood and stone rained from the sky, along with flakes of ash. A piece of timber that lay across the street from him—part of a flight of stairs the elves had broken when they

destroyed the gate—was burning. The heat of the explosion had already charred the beam along its full length. The warriors who had been standing in the open now lay flat on the ground, some still moving, others clearly dead.

Roran glanced at the archer. The man had bitten through his bottom lip; blood coated his chin.

They helped each other off the ground, and Roran looked toward where the citadel had been. He could see nothing but gray darkness. *Eragon!* Could he and Saphira have survived the explosion? Could anyone who had been close to the heart of such an inferno?

Roran opened his mouth several times, trying to clear his ears—which rang and hurt badly—but to no avail. When he touched his right ear, his fingers came away bloody.

"Can you hear me?" he shouted at the archer, the words nothing but a vibration in his mouth and throat.

The archer frowned and shook his head.

A spate of dizziness caused Roran to lean over and prop himself against the block of stone. As he waited for his balance to return, he thought of the shelf hanging over them, and it suddenly occurred to him that the whole city might be in danger.

We have to leave before it falls, he thought. He spat blood and dirt onto the cobblestones. Then he looked in the direction of the citadel again. The dust still hid it. And grief clutched at his heart.

Eragon!

✦ ✦ ✦

A Sea of Nettles

Darkness, and in that darkness, silence.

Eragon felt himself slide to a stop, then … nothing. He could breathe, but the air was stale and lifeless, and when he tried to move, the strain upon his spell increased.

He touched the minds of everyone around him, checking that he had managed to save them all. Elva was unconscious, and Murtagh nearly so, but they were alive, as were the rest.

It was the first time Eragon had come into contact with Thorn's mind. As he did, the red dragon seemed to recoil. His thoughts felt darker, more contorted than Saphira's, but there was a strength and nobility to him that impressed Eragon.

We cannot maintain this spell for much longer, said Umaroth, his voice tense.

You have to, said Eragon. *If you don't, we'll die*.

Seconds more passed.

Without warning, light flooded Eragon's eyes, and an onslaught of noise assailed his ears.

He winced and blinked while his eyes adjusted.

Through the smoke-filled air, he saw a huge glowing crater where Galbatorix had been standing. The incandescent stone pulsed like living flesh as breaths of air wafted over its surface. The ceiling glowed as well, and the sight unnerved Eragon; it was as if they were standing inside a giant crucible.

The air smelled like the taste of iron.

The walls of the room were cracked, and the pillars, carvings, and lanterns had been pulverized. At the back of the chamber lay Shruikan's corpse, much of the flesh stripped from his soot-blackened bones. At the front, the explosion had shattered the stone walls, as well as the walls beyond for hundreds of feet, exposing a veritable warren of tunnels and rooms. The beautiful golden doors that had guarded the entrance to the chamber had been blown off their hinges, and Eragon thought he glimpsed daylight at the far end of the quarter-mile-long hallway that led to the outside.

As he got to his feet, he noticed that his ward was still drawing strength from the dragons, but not so quickly as before.

A piece of stone the size of a house fell from the ceiling and landed next to Shruikan's skull, where it split into a dozen pieces. Around them, more cracks spread through the walls, ominous shrieks and

groans sounding from every side.

Arya went to the two children, grabbed the boy around his waist, and climbed with him up onto Saphira's back. Once there, she pointed at the girl and said to Eragon, "Throw her to me!"

Eragon lost a second as he struggled to sheathe Brisingr. Then he grabbed the girl and tossed her to Arya, who caught her in outstretched arms.

Eragon turned and sidestepped Elva as he hurried over to Nasuada. "Jierda!" he said, placing a hand on the manacles that held her to the block of gray stone. The spell had no apparent effect, so he ended it quickly before it consumed too much energy.

Nasuada made an urgent sound, and he pulled the knotted cloth out of her mouth. "You have to find the key!" she said. "Galbatorix's jailer has it on him."

"We'll never find him in time!" Eragon drew Brisingr again and swung at the chain connected to the manacle around her left hand. The sword bounced off the links with a harsh reverberation, leaving not so much as a scratch on the dull metal. He swung a second time, but the chain was impervious to his blade.

Another piece of rock fell from the ceiling and struck the floor with a loud *crack*.

A hand gripped his arm, and he turned to see Murtagh standing behind him, one arm pressed against the wound in his stomach. "Move aside," he growled. Eragon did, and Murtagh spoke the name of all names, as he had before, as well as *jierda*, and the iron cuffs opened and fell from Nasuada's limbs.

Murtagh took her by the wrist, and he began to lead her toward Thorn. After his first step, she slipped under his arm and allowed him to lean his weight on her shoulders.

Eragon opened his mouth, then closed it. He would ask his questions later.

"Wait!" cried Arya, and she leaped down from Saphira and ran over to Murtagh. "Where is the egg? And the Eldunarí? We can't leave them!"

Murtagh frowned, and Eragon felt the information pass between him and Arya.

Arya spun around, her burnt hair flying, and sprinted toward a doorway on the opposite side of the room.

"It's too dangerous!" Eragon shouted after her. "This place is falling apart! Arya!"

Go, she said. *Get the children to safety. Go! You haven't much time!*

Eragon cursed. At the very least, he wished she had taken Glaedr with her. He slid Brisingr back into its scabbard, then bent and picked up Elva, who was just beginning to stir.

“What’s happening?” she asked as Eragon carried her up onto Saphira’s back behind the two other children.

“We’re leaving,” he said. “Hold on.”

Saphira had already started moving. Limping because of her wounded foreleg, she trotted around the crater. Thorn followed close behind her, Murtagh and Nasuada upon his back.

“Look out!” shouted Eragon as he saw a chunk of the glowing ceiling break loose directly overhead.

Saphira shied to her left, and the jagged piece of stone landed next to her and sent a burst of straw-yellow shards in every direction. One of them struck Eragon in the side and lodged in his mail. He plucked it out and threw it away. Smoke trailed from the fingers of his gloves, and he smelled burnt leather. More pieces of stone fell elsewhere in the chamber.

When Saphira arrived at the mouth of the hallway, Eragon twisted and looked back at Murtagh. “What of the traps?” he shouted.

Murtagh shook his head and waved for them to continue.

Piles of broken stone covered the floor along much of the hallway, which slowed the dragons. To either side, Eragon could see into the rubble-filled rooms and tunnels that the explosion had torn open. Within them, tables, chairs, and other pieces of furniture burned. The limbs of the dead and dying stuck out at odd angles from beneath the tumbled stones, occasionally a grimy face or the back of a head.

He looked for Blödhgarm and his spellcasters but saw no sign of them, either dead or alive.

Farther down the hallway, hundreds of people—soldiers and servants alike—poured out of the adjoining doorways and ran toward the now-gaping entrance. Broken limbs were common among them, as were burns, scrapes, and other wounds. The survivors moved aside for Saphira and Thorn, but otherwise ignored the dragons.

Saphira was nearly at the end of the hall when a thunderous crash sounded behind them, and Eragon looked back to see that the throne room had caved in on itself, burying the chamber floor under a pile of stone fifty feet thick.

Arya! thought Eragon. He tried to find her with his mind, but without success. Either too much material separated them, or one of the spells woven throughout the mined-out crag blocked his mental probe, or—the one alternative he hated to consider—she was dead. She had not been in the room when it collapsed; that much he knew, but he wondered if she would be able to find her way back out again, now that the throne room was blocked.

As they emerged from the citadel, the air cleared and Eragon was able to see the destruction that the blast had wreaked on Urû’baen. It had ripped off the slate roofs of many nearby buildings and set fire to

the beams underneath. Scores of fires dotted the rest of the city. The threads and plumes of smoke drifted upward until they collided with the underside of the shelf above. There they pooled and flowed along the angled surface of the stone, like water over a streambed. By the southeastern edge of the city, the smoke caught the light of the morning sun as it seeped around the side of the overhang, and there the smoke glowed with the reddish-orange color of a fire opal.

The people of Urû'baen were fleeing their houses, streaming through the streets toward the hole in the outer wall. The soldiers and servants from the citadel hurried to join them, giving Saphira and Thorn a wide berth as they ran across the courtyard in front of the fortress. Eragon paid them little attention; as long as they remained peaceful, he did not care what they did.

Saphira stopped in the middle of the quadrangle, and Eragon lowered Elva and the two nameless children to the ground. "Do you know where your parents are?" he asked, kneeling by the siblings.

They nodded, and the boy pointed toward a large house on the left side of the courtyard.

"Is that where you live?"

The boy nodded again.

"Go on, then," said Eragon, and gave them a gentle push on the back. Without further prompting, the brother and sister ran across the courtyard to the building. The door to the house flew open, and a balding man with a sword at his belt stepped out and wrapped the two of them in his arms. He gave Eragon a glance, then hurried the children inside.

That was easy, Eragon said to Saphira.

Galbatorix must have had his men find the nearest hatchlings, she replied. *We didn't give him time to do much else*.

I suppose.

Thorn sat a number of yards away from Saphira, and Nasuada helped Murtagh down from his back. Then Murtagh slumped against Thorn's belly. Eragon heard him begin to recite spells of healing.

Eragon likewise attended to Saphira's wounds, ignoring his own, for hers were more serious. The gash on her left foreleg was as wide as both his hands put together, and a pool of blood was forming about her foot.

Tooth or claw? he asked as he examined the wound.

Claw, she said.

He used her strength, as well as Glaedr's, to mend the gash. When he finished, he turned his attention to his own wounds, starting with the burning line of pain in his side, where Murtagh had stabbed him.

As he worked, he kept an eye on Murtagh—watched as Murtagh healed his gut wound, Thorn's broken wing, and the dragon's other

injuries. Nasuada stayed by him the whole while, her hand on his shoulder. He had, Eragon saw, somehow reacquired Zar'roc on the way out of the throne room.

Eragon then turned to Elva, who was standing nearby. She appeared pained, but he saw no blood upon her. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

Her brow furrowed, and she shook her head. "No, but many of them are." And she pointed at the people fleeing the citadel.

"Mmh." Eragon glanced over at Murtagh again. He and Nasuada were standing now, talking to each other.

Nasuada frowned.

Then Murtagh reached out, grasped the neck of her tunic, and pulled it to the side, tearing the fabric.

Eragon had drawn Brisingr halfway out of its sheath before he saw the map of angry-looking welts below Nasuada's collarbone. The sight struck him like a blow; it reminded him of the wounds on Arya's back after he and Murtagh had rescued her from Gil'ead.

Nasuada nodded and bowed her head.

Again Murtagh began to speak, this time, Eragon was sure, in the ancient language. He placed his hands upon various parts of Nasuada's body, his touch gentle—even hesitant—and her expression of relief was all the evidence Eragon needed to understand how much pain she had been suffering.

Eragon watched for a minute longer, then a sudden rush of emotion swept through him. His knees grew weak, and he sat on Saphira's right paw. She lowered her head and nuzzled his shoulder, and he leaned his head against her.

We did it, she said in a quiet tone.

We did it, he said, hardly able to believe the words.

He could feel Saphira thinking about Shruikan's death; as dangerous as Shruikan had been, she still mourned the passing of one of the last remaining members of her race.

Eragon gripped her scales. He felt light, almost dizzy, as if he might float away from the surface of the earth. *What now …?*

Now we will rebuild, said Glaedr. His own emotions were a curious mixture of satisfaction, grief, and weariness. *You acquitted yourself well, Eragon. No one else would have thought to attack Galbatorix as you did.*

"I just wanted him to understand," he murmured wearily. But if Glaedr heard, he chose not to respond.

At last, the Oath-breaker is dead, crowed Umaroth.

It seemed impossible that Galbatorix was no more. As Eragon contemplated the fact, something within his mind seemed to release, and he remembered—as if he had never forgotten—everything that had transpired during their time in the Vault of Souls.

A tingle passed through him. *Saphira—*

I know, she said, her excitement rising. *The eggs!*

Eragon smiled. Eggs! Dragon eggs! As a race, they would not pass into the void. They would survive, and flourish, and return to their former glory, as they had been before the fall of the Riders.

Then a horrible suspicion occurred to him. *Did you make us forget anything else?* he asked Umaroth.

If we did, how would we know? replied the white dragon.

"Look!" cried Elva, pointing.

Eragon turned and saw Arya walking out of the dark maw of the citadel. With her were Blödhgarm and his spellcasters, bruised and scraped, but alive. In her arms, Arya carried a wooden chest fitted with gold hasps. A long line of metal boxes—each the size of the back of a wagon—floated along behind the elves, a few inches above the floor.

Elated, Eragon sprang up and ran over to meet them. "You're alive!" He surprised Blödhgarm by grabbing the fur-covered elf and embracing him.

Blödhgarm regarded him for a moment with his yellow eyes, and then he smiled, showing his fangs.

"We are alive, Shadeslayer."

"Are those the … Eldunarí?" Eragon asked, speaking the word softly.

Arya nodded. "They were in Galbatorix's treasure room. We will have to go back at some point; there are many wonders hidden therein."

"How are they? The Eldunarí, I mean."

"Confused. It will take them years to recover, if ever they do."

"And is that …?" Eragon motioned toward the chest she carried.

Arya glanced around to make sure no one was close enough to see; then she lifted the lid the width of a finger. Inside, nestled in velvet, Eragon saw a beautiful green dragon egg, webbed with veins of white.

The joy in Arya's face lifted Eragon's heart. He grinned and beckoned to the other elves. When they had gathered close to him, he whispered in the ancient language and told them of the eggs on Vroengard.

They did not shout or laugh, but their eyes gleamed, and as a group, they seemed to vibrate with excitement. Still grinning, Eragon bounced on his heels, delighted by their reaction.

Then Saphira said, *Eragon!*

At the same time, Arya frowned and said, "Where are Thorn and Murtagh?"

Eragon shifted his gaze and saw Nasuada standing alone in the courtyard. Next to her was a pair of saddlebags that Eragon did not

remember seeing on Thorn. Wind swept over the courtyard and he heard the sound of wings flapping, but of Murtagh and Thorn, nothing was visible.

Eragon cast his thoughts out toward where he thought they were. He felt them at once, for their minds were not hidden, but they refused to speak or listen to him.

"Blast it," muttered Eragon as he ran over to Nasuada. There were tears on her cheeks, and she seemed on the verge of losing her composure.

"Where are they going?!"

"Away." Her chin trembled. Then she took a breath, released it, and stood taller than before.

Cursing again, Eragon bent and pulled open the saddlebags. Within, he found a number of smallish Eldunarí enclosed in padded cases. "Arya! Blödhgarm!" he shouted, pointing at the saddlebags. The two elves nodded.

Eragon ran over to Saphira. He did not have to explain himself; she understood. She spread her wings as he climbed onto her back, and the moment he was settled in the saddle, she took flight from the courtyard.

Cheers rose from the city as the Varden caught sight of her.

Saphira flapped quickly, following Thorn's musky scent trail through the air. It led her south, out from under the shadow of the overhang, and then it turned and curved up and around the great stone outcrop, heading north, toward the Ramr River.

For several miles, the trail ran straight and level. When the broad, tree-lined river was almost underneath them, the scent began to angle downward.

Eragon studied the ground ahead and saw a flash of red by the foot of a small hill on the other side of the river. *Over there*, he said to Saphira, but she had already spotted Thorn.

She spiraled down and landed softly atop the hill, where she had the advantage of height. The air off the water was cool and moist, carrying with it the scent of moss, mud, and sap. Between the hill and the river lay a sea of nettles. The plants grew in such thick profusion, the only way to pass through them would have been to cut a path. Their dark, sawtooth leaves rubbed against each other with a gentle susurration that blended with the sound of the rushing river.

By the edge of the nettles sat Thorn. Murtagh stood next to him, adjusting the girth on his saddle.

Eragon loosened Brisingr in its sheath, then cautiously approached.

Without turning around, Murtagh said, "Have you come to stop us?"

"That depends. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. North, maybe … somewhere away from other

people."

"You could stay."

Murtagh uttered a bark of mirthless laughter. "You know better than that. It would only cause Nasuada problems. Besides, the dwarves would never stand for it. Not after I killed Hrothgar." He glanced over his shoulder at Eragon. "Galbatorix used to call me Kingkiller. You're Kingkiller as well now."

"It seems to run in the family."

"You'd better keep an eye on Roran, then.… And Arya is a dragonkiller. That can't be easy for her—an elf killing a dragon. You should talk to her and make sure she's all right."

Murtagh's insight surprised Eragon. "I will."

"There," said Murtagh, giving the strap a final tug. Then he turned to face Eragon, and Eragon saw that he had been holding Zar'roc close against his body, drawn and ready to use. "So, again: have you come to stop us?"

"No."

Murtagh gave a thin smile and sheathed Zar'roc. "Good. I would hate to have to fight you again."

"How were you able to break free of Galbatorix? It was your true name, wasn't it?"

Murtagh nodded. "As I said, I'm not … *we're* not"—he touched Thorn's side—"what we once were. It just took a while to realize it."

"And Nasuada."

Murtagh frowned. Then he turned away and stared out over the sea of nettles. As Eragon joined him, Murtagh said in a low voice, "Do you remember the last time we were at this river?"

"It would be hard to forget. I can still hear the screams of the horses."

"You, Saphira, Arya, and me, all together and sure that nothing could stop us.…"

In the back of his mind, Eragon could feel Saphira and Thorn talking to each other. Saphira, he knew, would tell him later what had passed between them.

"What will you do?" he asked Murtagh.

"Sit and think. Maybe I'll build a castle. I have the time."

"You don't have to leave. I know it would be … difficult, but you have family here: me and also Roran. He's your cousin as well as mine, and you've never even met him.… You belong as much to Carvahall and Palancar Valley as you do to Urû'baen, maybe more."

Murtagh shook his head and continued to stare over the nettles. "It wouldn't work. Thorn and I need time alone; we need time to heal. If we stay, we'd be too busy to figure things out for ourselves."

"Good company and staying busy are often the best cure for a

sickness of the soul."

"Not for what Galbatorix did to us.… Besides, it would be painful to be around Nasuada right now, for both her and me. No, we have to leave."

"How long do you think you'll be gone?"

"Until the world no longer seems quite so hateful and we no longer feel like tearing down mountains and filling the sea with blood."

To that, Eragon had no response. They stood looking at the river, where it lay behind a line of low willow trees. The rustling of the nettles grew louder, stirred by the westward wind.

Then Eragon said, "When you no longer wish to be alone, come find us. You'll always be welcome at our hearth, wherever that may be."

"We will. I promise." To Eragon's surprise, he saw a gleam appear in Murtagh's eyes. It vanished a second later. "You know," Murtagh said, "I never thought you could do it … but I'm glad you did."

"I was lucky. And it wouldn't have been possible without your help."

"Even so.… You found the Eldunarí in the saddlebags?"

Eragon nodded.

"Good."

Should we tell them? Eragon asked Saphira, hoping that she would agree.

She thought for a moment. *Yes, but do not say where. You tell him, and I will tell Thorn.*

As you wish. To Murtagh, Eragon said, "There's something you should know."

Murtagh gave him a sideways glance.

"The egg that Galbatorix had—it isn't the only one in Alagaësia. There are more, hidden in the same place where we found the Eldunarí we brought with us."

Murtagh turned toward him, disbelief evident on his face. At the same time, Thorn arched his neck and uttered a joyful trumpet that scared a flight of swallows from the branches of a nearby tree.

"How many more?"

"Hundreds."

For a moment, Murtagh seemed unable to speak. Then: "What will you do with them?"

"Me? I think Saphira and the Eldunarí will have some say in the matter, but probably find somewhere safe for the eggs to hatch, and start to rebuild the Riders."

"Will you and Saphira train them?"

Eragon shrugged. "I'm sure the elves will help. You could as well, if you join us."

Murtagh tilted his head back and released a long breath. "The

dragons are going to return, and the Riders as well." He laughed softly. "The world is about to change."

"It has already changed."

"Aye. So you and Saphira will become the new leaders of the Riders, while Thorn and I will live in the wilderness." Eragon tried to say something, to comfort him, but Murtagh stopped him with a look. "No, it is as it should be. You and Saphira will make better teachers than we would."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Mmh … Promise me one thing, though."

"What?"

"When you teach them—teach them not to fear. Fear is good in small amounts, but when it is a constant, pounding companion, it cuts away at who you are and makes it hard to do what you know is right."

"I'll try."

Then Eragon noticed that Saphira and Thorn were no longer speaking. The red dragon shifted and moved around her until he was able to peer down at Eragon. With a mental voice that was surprisingly musical, Thorn said, *Thank you for not killing my Rider, Eragon-Murtagh's-brother*.

"Yes, thank you," Murtagh said dryly.

"I'm glad I didn't have to," Eragon said, looking Thorn in one glittering, blood-red eye.

The dragon snorted, then bent and touched Eragon on the top of his head, tapping his scales against Eragon's helm. *May the wind and the sun always be at your back*.

"And at yours."

A sense of great anger, grief, and ambivalence pressed heavily against Eragon as Glaedr's consciousness enveloped his mind and, it seemed, those of Murtagh and Thorn, for they tensed, as if in anticipation of battle. Eragon had forgotten that Glaedr, along with the other Eldunarí—hidden within their invisible pocket of space—were present and listening.

Would that I could thank you for the same, said Glaedr, his words as bitter as an oak gall. *You killed my body and you killed my Rider*. The statement was flat and simple and all the more terrible because of it.

Murtagh said something with his thoughts, but Eragon did not know what it was, for it was directed to Glaedr alone, and Eragon was privy only to Glaedr's reaction.

No, I cannot, said the gold dragon. *However, I understand that it was Galbatorix who drove you to it and that it was he who swung your arm, Murtagh.… I cannot forgive, but Galbatorix is dead and with him my desire for vengeance. Yours has always been a hard path, since each of you hatched. But today you showed that your misfortunes have not broken you.*

You turned against Galbatorix when it might have gained you only pain, and by it you allowed Eragon to kill him. Today you and Thorn proved yourselves worthy of being considered Shur'tugal in full, though you never had the proper instruction or guidance. That is … admirable.

Murtagh bowed his head slightly, and Thorn said, *Thank you, Ebrithil*, which Eragon heard. Thorn's use of the honorific *ebrithil* seemed to startle Murtagh, for Murtagh looked back at the dragon and opened his mouth as if he was going to say something.

Then Umaroth spoke. *We know much of the difficulties you have faced, Thorn and Murtagh, for we have watched you from afar, even as we have watched Eragon and Saphira. There are many things we would teach you once you are ready, but until then, we will tell you this: in your wanderings, avoid the barrows of Anghelm, where the one and only Urgal king, Kulkarvek, lies in state. Avoid too the ruins of Vroengard and of Elharím. Beware the deeps, and tread not where the ground grows black and brittle and the air smells of brimstone, for in those places evil lurks. Do this and, unless you are greatly unfortunate, you shall not encounter danger beyond your ability to master.*

Murtagh and Thorn thanked Umaroth, and then Murtagh cast a glance in the direction of Urû'baen and said, "We should be off." He looked at Eragon again. "Can you remember the name of the ancient language now, or is Galbatorix's magic still clouding your mind?"

"I can *almost* remember it, but …" Eragon shook his head with frustration.

Then Murtagh spoke the name of names twice: first to remove the spell of forgetfulness Galbatorix had placed on Eragon, and then again so that Eragon and Saphira might learn the name for themselves. "I wouldn't share it with anyone else," he said. "If every magician knew the name of the ancient language, the language would be worse than useless."

Eragon nodded, agreeing.

Then Murtagh held out his hand and Eragon grasped him by the forearm. They stood like that for a moment, gazing at each other.

"Be careful," Eragon said.

"You too … Brother."

Eragon hesitated, then nodded again. "Brother."

Murtagh checked the straps on Thorn's harness once more before he climbed up into the saddle. As Thorn spread his wings and started to move away, Murtagh called out, "See to it that Nasuada is well protected. Galbatorix had many servants, more than he ever told me about, and not all of them were bound to him by magic alone. They will seek revenge for the death of their master. Be on your guard at all times. There are those among them who are even more dangerous than the Ra'zac!"

Then Murtagh raised a hand in farewell. Eragon did likewise, and Thorn took three loping steps away from the sea of nettles and leaped into the sky, leaving tracklike gouges in the soft earth below.

The sparkling red dragon circled over them once, twice, three times and then he turned and set off to the north, flapping with a slow, steady beat.

Eragon joined Saphira on the crest of the low hill, and together they watched as Thorn and Murtagh dwindled to a single starlike speck close to the horizon.

With a sense of sadness upon them both, Eragon took his place on Saphira's back, and they departed from the knoll and returned thence to Urû'baen.

Heir to the Empire

Eragon slowly climbed the worn steps of the green tower. It was close to sunset, and through the windows that pierced the curving wall to his right, he could see the shadow-streaked buildings of Urû'baen, as well as the hazy fields outside the city and, as he spiraled around, the dark mass of the stone hill that rose up behind it.

The tower was tall, and Eragon was tired. He wished he could have flown with Saphira to the top. It had been a long day, and right then, he wanted nothing more than to sit with Saphira and drink a cup of hot tea while watching the light fade from the sky. But, as always, there was still work to be done.

He had seen Saphira only twice since they landed back at the citadel after parting with Murtagh and Thorn. She had spent most of the afternoon helping the Varden kill or capture the remainder of the soldiers and, later, gather into camps the families who had fled their homes and scattered across the countryside while they waited to see if the overhang would break and fall.

That it had not, the elves told Eragon, was because of spells they had embedded within the stone in ages past—when Urû'baen was yet known as Ilirea—and also because of the overhang's sheer size, which had allowed it to weather the force of the blast without significant damage.

The hill itself had helped contain the harmful residue from the explosion, although a large amount had still escaped through the entrance to the citadel, and most everyone who had been in or around Urû'baen needed healing with magic, else they would soon sicken and die. Already many had fallen ill. Along with the elves, Eragon had worked to save as many as possible; the strength of the Eldunarí had allowed him to cure a large portion of the Varden, as well as many inhabitants of the city.

At that very moment, the elves and the dwarves were walling up the front of the citadel to prevent any further contamination from seeping out. This after having searched the building for survivors, of whom there had been many: soldiers, servants, and hundreds of prisoners from the dungeons below. The great store of treasures that lay within the citadel, including the contents of Galbatorix's vast library, would have to be retrieved at a later date. It would be no easy task. The walls of many rooms had collapsed; countless others, though still standing, were so damaged that they posed a danger to any who

ventured near. Moreover, magic would be required to fend off the poison that had permeated the air, the stone, and all of the objects within the sprawling warren of the fortress. And more magic would be required to cleanse whatever items they chose to bring out.

Once the citadel was closed off, the elves would purge the city and the land thereabouts of the harmful residue that had settled upon it so that the area would again be safe to live in. Eragon knew that he would have to help with that too.

Before he had joined in the effort to heal and place wards of protection around everyone in and around Urû'baen, he had spent over an hour using the name of the ancient language to find and dismantle the many spells Galbatorix had bound to the buildings and the people of the city. Some of the enchantments seemed benign, even helpful—such as one spell whose only apparent purpose was to keep the hinges of a door from creaking, and which drew its power from an egg-sized piece of crystal set within the face of the door—but Eragon dared not leave any of the king's spells intact, no matter how harmless they appeared. Especially not those that lay upon the men and women of Galbatorix's command. Among them, oaths of fealty were the most common, but there were also wards, enchantments to grant skills beyond the ordinary, and other, more mysterious spells.

As Eragon had released nobles and commoners alike from their bondage, he occasionally felt a cry of anguish, as if he had taken something precious from them.

There had been a moment of crisis when he stripped Galbatorix's strictures from the Eldunarí the king had enslaved. The dragons immediately began to lash out and assail the minds of the people within the city, attacking without regard for who was friend or who was foe. In those moments, a great pall of dread spread over Urû'baen, causing everyone, even the elves, to crouch and turn white with fear.

Then Blödhgarm and his ten remaining spellcasters had tied the convoy of metal boxes that contained the Eldunarí to a pair of horses and ridden out of Urû'baen, where the dragons' thoughts no longer had such a strong effect. Glaedr insisted upon accompanying the maddened dragons, as did several of the Eldunarí from Vroengard. That had been the second time Eragon had seen Saphira since their return, when he amended the spell that hid Umaroth and those with him so that five of the Eldunarí could be portioned out and given over to Blödhgarm's safekeeping. Glaedr and the five were of the opinion that they could calm and communicate with the dragons that Galbatorix had for so long tormented. Eragon was less sure, but he hoped they were right.

As the elves and Eldunarí were on their way out of the city, Arya had contacted him, casting a questioning thought from outside the

ruined gate, where she was in conference with the captains of her mother's army. In that brief time when their minds touched, he felt her desolation at Islanzadí's death, as well as the regret and anger that eddied beneath her grief, and he saw how her emotions threatened to overwhelm her reason and how she struggled to restrain them. He sent her what comfort he could, but it seemed paltry when compared to her loss.

Then and now, and ever since Murtagh's departure, a sense of emptiness had gripped Eragon. He had expected to feel jubilant if they killed Galbatorix, and though he was glad—and he *was* glad—with the king gone, he no longer knew what he was supposed to do. He had reached his goal. He had climbed the unclimbable mountain. And now, without that purpose to guide him, to drive him, he was at a loss. What were he and Saphira to make of their lives now? What would give them meaning? He knew that, in time, he and Saphira were to raise the next generation of dragons and Riders, but the prospect seemed too distant to be real.

Pondering those questions made him feel queasy and overwhelmed. He turned his thoughts elsewhere, but the questions continued to nibble at the edges of his mind, and his sense of emptiness persisted.

Maybe Murtagh and Thorn had the right idea.

It seemed as if the stairs of the green tower would never end. He trudged upward, round and round, until the people in the streets appeared as small as ants and his calves and the backs of his ankles burned from the repetitive motion. He saw the nests of swallows built within the narrow windows, and beneath one window, he found a pile of small skeletons: the leavings of a hawk or an eagle.

When at last the top of the winding staircase appeared—a large lancet door, black with age—he paused to gather his thoughts and allow his breathing to slow. Then he climbed the last few feet, lifted the latch, and pushed forward into the large round chamber atop the elven watchtower.

Waiting for him were six people, along with Saphira: Arya and the silver-haired elf lord Däthedr, King Orrin, Nasuada, King Orik, and the king of the werecats, Grimrr Halfpaw. They stood—or in the case of King Orrin, sat—in a widely spaced circle, with Saphira directly opposite the stairs, before the southern-facing window that had allowed her to land within the tower. The light from the dying sun streamed sideways through the chamber, illuminating the elven carvings upon the walls and the intricate pattern of colored stone set within the chipped floor.

Except for Saphira and Grimrr, everyone appeared tense and uncomfortable. In the tightness of the skin around Arya's eyes and the hard line of her tawny throat, Eragon saw evidence of her grief and

upset. He wished he could do something to ease her pain. Orrin sat in a deep-seated chair, holding his bandaged chest with his left hand and a cup of wine with his right. He moved with exaggerated care, as if afraid of hurting himself, but his eyes were bright and clear, so Eragon guessed it was his wound, and not the drink, that made him cautious. Däthedr was tapping the pommel of his sword with one finger while Orik stood with his hands folded atop the butt of Volund's haft—the hammer rested upright on the floor before him—staring into his beard. Nasuada had her arms crossed, as if she was cold. To the right, Grimrr Halfpaw stared out a window, seemingly oblivious to the others.

As Eragon opened the door, they all looked at him, and a smile broke across Orik's face. "Eragon!" he exclaimed. He hefted Volund onto his shoulder, trundled over to Eragon, and grasped him by a forearm. "I knew you could kill him! Well done! Tonight we celebrate, eh! Let the fires burn bright, and let our voices ring forth until the heavens themselves echo with the sound of our feasting."

Eragon smiled and nodded, and Orik clapped him on the arm once more, then returned to his place as Eragon crossed the room to stand by Saphira.

Little one, she said, brushing his shoulder with her snout.

He reached up and touched her hard, scaled cheek, taking comfort from her closeness. Then he extended a tendril of thought toward the Eldunarí she still had with her. Like him, they were weary from the day's events, and he could tell they preferred to watch and listen rather than to actively participate in the discussion that was about to take place.

The Eldunarí acknowledged his presence, and Umaroth said, *Eragon*, but thereafter he was silent.

No one in the room seemed willing to speak first. From the city below, Eragon heard a horse whinny. Off by the citadel came the rapping of picks and chisels. King Orrin shifted uncomfortably in his chair and sipped his wine. Grimrr scratched one pointed ear, then sniffed, as if testing the air.

Finally, Däthedr broke the silence. "We have a decision to make," he said.

"That we know, elf," rumbled Orik.

"Let him speak," said Orrin, and gestured with his jeweled goblet. "I would hear his thoughts on how he thinks we should proceed." A bitter, somewhat mocking smile appeared on his face. He tilted his head toward Däthedr, as if to grant him permission to speak.

Däthedr inclined his head in return. If the elf took offense at the king's tone, it did not show. "There is no hiding that Galbatorix is dead. Even now, word of our victory wings its way across the land. By

the end of the week, Galbatorix's demise shall be known throughout the greater part of Alagaësia."

"As it should be," said Nasuada. She had changed out of the tunic her jailers had given her and into a dark red dress, which made the weight she had lost during her captivity all the more apparent, for the dress hung loosely off her shoulders and her waist was painfully small. But though she appeared frail, she seemed to have regained some of her strength. When Eragon and Saphira had returned to the citadel, Nasuada had been on the verge of collapse, from both mental and physical exhaustion. The moment Jörmundur had seen her, he bundled her off to their camp, and she spent the rest of the day in seclusion. Eragon had been unable to consult with her before the meeting, so he was not sure of her opinion on the subject they had assembled to discuss. If he had to, he would contact her directly with his thoughts, but he hoped to avoid that, for he did not want to intrude on her privacy. Not then. Not after what she had endured.

"As it should be," said Däthedr, his voice strong and clear beneath the vaulted ceiling of that high, round chamber. "However, as people learn that Galbatorix has fallen, the first question they shall ask is who has taken his place." Däthedr looked around at their faces. "We must provide them with an answer now before unrest begins to spread. Our queen is dead. King Orrin, you are wounded. Rumors aplenty are afoot, I am sure. It is important that we quell them before they cause harm. To delay would be disastrous. We cannot allow every lord with a measure of troops to believe that he can set himself up as ruler of his own petty monarchy. Should that happen, the Empire will disintegrate into a hundred different kingdoms. None of us want that. A successor must be chosen—chosen and named, however difficult that may be."

Without turning around, Grimrr said, "You cannot lead a pack if you are weak."

King Orrin smiled again, but the smile did not touch his eyes. "And what part do you seek to play in this, Arya, Lord Däthedr? Or you, King Orik? Or you, King Halfpaw? We are grateful for your friendship and your help, but this is a matter for humans to decide, not you. We rule ourselves, and we do not let others choose our kings."

Nasuada rubbed her crossed arms and, to Eragon's surprise, said, "I agree. This is something we must settle on our own." She looked across the room at Arya and Däthedr. "Surely you can understand. You would not allow us to tell you whom you ought to appoint as your new king or queen." She looked at Orik. "Nor would the clans have allowed us to select you as Hrothgar's successor."

"No," said Orik. "That they wouldn't have."

"The decision is, of course, yours to make," said Däthedr. "We would not presume to dictate what you should or should not do.

However, as your friends and allies, have we not earned the right to offer our advice upon such a weighty matter, especially when it shall affect us all? Whatever you decide will have far-reaching implications, and you would do well to understand those implications ere you make your choice."

Eragon understood well enough. It was a threat. Däthedr was saying that if they made a decision the elves disapproved of, there would be unpleasant consequences. Eragon resisted the urge to scowl. The elves' stance was only to be expected. The stakes were high, and a mistake now could end up causing problems for decades more.

"That … seems reasonable," said Nasuada. She glanced over at King Orrin.

Orrin stared into his goblet as he tilted it around, swirling the liquid within. "And just *how* would you advise us to choose, Lord Däthedr? Do tell; I am most curious."

The elf paused. In the low, warm light from the setting sun, his silver hair glowed in a diffuse halo around his head. "Whoever is to wear the crown must have the skill and experience needed to rule effectively from the start. There is no time to instruct someone in the ways of command, nor can we afford the mistakes of a novice. In addition, this person must be morally fit to assume such a high office; he or she must be an acceptable choice to the warriors of the Varden and, to a lesser extent, the people of the Empire; and if at all possible, this person should also be one whom we and your other allies will find agreeable."

"You limit our choices a great deal with your requirements," said King Orrin.

"They merely make for good statesmanship. Or do you see it differently?"

"I see several options you have overlooked or disregarded, perhaps because you consider them distasteful. But no matter. Continue."

Däthedr's eyes narrowed, but his voice remained as smooth as ever. "The most obvious choice—and the one the people of the Empire will likely expect—is the person who actually killed Galbatorix. That is, Eragon."

The air in the chamber grew brittle, as if it were made of glass.

Everyone looked at Eragon, even Saphira and the werecat, and he could feel Umaroth and the other Eldunarí observing him closely too. He stared back at the people around him, neither frightened nor angered by their scrutiny. He searched Nasuada's face for a hint as to her reaction, but other than the seriousness of her expression, he could discern nothing of what she thought or felt.

It unsettled him to realize that Däthedr was correct: he could become king.

For a moment, Eragon allowed himself to entertain the possibility. There was no one who could stop him from taking the throne, no one except Elva and perhaps Murtagh—but he now knew how to counter Elva's ability, and Murtagh was no longer there to challenge him. Saphira, he could sense from her mind, would not oppose him, whatever he chose. And though he could not read Nasuada's expression, he had a strange feeling that, for the first time, she would be willing to step aside and allow him to take command.

What do you want? asked Saphira.

Eragon thought about it. *I want … to be of use. But power and dominion over others—those things that Galbatorix sought—they hold little appeal for me. In any case, we have other responsibilities*.

Shifting his attention back to those watching, he said, "No. It would not be right."

King Orrin grunted and took another swig of his wine, while Arya, Däthedr, and Nasuada seemed to relax, if however slightly. Like them, the Eldunarí seemed pleased with his decision, although they did not comment upon it with words.

"I am glad to hear you say it," said Däthedr. "No doubt you would make a fine ruler, but I do not think it would be good for your kind, nor for the other races of Alagaësia, were another Dragon Rider to assume the crown."

Then Arya motioned to Däthedr. The silver-haired elf stepped back slightly, and Arya said, "Roran would be another obvious choice."

"Roran!" said Eragon, incredulous.

Arya gazed at him, her eyes solemn and—in the sideways light—bright and fierce, like emeralds cut in a rayed pattern. "It was by his actions that the Varden captured Urû'baen. He is the hero of Aroughs and of many other battles besides. The Varden and the rest of the Empire would follow him without hesitation."

"He's rude and overconfident, and he hasn't the experience needed," said Orrin. Then he glanced over at Eragon with a slightly guilty expression. "He is a good warrior, though."

Arya blinked, once, like an owl. "I believe you would find that his rudeness depends upon those he is dealing with … Your Majesty. However, you are correct; Roran lacks the experience needed. That leaves but two choices, then: you, Nasuada; and you, King Orrin."

King Orrin shifted again in his deep-seated chair, and his brow furrowed more severely than before, while Nasuada's expression remained unchanged.

"I assume," said Orrin to Nasuada, "that you wish to assert your claim."

She lifted her chin. "I do." Her voice was as calm as smooth water.

"Then we are at an impasse, for so do I. And I will not relent." Orrin

rolled the stem of his goblet between his fingers. “The only way I can see to resolve the matter without bloodshed is for you to renounce your claim. If you insist upon pursuing it, you will end up destroying everything we have won today, and you will have none to blame but yourself for the havoc that will follow.”

“You would turn upon your own allies for no other reason than to deny Nasuada the throne?” asked Arya. King Orrin might not have recognized it, but Eragon saw her cold, hard demeanor for what it was: a readiness to strike and kill at a moment’s notice.

“No,” Orrin replied. “I would turn upon the Varden in order to *win* the throne. There is a difference.”

“Why?” asked Nasuada.

“Why?” The question seemed to outrage Orrin. “My people have housed, fed, and equipped the Varden. They have fought and died alongside your warriors and, as a country, we have risked far more than the Varden. The Varden have no home; if Galbatorix had defeated Eragon and the dragons, you could have fled and hid. But we had nowhere to go other than Surda. Galbatorix would have fallen upon us like a bolt from on high, and he would have laid waste to the entire region. We wagered *everything*—our families, our homes, our wealth, and our freedom—and after all that, after all our sacrifices, do you truly believe we will be satisfied to return to our fields with no other rewards than a pat on the head and your royal thanks? Bah! I’d sooner crawl. We’ve watered the ground between here and the Burning Plains with our blood, and now we’ll have our recompense.” He clenched his fist. “Now we’ll have the just spoils of war.”

Orrin’s words did not seem to upset Nasuada; indeed, she looked thoughtful, almost sympathetic.

Surely she won’t give this snarling cur what he wants, said Saphira.

Wait and see, said Eragon. *She’s yet to lead us astray*.

Arya said, “I would hope that the two of you could come to an amicable agreement, and—”

“Of course,” said King Orrin. “I hope for that as well.” His gaze flicked toward Nasuada. “But I fear that Nasuada’s single-minded determination will not allow her to realize that, in this, she must finally submit.”

Arya continued: “—and as Däthedr said, we would not think of interfering with your race as you choose your next ruler.”

“I remember,” said Orrin with a hint of a smug smile.

“However,” said Arya, “as sworn allies of the Varden, I must tell you that we regard any attack on them as an attack on ourselves, and we will respond in kind.”

Orrin’s face drew inward, as if he had bitten into something sour.

“The same holds true for us the dwarves,” said Orik. The sound of

his voice was like stones grinding against one another deep underground.

Grimrr Halfpaw lifted his mangled hand before his face and inspected the clawlike nails on his three remaining fingers. “We do not care who becomes king or queen as long as we are given the seat next to the throne that was promised to us. Still, it was with Nasuada that we made our bargain, and it is Nasuada we shall continue to support until such time as she is no longer pack leader of the Varden.”

“Ah-ha!” exclaimed King Orrin, and he leaned forward with his hand on one knee. “But she isn’t the leader of the Varden. Not anymore. Eragon is!”

Again all eyes turned to Eragon. He grimaced slightly and said, “I thought it was understood that I gave my authority back to Nasuada the moment she was free. If not, then let there be no mistake: Nasuada is the leader of the Varden, not me. And I believe that she ought to be the one to inherit the throne.”

“You *would* say that,” said King Orrin, sneering. “You’ve sworn fealty to her. Of course you believe she should inherit the throne. You’re nothing more than a loyal servant standing up for his master, and your opinions carry no more weight than the opinions of my own servants.”

“No!” said Eragon. “There you’re wrong. If I thought that you or anyone else would make a better ruler, then I would say so! Yes, I gave my oath to Nasuada, but that doesn’t stop me from speaking the truth as I see it.”

“Maybe not, but your loyalty to her still clouds your judgment.”

“Even as your loyalty to Surda clouds yours,” said Orik.

King Orrin scowled. “Why is it that you always turn against me?” he demanded, looking from Eragon to Arya to Orik. “Why is it that, in every dispute, you side with her?” Wine sloshed over the rim of his goblet as he gestured toward Nasuada. “Why is it that *she* commands your respect, and not I or the people of Surda? Always it is Nasuada and the Varden you favor, and before her, it was Ajihad. Were my father still alive—”

“Were your father, King Larkin, still alive,” said Arya, “he would not be sitting there bemoaning how others see him; he would be doing something about it.”

“Peace,” said Nasuada before Orrin could utter a retort. “There is no need for insults here.… Orrin, your concerns are reasonable. You are right; the Surdans have contributed much to our cause. I freely admit that without your help, we never would have been able to attack the Empire as we did, and you deserve recompense for what you have risked, spent, and lost over the course of this war.”

King Orrin nodded, appearing satisfied. “You will yield, then?”

"No," said Nasuada, calm as ever. "That, I will not. But I have a counterproposal, one that perhaps will satisfy all our interests." Orrin made a noise of dissatisfaction, but he did not interrupt further. "My proposal is this: much of the land we have captured shall become part of Surda. Aroughs, Feinster, and Melian will all be yours, as well as the isles to the south, once they are under our governance. By this acquisition, Surda will nearly double in size."

"And in return?" asked King Orrin, lifting an eyebrow.

"In return, you will swear allegiance to the throne here in Urû'baen and whoever sits upon it."

Orrin's mouth twisted. "You would set yourself up as High Queen over the land."

"These two realms—the Empire and Surda—must be reunited if we are to avoid future hostilities. Surda would remain yours to command as you see fit, save for one exception: the magicians of both our countries would be subject to certain restrictions, the exact nature of which we would decide upon at a later date. Along with those laws, Surda would of necessity have to contribute to the defense of our combined territories. Should either of us be attacked, the other would be required to provide aid in the form of men and materiel."

King Orrin placed his goblet upright in his lap and stared down at it. "Again I ask: why should *you* be the one to take the throne instead of me? My family has ruled Surda since Lady Marelda won the Battle of Cithrí and thereby established both Surda and the House of Langfeld, and we can trace our ancestry all the way back to Thanebrand the Ring Giver himself. We faced and fought the Empire for an entire century. Our gold and our weapons and our armor allowed the Varden to exist in the first place and have sustained you through the years. Without us, it would have been impossible for you to resist Galbatorix. The dwarves could not have provided everything you needed, nor the elves, as far away as they were. So again I ask, why should this prize fall to you, Nasuada, and not me?"

"Because," said Nasuada, "I believe I can make a good queen. And because—as with everything I have done while leading the Varden—I believe it is what is best for our people and for the whole of Alagaësia."

"You have a very high opinion of yourself."

"False modesty is never admirable, and least of all among those who command others. Have I not amply demonstrated my ability to lead? If not for me, the Varden would still be cowering inside Farthen Dûr, waiting for a sign from above that it was the right time to advance on Galbatorix. I shepherded the Varden from Farthen Dûr to Surda, and I built them into a mighty army. With your help, yes, but I am the one who led them, and it was I who secured the help of the dwarves, the

elves, and the Urgals. Could you have done as much? Whosoever rules in Urû'baen will have to treat with every race in the land, not just our own. Again, this I have done and this I can do." Then Nasuada's voice softened, although her expression remained as strong as ever. "Orrin, why do you want this? Would it make you any happier?"

"It isn't a question of happiness," he growled.

"But it is, in part. Do you really want to govern the whole of the Empire in addition to Surda? Whoever takes the throne will have a huge task ahead. There is a country to rebuild: treaties to negotiate, cities still to capture, nobles and magicians to subdue. It will take a lifetime to even begin to undo the damage Galbatorix has wrought. Is that something you are really willing to undertake? It seems to me that you would prefer your life as it once was." Her gaze shifted to the goblet in his lap and then back to his face. "If you accept my offer, you can return to Aberon and your experiments in natural philosophy. Wouldn't you like that? Surda will be larger and richer, and you will have the freedom to pursue your interests."

"We don't always get to do what we like. Sometimes we have to do what is right, not what we want," said King Orrin.

"True, but—"

"Besides, if I were king in Urû'baen, I would be able to pursue my interests here just as easily as I could in Aberon." Nasuada frowned, but before she could speak, Orrin overrode her: "You don't understand.…" He scowled and took another sip of wine.

Then explain it to us, said Saphira, her impatience conspicuous in the color of her thoughts.

Orrin snorted, drained his goblet, and then threw it against the door to the staircase, denting the gold of the cup and knocking several of the jewels from their settings so that they spun jittering across the floor. "I can't," he growled, "and I don't care to try." He glared around the room. "None of you would understand. You are too bound up in your own importance to see. How could you, when you've never experienced what I have?" He sank back into his chair, his eyes like dark coals beneath the eaves of his brow. To Nasuada, he said, "You are determined? You will not withdraw your claim?"

She shook her head.

"And if I choose to pursue my own claim?"

"Then we will be in conflict."

"And the three of you will side with her?" asked Orrin, looking in turn at Arya, Orik, and Grimrr.

"If the Varden are attacked, we will fight alongside them," said Orik.

"As will we," said Arya.

King Orrin smiled a smile that was more a baring of his teeth than

anything. “But you would not think to tell us who we ought to choose as our ruler, now would you?”

“Of course not,” said Orik, and his own teeth flashed white and dangerous within his beard.

“Of course not.” Then Orrin returned his attention to Nasuada. “I want Belatona, along with the other cities you mentioned.”

Nasuada thought for a moment. “You’re already gaining two port cities with Feinster and Aroughs, three if you count Eoam on Beirland Isle. I’ll give you Furnost instead, and then you’ll have the whole of Lake Tüdosten, even as I will have the whole of Leona Lake.”

“Leona is more valuable than Tüdosten, as it grants access to the mountains and the northern coast,” Orrin pointed out.

“Aye. But you already have access to Leona Lake from Dauth and the Jiet River.”

King Orrin stared at the floor in the center of the room and was silent. Outside, the top of the sun slipped below the edge of the horizon, leaving a few attenuated clouds illuminated by its light. The sky began to darken, and the first few stars appeared in the gloaming: faint pinpricks of light in the purple vastness. A slight breeze started, and in the sound of it brushing against the sides of the tower, Eragon heard the rustling of the sawtooth nettles.

The longer they waited, the more likely it seemed to Eragon that Orrin would reject Nasuada’s offer, or that he would remain sitting there, silent, for the entire night.

Then the king shifted his weight and looked up. “Very well,” he said in a low voice. “As long as you honor the terms of our agreement, I shall not challenge you for Galbatorix’s throne … Your Majesty.”

A shiver passed through Eragon as he heard Orrin utter those words.

Her expression somber, Nasuada walked forward until she stood in the center of the open room. Then Orik struck the butt of Volund’s haft against the floor and proclaimed, “The king is dead, long live the queen!”

“The king is dead, long live the queen!” cried Eragon, Arya, Däthedr, and Grimrr. The werecat’s lips stretched, baring his sharp fangs, and Saphira uttered a loud, triumphant bugle, which echoed off the angled ceiling and out over the dusk-ridden city below. A sense of approval emanated from the Eldunarí.

Nasuada stood tall and proud, her eyes gleaming with tears in the graying light. “Thank you,” she said, and looked at each of them, holding their gaze. Still, her thoughts seemed to be directed elsewhere, and about her was an air of sadness that Eragon doubted the others noticed.

And all across the land, darkness sank, leaving the top of their

tower a lone beacon of light high above the city.

A Fitting Epitaph

After their victory at Urû'baen, the months passed both quickly and slowly for Eragon. Quickly because there was much for him and Saphira to do, and rare was the day that they were not exhausted by sundown. Slowly because he continued to feel a lack of purpose—despite the many tasks Queen Nasuada gave them—and it seemed to him as if they were idling in a patch of becalmed water, waiting for something, anything, to push them back into the main current.

He and Saphira stayed in Urû'baen for another four days after Nasuada was chosen queen, helping establish the Varden's presence there and throughout the surrounding area. Much of that time they spent dealing with the inhabitants of the city—usually placating crowds who were furious with some action of the Varden's—and hunting groups of soldiers who had fled Urû'baen and were preying upon travelers, peasants, and nearby estates to support themselves. He and Saphira also participated in the effort to rebuild the city's massive front gate, and at Nasuada's behest, he cast several spells designed to prevent those still loyal to Galbatorix from working against her. The spells applied only to the people within the city and the adjacent lands, but having them in place made everyone in the Varden feel safer.

Eragon noticed that the Varden, the dwarves, and even the elves treated him and Saphira differently than they had before Galbatorix's death. They were more respectful and deferential, especially the humans, and they regarded him and Saphira with what he slowly came to understand was a sense of awe. He enjoyed it at first—Saphira did not seem to care one way or another—but it began to bother him when he realized that many of the dwarves and humans were so eager to please him, they would tell him whatever they thought he wanted to hear and not the actual truth. The discovery unsettled him; he felt unable to trust anyone other than Roran, Arya, Nasuada, Orik, Horst, and of course, Saphira.

He saw little of Arya during those days. The few times they met, she seemed withdrawn, which he recognized was her way of dealing with her grief. They never had a chance to talk in private, and the only condolences he was able to offer were brief and awkward. He thought she appreciated them, but it was hard to tell.

As for Nasuada, she seemed to regain much of her former drive, spirit, and energy after a single night's sleep, which amazed Eragon.

His opinion of her increased tremendously upon hearing her account of her ordeal in the Hall of the Soothsayer, as did his regard for Murtagh, of whom Nasuada spoke not a word thereafter. She complimented Eragon on his leadership of the Varden in her absence —although he protested that he had been gone most of that time—and thanked him for rescuing her as quickly as he had, for as she admitted late in their conversation, Galbatorix had nearly succeeded in breaking her.

Upon the third day, Nasuada was coronated in a great square near the center of the city, in full view of a vast crowd of humans, dwarves, elves, werecats, and Urgals. The explosion that had ended Galbatorix's life had destroyed the ancient crown of the Broddrings, so the dwarves had forged a new crown from gold found in the city and from jewels the elves had taken from their helms or from the pommels of their swords.

The ceremony was simple, but all the more effective for it. Nasuada approached on foot from the direction of the ruined citadel. She wore a dress of royal purple—cut short at the elbows so that all might see the scars that lined her forearms—with a train fringed with mink, which Elva carried, for Eragon had heeded Murtagh's warning and insisted that the girl stay as close to Nasuada as possible.

A slow drumbeat sounded as Nasuada walked up to the dais that had been erected in the center of the square. At the top of the dais, next to the carved chair that would serve as her throne, stood Eragon, with Saphira close behind. In front of the raised platform were the kings Orrin, Orik, and Grimrr, along with Arya, Däthedr, and Nar Garzhvog.

Nasuada ascended the dais, then knelt before Eragon and Saphira. A dwarf of Orik's clan presented Eragon with the newly made crown, which he placed upon Nasuada's head. Then Saphira arched her neck and, with her snout, touched Nasuada upon the brow, and both she and Eragon said:

"Rise now as queen, Nasuada, daughter of Ajihad and Nadara."

A fanfare of trumpets rang forth, and the gathered crowd—which had been deathly silent—began to cheer. It was a strange cacophony, what with the bellows of Urgals intermingled with the melodious voices of the elves.

Then Nasuada sat upon the throne. King Orrin came before her and swore his allegiance, followed by Arya, King Orik, Grimrr Halfpaw, and Nar Garzhvog, who each pledged the friendship of their respective races.

The event affected Eragon strongly. He found himself holding back tears as he gazed at Nasuada sitting regnant on her throne. Only with her coronation did it feel as if the specter of Galbatorix's oppression

had begun to recede.

Afterward, they feasted, and the Varden and their allies celebrated throughout the night and into the next day. Eragon remembered little of the festivities, save the dancing of the elves, the pounding of the dwarves' drums, and the four Kull who climbed a tower along the city wall and there stood blowing horns made from the skulls of their fathers. The people of the city joined in the celebrations as well, and among them, Eragon saw relief and jubilation that Galbatorix was no longer king. And underlying their emotions, and those of everyone present, was an awareness of the importance of the moment, for they knew they were witnessing the end of one age and the beginning of another.

Upon the fifth day, when the gate was nearly rebuilt and the city seemed reasonably secure, Nasuada ordered Eragon and Saphira to fly to Dras-Leona, and thence to Belatona, Feinster, and Aroughs, and in each place to use the name of the ancient language to release from their oaths everyone who had sworn fealty to Galbatorix. She also asked Eragon to bind the soldiers and nobles with spells—even as he had bound the people of Urû'baen—to keep them from trying to undermine the newly established peace. That, Eragon had refused, for he felt it was too similar to how Galbatorix had controlled those who served him. In Urû'baen, the risk of hidden killers or other loyalists was great enough that Eragon had been willing to do as she wished. But not elsewhere. To his relief, Nasuada agreed with him after some consideration.

He and Saphira took with them over half the Eldunarí from Vroengard; the rest remained behind with the hearts of hearts that had been rescued from Galbatorix's treasure room. Blödhgarm and his spellcasters—who were no longer bound to defend Eragon and Saphira—moved those Eldunarí to a castle several miles northeast of Urû'baen, where it would be easy to protect the hearts against any who might seek to steal them, and where the thoughts of the mad dragons would not affect the minds of any but their caretakers.

Only once Eragon and Saphira were satisfied that the Eldunarí were safe did they depart.

When they arrived at Dras-Leona, Eragon was astounded by the number of spells he found woven throughout the city, as well as in the dark tower of stone, Helgrind. Many of them, he guessed, were hundreds of years old, if not older: forgotten enchantments from ages past. He left those that seemed harmless and removed those that did not, but ofttimes it was difficult to tell, and he was reluctant to tamper with spells whose purpose he did not understand. Here the Eldunarí proved helpful; in several cases, they remembered who had cast a

spell and why, or else they were able to divine its purpose from information that meant nothing to him.

When it came to Helgrind and the various holdings of the priests—who had gone into hiding as soon as news of Galbatorix's demise had reached them—Eragon did not bother trying to determine which spells were dangerous and which were not; he removed them all. He also used the name of names to search for the belt of Beloth the Wise in the ruins of the great cathedral, but without success.

They stayed in Dras-Leona for three days, then they proceeded to Belatona. There too Eragon removed Galbatorix's enchantments, as well as at Feinster and Aroughs. In Feinster, someone tried to kill him with a poisoned drink. His wards protected him, but the incident angered Saphira.

If I ever corner the rat-coward who did this, I'll eat him alive from the toes up, she growled.

On the return trip to Urû'baen, Eragon suggested a slight change of direction. Saphira agreed and altered her course, tilting so the horizon stood on end and the world was divided equally between the dark blue sky and the green and brown earth.

It took a half day of searching, but at last Saphira found the cluster of sandstone hills and, among them, one hill in particular: a tall, sloping mound of reddish stone with a cave halfway up its side. And upon its crest, a glittering tomb of diamond.

The hill looked exactly as Eragon remembered. When he gazed upon it, he felt his chest grow tight.

Saphira landed next to the tomb. Her claws scraped against the pitted stone, chipping off flakes.

With slow fingers, Eragon unbuckled his legs. Then he slid to the ground. A wave of dizziness passed through him at the smell of the warm stone, and for a moment, he felt as if he were in the past.

Then he shook himself, and his mind cleared. He walked to the tomb and looked into its crystal depths, and there he saw Brom.

There he saw his father.

Brom's appearance had not changed. The diamond that encased his body protected him from the ravages of time, and his flesh showed no hint of decay. The skin of his lined face was firm, and it had a rosy tint, as if hot blood still coursed beneath the surface. At any moment, it seemed as if Brom might open his eyes and rise to his feet, ready to continue on their unfinished journey. In a way, he had become deathless, for he no longer aged as others did, but would remain forever the same, caught in a dreamless sleep.

Brom's sword lay atop his chest and the long white pennant of his beard, with his hands folded over the hilt, just as Eragon had placed

them. By his side was his gnarled staff, carved, Eragon now realized, with dozens of glyphs from the ancient language.

Tears welled in Eragon's eyes. He fell to his knees and wept quietly for a timeless while. He heard Saphira join him, felt her with his mind, and he knew that she too mourned Brom's passing.

At last Eragon got to his feet and leaned against the edge of the tomb as he studied the shape of Brom's face. Now that he knew what to look for, he could see the similarities between their features, blurred and obscured by age and by Brom's beard, but still unmistakable. The angle of Brom's cheekbones, the crease between his eyebrows, the way his upper lip curved; all those Eragon recognized. He had not inherited Brom's hooked nose, however. His nose he had gotten from his mother.

Eragon looked down, breathing heavily as his eyes again grew blurry. "It's done," he said in an undertone. "I did it.… *We* did it. Galbatorix is dead, Nasuada is on the throne, and both Saphira and I are unharmed. That would please you, wouldn't it, you old fox?" He laughed shortly and wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. "What's more, there are dragon eggs in Vroengard. Eggs! The dragons aren't going to die out. And Saphira and I will be the ones to raise them. You never foresaw *that*, now did you?" He laughed again, feeling silly and grief-stricken at the same time. "What would you think of this all, I wonder? You're the same as ever, but we're not. Would you even recognize us?"

Of course he would, said Saphira. *You are his son*. She touched him with her snout. *Besides, your face isn't so different that he would mistake you for someone else, even if your scent has changed*.

"It has?"

You smell more like an elf now.… Anyway, he would hardly think I was Shruikan or Glaedr, now would he?

"No."

Eragon sniffed and pushed himself off the tomb. Brom looked so lifelike within the diamond, the sight of him inspired an idea: a wild, improbable idea that he almost dismissed but that his emotions would not let him ignore. He thought of Umaroth and the Eldunarí—of all their collected knowledge and of what they had accomplished with his spell in Urû'baen—and a spark of desperate hope kindled within his heart.

Speaking both to Saphira and Umaroth, he said, *Brom had only just died when we buried him. Saphira didn't turn the stone to diamond until the following day, but he was still encased in stone, away from the air, through the night. Umaroth, with your strength and your knowledge, maybe … maybe we could still heal him*. Eragon shivered as if he were in the grip of a fever. *I didn't know how to mend his wound before, but*

now—now I think I could.

It would be more difficult than you imagine, said Umaroth.

Yes, but you could do it! said Eragon. *I've seen you and Saphira accomplish amazing things with magic. Surely this isn't beyond you!*

You know that we cannot use magic on command, said Saphira.

And even if we succeeded, said Umaroth, *there is every chance that we would be unable to restore Brom's mind to what it was. Minds are complicated things, and he might easily end up with his wits muddled or his personality altered. And then what? Would you want him to live like that? Would* he? *No, it is best to let him be, Eragon, and to honor him with your thoughts and actions, as you have. You wish it were otherwise. So do all who have lost one they care about. However, it is the way of things. Brom lives on in your memories, and if he was the man you showed us, he would be content with that. Let you be content with that as well.*

But—

It was not Umaroth who interrupted, but the oldest of the Eldunarí, Valdr. He surprised Eragon by speaking not in images or feelings, but in words of the ancient language, strained and labored, as if each was foreign to him. And he said, *Leave the dead to the earth. They are not for us*. Then he spoke no more, but Eragon felt from him a great sadness and sympathy.

Eragon let out a long sigh and closed his eyes for a moment. Then, in his heart, he allowed himself to release his misguided hope and again accept the fact that Brom was gone.

"Ah," he said to Saphira. "I didn't think this would be so difficult."

It would be strange if it were not. He felt her warm breath ruffle the hair on the top of his head as she touched his back with the side of her muzzle.

He smiled weakly and gathered up his courage to look at Brom again.

"Father," he said. The word tasted strange in his mouth; he had never had cause to say it to anyone before. Then Eragon shifted his gaze to the runes he had set into the spire at the head of the tomb, which read:

Here Lies Brom
Who was a Dragon Rider
And like a father
To me.
May his name live on in glory.

He smiled painfully at how close he had come to the truth. Then he spoke in the ancient language, and he watched the diamond shimmer and flow as a new pattern of runes formed upon its surface. When he finished, the inscription had changed to:

Here Lies Brom
Who was
A Rider bonded to the dragon Saphira
Son of Holcomb and Nelda
Beloved of Selena
Father of Eragon Shadeslayer
Founder of the Varden
And Bane of the Forsworn.
May his name live on in glory.
Stydja unin mor'ranr.

It was a less personal epitaph, but it seemed more fitting to Eragon. Then he cast several spells to protect the diamond from thieves and vandals.

He continued to stand next to the tomb, reluctant to turn away and feeling as if there ought to be something *more*—some event or emotion or realization that would make it easier for him to say farewell to his father and thus to leave.

At last he put his hand atop the cool diamond, wishing that he could reach through it to touch Brom one final time. And he said, "Thank you for everything you taught me."

Saphira snorted and bowed her head until her snout tapped against the hard jewel.

Then Eragon turned and, with a sense of finality, he slowly climbed onto Saphira's back.

He was somber for a time as Saphira took off and flew northeast, toward Urû'baen. When the patch of sandstone hills was no more than a smudge on the horizon, he let out a long breath and looked up into the azure sky.

A smile split his face.

What is so amusing? asked Saphira, and she swung her tail back and forth.

The scale on your snout is regrowing.

Her delight was evident. Then she sniffed and said, *I always knew it would. Why would it not?* However, he could feel her sides vibrating against his heels as she hummed with satisfaction, and he patted her and laid his chest against her neck, feeling the warmth from her body seeping into his.

PIECES ON A BOARD

When he and Saphira arrived at Urû'baen, Eragon was surprised to discover that Nasuada had restored its name to Ilirea, out of respect for its history and heritage.

Also, he was dismayed to learn that Arya had departed for Ellesméra, along with Däthedr and many of the other high elf lords, and that she had taken with her the green dragon egg they had found in the citadel.

She had left a letter for him with Nasuada. In it, Arya explained that she needed to accompany her mother's body back to Du Weldenvarden for a proper burial. As for the dragon egg, she wrote:

> *… and because Saphira chose you, a human, to be her Rider, it is only right that an elf should be the next Rider, if the dragon within this egg agrees. I wish to give it that chance without delay. Already, it has spent far too long within its shell. Since there are many more eggs elsewhere—I shall not name the place—I hope you do not believe that I have acted presumptuously or that I have been overly prejudiced in favor of my own race. I consulted with the Eldunarí upon this matter, and they agreed with my decision.*
>
> *In any event, with both Galbatorix and my mother having passed into the void, I no longer wish to continue as ambassador to the Varden. Rather, I wish to resume my task of ferrying a dragon egg throughout the land, as I did with Saphira's. Of course, an ambassador between our races is still needed. Therefore, Däthedr and I have appointed as my replacement a young elf named Vanir, whom you met during your time in Ellesméra. He has expressed a desire to learn more about the people of your race, and that seems to me as good a reason as any for him to have the post—so long as he does not prove completely incompetent, that is.*

The letter continued for several more lines, but Arya gave no indication of when, if ever, she might return to the western half of Alagaësia. Eragon was pleased that she had thought enough of him to write, but he wished that she could have waited until their return before she had departed. With her gone, there was a hole in his world, and though he spent a fair amount of time with Roran and Katrina, as well as Nasuada, the aching emptiness within him refused to subside. That, along with his continued sense that he and Saphira were merely biding their time, left him with a feeling of detachment. It often seemed as if he were watching himself from outside his body, as might a stranger. He understood the cause of his feelings, but he could think of no cure other than time.

During their recent trip, it had occurred to him that—with the command of the ancient language bestowed by the name of names—he could remove from Elva the last vestiges of his blessing that had proved a curse. So he went to the girl, where she was living in

Nasuada's grand hall, and he told her his idea, then asked her what she wanted.

She did not react with the delight he expected, but sat staring at the floor, a frown upon her pale face. She remained silent for the better part of an hour—he sitting across from her, waiting without complaint.

Then she looked at him and said, "No. I would rather stay as I am. … I am grateful that you thought to ask, but this is too large a part of me, and I cannot give it up. Without my ability to sense others' pain, I would be only an oddity—a misbegotten aberration, good for nothing but satisfying the low-minded curiosity of those who consented to have me around, of those who *tolerated* me. With it, I am still an oddity, but I can be useful as well, and I have a power that others fear and a control over my own destiny, which many of my sex do not." She gestured at the ornate room where she was staying. "Here I can live in comfort—I can live in peace—and yet I can continue to do some good by helping Nasuada. If you take away my ability, then what would I have? What would I do? What would I be? To remove your spell would be no blessing, Eragon. No, I will stay as I am, and I will bear the trials of my gift of my own free will. But I do thank you."

Two days after he and Saphira alit in what was now Ilirea, Nasuada sent them out once more, first to Gil'ead and then to Ceunon—the two cities that the elves had captured—so that Eragon could again use the name of names to clear away Galbatorix's spells.

Both Eragon and Saphira found Gil'ead unpleasant to visit. It reminded them of when the Urgals had captured Eragon at Durza's orders, and also of Oromis's death.

Eragon and Saphira slept in Ceunon for three nights. It was unlike any other city they had seen before. The buildings were mainly wood, with steep, shingled roofs that, in the case of the larger houses, had several layers. The peaks of the roofs were often decorated with a stylized carving of a dragon head, while the doors were carved or painted with elaborate, knotlike patterns.

When they departed, Saphira was the one who suggested a change of path. She did not have to try very hard to convince Eragon; he was happy to agree once she explained that the side trip would not take too long.

From Ceunon, Saphira flew westward, across the Bay of Fundor: a broad, white-capped expanse of water. The gray and black humps of great sea-fish often breached the waves, like small, leathery islands. Then they would spray water from their blowholes and lift their flukes high into the air before slipping back into the silent depths.

Across the Bay of Fundor, through winds cold and blustery, and

then across the mountains of the Spine, each of which Eragon knew by name. And thus to Palancar Valley for the first time since they had set off in pursuit of the Ra'zac, along with Brom, what seemed like a lifetime ago.

The valley smelled like home to Eragon; the scent of the pines and the willows and the birches reminded him of his childhood, and the bitter bite of the air told him that winter was near.

They landed in the charred ruins of Carvahall, and Eragon wandered along streets fringed with encroaching grass and weeds.

A pack of wild dogs trotted out of a nearby stand of birch. They stopped when they saw Saphira, then snarled, yelped, and ran for cover. Saphira growled and loosed a puff of smoke but made no move to chase them.

A piece of burnt wood cracked under Eragon's foot as he dragged his boot through a pile of ashes. The destruction of the town left him saddened. But most of the villagers who had escaped were still alive. If they returned, Eragon knew that they would rebuild Carvahall and make it better than it had been. The buildings he had grown up with, though, were gone forever. Their absence exacerbated his feeling that he no longer belonged in Palancar Valley, and the empty spaces where they ought to have been left him with a sense of wrongness, as if he were in a dream where everything was off-kilter.

"The world is out of joint," he murmured.

Eragon built a small campfire next to what had been Morn's tavern, and he cooked a large pot of stew. While he ate, Saphira prowled the surrounding landscape, sniffing at whatever she found interesting.

When the stew was gone, Eragon carried his pot, bowl, and spoon to the Anora River and washed them in the icy water. He sat squatting on the rocky shore and stared at the drifting white plume at the head of the valley: the Igualda Falls, which stretched upward for a half mile before disappearing over a shoulder of stone high on Narnmor Mountain. Seeing it brought back the evening he had returned from the Spine with Saphira's egg in his pack, knowing nothing of what lay before the two of them, or even that there would *be* two of them.

"Let's go," he said to Saphira, rejoining her by the caved-in well in the center of the town.

Do you want to visit your farm? she asked as he took his place on her back.

He shook his head. "No. I would rather think of it as it was, not as it is."

She agreed. However, by unspoken consent she flew south following the same path as when they had left Palancar Valley. Along the way, Eragon glimpsed the clearing where his home had been, but it was distant and obscure enough that he was able to pretend that perhaps

the house and barn were still intact.

At the southern end of the valley, Saphira rode a pillar of rising air up to the top of the huge, bare mountain, Utgard, where stood the crumbling turret the Riders had built to keep watch over mad King Palancar. The turret had once been known as Edoc'sil, but now bore the name Ristvak'baen, or the "Place of Sorrow," as it was there that Galbatorix had slain Vrael.

In the ruins of the turret, Eragon, Saphira, and the Eldunarí with them paid their respects to the memory of Vrael. Umaroth in particular was somber, but he said, *Thank you for bringing me here, Saphira. I never thought to see the place where my Rider fell.*

Then Saphira spread her wings and leaped out of the turret and soared away from the valley and over the grassy plains beyond.

Halfway to Ilirea, Nasuada contacted them through one of the Varden's magicians and ordered them to join a large group of warriors she had sent to march from the capital to Teirm.

Eragon was pleased to learn that Roran commanded the warriors and that among their ranks were Jeod, Baldor—who had regained full use of his hand after the elves reattached it—and several more of the villagers.

Somewhat to Eragon's surprise, the people of Teirm refused to surrender, even after he released them from their oaths to Galbatorix, and even though it was obvious that the Varden, with Saphira and Eragon to help, could easily capture the city if they wished. Instead, the governor of Teirm, Lord Risthart, demanded that they be allowed to become an independent city-state with the freedom to choose its own rulers and set its own laws.

In the end, after several days of negotiations, Nasuada agreed to his terms, provided that Lord Risthart swore allegiance to her as high queen, even as King Orrin had, and consented to abide by her laws concerning magicians.

From Teirm, Eragon and Saphira accompanied the warriors south, along the narrow coast, until they arrived at the city of Kuasta. They repeated the process from Teirm, but unlike Teirm, the governor of Kuasta yielded and agreed to join Nasuada's new kingdom.

Then Eragon and Saphira flew alone to Narda, far to the north, and extracted the same promise from them before finally returning to Ilirea, where they stayed for some weeks in a hall next to Nasuada's.

When time allowed, he and Saphira left the city and went to the castle, where Blödhgarm and the other spellcasters guarded the Eldunarí rescued from Galbatorix. There Eragon and Saphira aided in the effort to heal the minds of the dragons. They made progress, but it was slow, and some of the Eldunarí responded faster than others.

Many of them, Eragon worried, simply did not care about life anymore, or were so lost within the labyrinths of their minds that it was almost impossible to communicate with them in a meaningful manner, even for the elder dragons such as Valdr. To prevent the hundreds of maddened dragons from overwhelming those who were trying to help them, the elves kept most of the Eldunarí in a trancelike state, choosing to interact with only a few at a time.

Eragon also labored alongside the magicians of Du Vrangr Gata to empty the citadel of its treasures. Much of the work fell to him, as none of the other spellcasters had the knowledge or experience needed to deal with many of the enchanted artifacts Galbatorix had left behind. But Eragon did not mind; he enjoyed exploring the damaged fortress and discovering the secrets that lay hidden therein. Galbatorix had collected a host of wonders over the past century, some more dangerous than others, but all of them interesting. Eragon's favorite was an astrolabe that, when put to his eye, allowed him to see the stars, even in daylight.

He kept the existence of the most perilous artifacts a secret between him, Saphira, and Nasuada, deeming it too risky to allow knowledge of them to spread.

Nasuada put the trove of riches they recovered from the citadel to immediate use feeding and clothing her warriors, as well as rebuilding the defenses of the cities they had captured during their invasion of the Empire. In addition, she gave a gift of five gold crowns to every one of her subjects: a trifling amount to the nobles, but a veritable fortune to the poorer farmers. The gesture, Eragon knew, earned her their respect and allegiance in a way Galbatorix would never have understood.

They also recovered several hundred Riders' swords: swords of every color and shape, made for both humans and elves. It was a breathtaking find. Eragon and Saphira personally carried the weapons to the castle where the Eldunarí were, in anticipation of the day when they would again be needed by Riders.

Rhunön, Eragon thought, would be pleased to know that so much of her handiwork had survived.

And there were the thousands of scrolls and books that Galbatorix had collected, which the elves and Jeod helped to catalog, setting aside those that contained secrets about the Riders or the inner workings of magic.

As they sorted through Galbatorix's great hoard of knowledge, Eragon kept hoping that they would find some mention of where the king had hidden the rest of the Lethrblaka's eggs. However, the only mentions of the Lethrblaka or the Ra'zac he saw were in works by the elves and the Riders from ages past, where they discussed the dark

menace of the night and wondered what was to be done about a foe that could not be detected with magic of any sort.

Now that Eragon could speak openly with him, he found himself talking with Jeod on a regular basis, confiding in him all that had happened with the Eldunarí and the eggs, and even going so far as to tell him about the process of finding his true name on Vroengard. Talking with Jeod was a comfort, especially as he was one of the few people who had known Brom well enough to call him a friend.

As soon as it was convenient, Eragon fulfilled his promise to Jeod from so long ago by arranging for him to fly upon Saphira. That is, of course, only with Saphira's consent. Eragon expected her to object, but she agreed without complaint.

The flight took place on a clear and windless day. With a sweep of her wings, Saphira rose from the ground and carried Jeod aloft. For an hour or more, she flew with him high above Ilirea, turning and twisting in the morning light while Eragon watched from below and thought of Brom.

When she landed, Eragon saw tears on Jeod's cold-reddened cheeks. The man carefully climbed down off Saphira, then touched her on the side and, in a quiet voice, said, "Thank you, Bjartskular."

She bowed her head and hummed in response.

Eragon found it interesting, in a rather abstract way, to watch what went into ruling and rebuilding the kingdom Nasuada had formed from the remnants of the Empire. The amount of effort required to manage such an enormous and diverse country was tremendous, and the task never seemed finished; there was always more that needed doing. Eragon knew that he would have hated the demands of the position, but Nasuada appeared to thrive upon them. Her energy never flagged, and she always seemed to know how to solve the problems that came before her. Day by day, he saw her stature grow among the emissaries, functionaries, nobles, and commoners with whom she dealt. She seemed perfectly suited for her new role, although he was not sure how happy she really was, and he worried about her because of it.

He watched how she rendered judgment upon the nobles who had worked with Galbatorix—willingly or not—and he approved of the fairness and mercy she displayed, as well as the punishments she meted out when necessary. Most she stripped of their lands, titles, and the better portion of their ill-gotten wealth, but she did not have them executed, for which Eragon was glad.

He stood by her side when she granted Nar Garzhvog and his people vast swaths of land along the northern coast of the Spine, as well as along the fertile plains between the lake Fläm and the Toark River,

where few if any people now lived. And that too Eragon approved of.

Like King Orrin and Lord Risthart, Nar Garzhvog had sworn fealty to Nasuada as his high queen. However, the huge Kull said, “My people agree with this, Lady Nightstalker, but they have thick blood and short memories, and words will not bind them forever.”

In a cold voice, Nasuada replied, “Do you mean to say your people will break the peace? Am I to understand our races will once again be enemies?”

“No,” said Garzhvog, and shook his massive head. “We do not want to fight you. We know that Firesword would kill us. But … when our young ones have grown, they will want battles in which to prove themselves. If there are no battles, then they will start them. I am sorry, Nightstalker, but we cannot change what we are.”

The exchange troubled Eragon—and Nasuada as well—and he spent several nights thinking about the Urgals, trying to solve the problem they presented.

As the weeks rolled by, Nasuada continued to send him and Saphira to various locations within Surda and her kingdom, often using them as her personal representatives to King Orrin, Lord Risthart, and the other nobles and groups of soldiers throughout the land.

Wherever they went, they searched for a place that could serve as a home for the Eldunarí in the centuries to come and as nesting and proving grounds for the dragons hidden on Vroengard. The island itself was problematic. In time, Eragon thought he might—with the help of the Eldunarí—be able to cleanse Vroengard in the same manner that the elves had cleansed Ilirea. But even then, the shadow birds and burrow grubs would still pose a danger, and Eragon was not sure how well that danger could be contained with magic. The biggest stumbling block, though, was the fact that Vroengard was already inhabited by the strange hooded figures he had seen in the ruins of Doru Araeba, and whoever—or whatever—they were, they had first claim to the island. Displacing them would be wrong, and Eragon did not feel comfortable with the idea of settling the dragons close to others, no matter how peaceful they might be.

No, Vroengard would not work, as much as Eragon wished it could, for he would have liked to restore the Riders’ ancestral home to its former glory.

There were areas of the Spine that showed promise, but most were too close to humans or Urgals, or else were so far north, Eragon thought it would be miserable to live there year-round. Besides, Murtagh and Thorn had gone north, and Eragon and Saphira did not want to cause them additional difficulty.

The Beor Mountains would have been perfect, but it seemed

doubtful that the dwarves would welcome hundreds of ravenous dragons hatching within the bounds of their realm. No matter where they went in the Beors, they would still be a short flight from at least one dwarven city, and it would not do if a young dragon were to start raiding the dwarves' flocks of Feldûnost—which, knowing Saphira, Eragon deemed more than likely.

The elves would, he thought, have no objection to the dragons living on or around one of the mountains in Du Weldenvarden, but Eragon still worried about their nearness to the elven cities. Also, he disliked the idea of placing the dragons and the Eldunarí within the territory of any one race. Doing so would give the appearance that they were lending support to that race in particular. The Riders of the past had never done that, nor—Eragon believed—should the Riders of the future.

The only location that was far enough away from every town and city and that no race had yet claimed was the ancestral home of the dragons: the heart of the Hadarac Desert, where stood Du Fells Nangoröth, the Blasted Mountains. It would, Eragon was sure, be a fine place to raise hatchlings. However, it had three drawbacks. First, they would not be able to find enough food in the desert to feed the young dragons. Saphira would have to spend most of her time carrying deer and other wild animals to the mountains. And of course, once the hatchlings grew larger, they would have to start flying out on their own, which would take them close to the lands of either the humans, the elves, or the dwarves. Second, everyone who had traveled widely—and many who had not—knew where the mountains were. And third, it was not unduly difficult to reach the mountains, especially in the winter. The last two points concerned Eragon the most and made him wonder how well they would be able to protect the eggs, the hatchlings, and the Eldunarí.

It would be better if we were high up on one of the peaks in the Beors, where only a dragon could fly, he said to Saphira. *Then no one would be able to sneak up on us, no one except for Thorn, Murtagh, or some other magician.*

Some other magician, like every elf in the land? Besides, it would be cold all the time!

I thought you didn't mind the cold.

I don't. But I don't want to live in the snow year-round either. Sand is better for your scales; Glaedr told me. It helps polish them and keep them clean.

Mmh.

Day by day, the weather grew colder. Trees shed their leaves, flocks of birds flew south for the year, and winter thus came upon the land. It

was a cruel, harsh winter, and for a long while it felt as if the whole of Alagaësia was locked in slumber. At the first fall of snow, Orik and his army returned to the Beor Mountains. All of the elves who were still in Ilirea—save Vanir and Blödhgarm and his ten spellcasters—likewise left for Du Weldenvarden. The Urgals had departed weeks earlier. Last to go were the werecats. They seemed to simply disappear; no one saw them leave, and yet one day they were all gone, except for a large, fat werecat by the name of Yelloweyes, who sat on the padded cushion next to Nasuada, purring, napping, and listening to everything that went on in the throne room.

Without the elves and the dwarves, the city felt depressingly empty to Eragon as he walked along the streets, ragged flakes of snow drifting sideways underneath the shelf of creviced stone overhead.

And still Nasuada continued to dispatch him and Saphira upon missions. But never did she send them to Du Weldenvarden, the one place Eragon wanted to go. They had had no word from the elves as to who had been chosen as Islanzadí's successor, and when asked, Vanir would only say, "We are not a hasty people, and for us, appointing a new monarch is a difficult, complicated process. As soon as I learn what our councils have decided, I will tell you."

It had been so long since Eragon had seen or heard from Arya, he considered using the name of the ancient language to bypass the wards around Du Weldenvarden so that he could communicate with, or at least scry, her. However, he knew the elves would not look kindly on the intrusion, and he feared Arya would not appreciate him contacting her in that way without a pressing need.

Therefore, he instead wrote her a short letter, asking after her and telling her some of what he and Saphira had been doing. He gave the letter to Vanir, and Vanir promised that he would have it sent to Arya at once. Eragon was sure that Vanir kept his word—for they had been speaking in the ancient language—but he received no response from Arya, and as the moons waxed and waned, he began to think that, for some unknown reason, she had decided to end their friendship. The thought hurt him terribly, and it caused him to concentrate on the work Nasuada gave him with even greater intensity, hoping to forget his misery.

In the deepest part of winter, when swordlike icicles hung from the shelf above Ilirea and deep drifts of snow lay upon the surrounding landscape, when the roads were nearly impassable and the fare at their tables had grown lean, three attempts were made on Nasuada's life, as Murtagh had warned might happen.

The attempts were clever and well thought out, and the third one—which involved a net full of stones falling on Nasuada—nearly

succeeded. But with Eragon's wards and Elva to protect her, Nasuada survived, although the last attack cost her several broken bones.

During the third attempt, Eragon and the Nighthawks managed to kill two of Nasuada's attackers—the exact number of which remained a mystery—but the rest escaped.

Eragon and Jörmundur went to extraordinary lengths to ensure Nasuada's safety after that. They increased the number of her guards once again, and wherever she went, at least three spellcasters accompanied her. Nasuada herself grew ever more wary, and Eragon saw in her a certain hardness that had not been apparent before.

There were no more attacks upon Nasuada's person, but a month after winter broke and the roads were again clear, a displaced earl by the name of Hamlin, who had gathered up several hundred of the Empire's former soldiers, started launching raids against Gil'ead and attacking the travelers on the roads thereabouts.

At the same time, another, slightly larger rebellion began to brew in the south, led by Tharos the Quick of Aroughs.

The uprisings were more of a nuisance than anything, but they still took several months to quell, and they resulted in a number of unexpectedly savage fights, although Eragon and Saphira attempted to settle matters peacefully whenever they could. After the battles they had already participated in, neither of them was thirsty for more blood.

Soon after the end of the uprisings, Katrina gave birth to a large, healthy girl with a lock of red hair atop her head, the same as her mother. The girl bawled louder than any infant Eragon had ever heard, and she had a grip like iron. Roran and Katrina named her Ismira, after Katrina's mother, and whenever they looked at her, the joy in their faces made Eragon grin as well.

The day after Ismira's birth, Nasuada summoned Roran to her throne room and surprised him by granting him the title of earl, along with the whole of Palancar Valley as his domain.

"As long as you and your descendants remain fit to rule, the valley shall be yours," she said.

Roran bowed and said, "Thank you, Your Majesty." The gift, Eragon could see, meant almost as much to Roran as had the birth of his daughter, for after his family, the thing Roran prized most was his home.

Nasuada also tried to give Eragon various titles and lands, but he refused them, saying, "It is enough to be a Rider; I need nothing more."

A few days later, Eragon was standing with Nasuada in her study, examining a map of Alagaësia and discussing matters of concern

throughout the land, when she said, “Now that things are somewhat more settled, I think it’s time to address the role of magicians within Surda, Teirm, and my own kingdom.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about it and have reached a decision. I have decided to form a group, much like the Riders, but for magicians alone.”

“And what will this group do?”

Nasuada picked up a quill from her desk and rolled it between her fingers. “Again, much the same as the Riders: travel through the land, keep the peace, resolve disputes of law, and most important, watch over their fellow spellcasters, so as to ensure they do not use their ability for ill.”

Eragon frowned slightly. “Why not just leave that to the Riders?”

“Because it will be years before we have more of them, and even then there won’t be enough to mind every petty conjurer and hedge witch.… You still haven’t found a place to raise the dragons, have you?”

Eragon shook his head. Both he and Saphira had been feeling increasingly impatient, but as of yet, they and the Eldunarí had been unable to agree upon a location. It was becoming a sore point between them, for the infant dragons needed to hatch as soon as possible.

“I thought not. We have to do this, Eragon, and we cannot afford to wait. Look at the havoc Galbatorix wrought. Magicians are the most dangerous creatures in this world, even more dangerous than dragons, and they have to be held accountable. If not, we’ll always be at their mercy.”

“Do you really believe you will be able to recruit enough magicians to watch over all of the other spellcasters here and in Surda?”

“I think so, if *you* ask them to join. Which is one of the reasons I want you to lead this group.”

“Me?”

She nodded. “Who else? Trianna? I don’t fully trust her, nor does she have the strength needed. An elf? No, it has to be one of our own. You know the name of the ancient language, you’re a Rider, and you have the wisdom and authority of the dragons behind you. I cannot think of a better person to lead the spellcasters. I’ve spoken to Orrin about this, and he agrees.”

“I can’t imagine the idea pleases him.”

“No, but he understands that it is necessary.”

“Is it?” Eragon picked at the edge of her desk, troubled. “How do you intend to keep watch over the magicians who don’t belong to this group?”

“I hoped you might have some suggestions. I thought perhaps with

spells and scrying mirrors, so that we could track their whereabouts and supervise their use of magic, lest they use it to better themselves at the expense of others."

"And if they do?"

"Then we see to it that they make amends for their crime, and we have them swear in the ancient language to give up the use of magic."

"Oaths in the ancient language won't necessarily stop anyone from using magic."

"I know, but it's the best we can do."

He nodded. "And what if a spellcaster refuses to be watched? What, then? I can't imagine very many would agree to be spied upon."

A sigh escaped Nasuada, and she put down her quill. "There's the difficult part. What would you do, Eragon, if you were in my place?"

None of the solutions he thought of were very palatable. "I don't know…."

Her expression grew sad. "Nor do I. This is a difficult, painful, messy problem, and no matter what I choose, someone will end up hurt. If I do nothing, the magicians will remain free to manipulate others with their spells. If I force them to submit to oversight, many will hate me for it. However, I think you will agree with me that its better to protect the majority of my subjects at the expense of a few."

"I don't like it," he murmured.

"I don't like it either."

"You're talking about binding every human spellcaster to your will, regardless of who they are."

She did not blink. "For the good of the many."

"What about people who can only hear thoughts, and nothing more? That's a form of magic as well."

"Them too. The potential for them to abuse their power is still too great." Nasuada sighed then. "I know this isn't easy, Eragon, but easy or not, it's something we have to address. Galbatorix was mad and evil, but he was right about one thing: the magicians need to be reined in. But not as Galbatorix intended. Something needs to be done, though, and I think my plan is the best solution possible. If you can think of another, better way to enforce the rule of law among spellcasters, I would be delighted. Otherwise, this is the only path available to us, and I need your help to do it.… So, will you accept charge of this group, for the good of the country, and the good of our race as a whole?"

Eragon was slow to answer. At last he said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to think about it for a while. And I need to consult with Saphira."

"Of course. But don't think for too long, Eragon. Preparations are already under way, and you will soon be needed."

Afterward, Eragon did not return directly to Saphira but wandered

through the streets of Ilirea, ignoring the bows and the greetings from the people he passed. He felt … uneasy, both with Nasuada's proposal and with life in general. He and Saphira had been idling for too long. The time had come for a change, and circumstances would no longer allow them to wait. They had to decide what they were going to do, and whatever they chose, it would affect the rest of their lives.

He spent several hours walking and thinking, mainly about his ties and obligations. In late afternoon, he made his way back to Saphira and, without speaking, climbed onto her back.

She leaped out of the courtyard of the hall and flew high above Ilirea, high enough that they could see for hundreds of miles in every direction. There she stayed, circling.

They spoke without words, exchanging their mind-states. Saphira shared many of his concerns, but she was not as worried as he about their bonds with others. Nothing was as important to her as protecting the eggs and the Eldunarí, and doing what was right for him and her. Yet Eragon knew that they could not just ignore the effects their choices would have, both political and personal.

Finally, he said, *What should we do?*

Saphira dipped as the wind underneath her wings slowed. *What we need to do, as has always been the case*. She said nothing more, but turned then and began to descend toward the city.

Eragon appreciated her silence. The decision would be harder for him to make than for her, and he needed to think about it on his own.

When they landed in the courtyard, Saphira nudged him with her snout and said, *If you need to talk, I'll be here*.

He smiled and rubbed the side of her neck, and then slowly walked to his rooms, while staring at the floor.

That night, when the waxing moon had just appeared beneath the edge of the cliff over Ilirea and Eragon was sitting against the end of his bed, reading a book about the saddle-making techniques of the early Riders, a flicker by the edge of his sight—like the flapping of a drape—caught his attention.

He sprang to his feet, drawing Brisingr from its sheath.

Then, in his open window, he saw a small three-masted ship, woven from stalks of grass. He smiled and sheathed his sword. He held out his hand, and the ship sailed across the room and landed upon his palm, where it listed to one side.

The ship was different from the one Arya had made during their travels together in the Empire, after he and Roran rescued Katrina from Helgrind. It had more masts, and it also had sails fashioned from the blades of grass. Though the grass was limp and browning, it had not dried out entirely, which led him to think that it had been picked

only a day or two earlier.

Tied to the middle of the deck was a square of folded paper. Eragon carefully removed it, his heart pounding, then unfolded the paper on the floor. It read, in glyphs of the ancient language:

> *Eragon,*
>
> *We have finally decided upon a leader, and I am on my way to Ilirea to arrange an introduction with Nasuada. I would like to talk with you and Saphira first. This message should reach you four days before the half moon. If you would, meet me the day after you receive it, at the easternmost point of the Ramr River. Come alone, and do not tell anyone else where you are going.*
>
> *Arya*

Eragon smiled without meaning to. Her timing had been perfect; the ship had arrived exactly when she intended. Then his smile faded, and he reread the letter several more times. She was hiding something; that much was obvious. But what? Why meet in secret?

Maybe Arya doesn't approve of the elves' next ruler, he thought. *Or maybe there's some other problem.* And though Eragon was eager to see her again, he could not forget how she had ignored him and Saphira. He supposed that, from Arya's point of view, the intervening months were a trifling amount of time, but he could not help feeling hurt.

He waited until the first hint of sunlight appeared in the sky, then hurried down to wake Saphira and tell her the news. She was as curious as he, if not quite as excited.

He saddled her, and then they left the city and set off to the northeast, having told no one of their plans, not even Glaedr or the other Eldunarí.

FÍRNEN

It was early in the afternoon when they arrived at the location Arya had designated: a gentle curve in the Ramr River that marked its farthest excursion eastward.

Eragon strained to look over Saphira's neck as he searched for a glimpse of anyone below. The land appeared empty, save for a herd of wild oxen. When the animals caught sight of Saphira, they fled, lowing and kicking up plumes of dust. They and a few other, smaller animals scattered about the countryside were the only living creatures Eragon could sense. Disappointed, he shifted his gaze to the horizon but saw no sign of Arya.

Saphira landed on a slight rise fifty yards from the banks of the river. She sat, and Eragon sat with her, resting his back against her side.

On the top of the rise was an outcropping of soft, slatelike rock. While they waited, Eragon amused himself by grinding a thumb-sized flake into the shape of an arrowhead. The stone was too soft for the arrowhead to be anything other than decorative, but he enjoyed the challenge. When he was satisfied with the simple, triangular point, he set it aside and began to grind a larger piece into a leaf-bladed dagger, similar to those the elves carried.

They did not have to wait as long as he first thought.

An hour after their arrival, Saphira lifted her head from the ground and peered across the plains in the direction of the not-so-distant Hadarac Desert.

Her body stiffened against his, and he felt a strange emotion within her: a sense of impending momentousness.

Look, she said.

Keeping hold of his half-finished dagger, he clambered to his feet and peered eastward.

He saw nothing but grass, dirt, and a few lone, windswept trees between them and the horizon. He broadened his area of scrutiny but still saw nothing of interest.

What—he started to ask, then cut himself off as he looked up.

High in the eastern sky, he saw a wink of green fire, like an emerald glimmering in the sun. The point of light arced through the blue mantle of the heavens, approaching at a rapid pace, bright as a star at night.

Eragon dropped the stone dagger and, without taking his eyes off

the glittering spark, climbed onto Saphira's back and strapped his legs into her saddle. He wanted to ask her what she thought the point of light was—to force her to put into words what he suspected—but he could not bring himself to speak any more than she could.

Saphira held her position, although she unfolded her wings and, keeping them bent nearly in half, lifted them in preparation to take off.

As it grew larger, the spark proliferated, dividing into a cluster of dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of tiny points of light. After a few minutes, the true shape of it became visible, and they saw that it was a dragon.

Saphira could wait no longer. She uttered a resonant trumpet, leaped off the rise, and flapped downward.

Eragon clutched the neck spike in front of him as she ascended at a nearly vertical angle, desperate to intercept the other dragon as quickly as possible. Both he and she alternated between elation and a wariness born of too many battles. In their caution, it pleased them that they had the sun to their backs.

Saphira continued to climb until she was slightly above the green dragon, whereupon she leveled off and concentrated upon speed.

Closer, Eragon saw that the dragon, while well built, still had some of the gangly look of youth—his limbs had yet to acquire the stocky weight of Glaedr's or Thorn's—and he was smaller than Saphira. The scales upon his sides and back were a dark forest green, while those upon his belly and the pads of his feet were lighter, with the smallest ones verging upon white. When against his body, his wings were the color of holly leaves, but when the light shone through them, they were the color of oak leaves in the spring.

At the juncture between the dragon's neck and back was a saddle much like Saphira's, and on the saddle sat a figure that looked to be Arya, her dark hair streaming from her head. The sight filled Eragon's heart with joy, and the emptiness he had labored under for so long vanished like the darkness of night before the rising sun.

As the dragons swooped past each other, Saphira roared, and the other dragon roared in response. They turned and began to circle—as if chasing each other's tails—Saphira still slightly above the green dragon, who made no attempt to climb above her. If he had, Eragon would have feared he was attempting to gain the advantage before attacking.

He grinned and shouted into the wind. Arya shouted back and raised an arm. Then Eragon touched her mind, just to be sure, and he *knew* in an instant that it really was Arya, and that she and the dragon meant them no harm. He withdrew a moment later, for it would have been rude to prolong the mental contact without her consent; she

would answer his questions when they spoke on the ground.

Saphira and the green dragon roared again, and the green dragon lashed his whiplike tail; then they chased each other through the air until they reached the Ramr River. There Saphira took the lead and spiraled down until she landed upon the same rise where she and Eragon had been waiting.

The green dragon landed a hundred feet away, settling into a low crouch while Arya freed herself from her saddle.

Eragon tore the straps off his legs and jumped to the ground, banging the sheath of Brisingr against his leg. He ran over to Arya, and she to him, and they met in the middle between the two dragons, who followed at a more sedate pace, their steps weighing heavily on the ground.

As he drew near, Eragon saw that, in place of the leather strip that Arya usually wore to keep her hair back, a circlet of gold rested upon her brow. In the center of the circlet, a teardrop-shaped diamond flashed with light that came not from the sun but from within its own depths. At her waist hung a green-hilted sword in a green sheath, which he recognized as Támerlein, the same sword the elf lord Fiolr had offered him as a replacement for Zar'roc and that had once belonged to the Rider Arva. However, the hilt looked different than he remembered, lighter and more graceful, and the sheath appeared narrower.

It took Eragon a moment to realize what the diadem meant. He looked at Arya with astonishment. "You!"

"Me," she said, and inclined her head. "Atra esterní ono thelduin, Eragon."

"Atra du evarínya ono varda, Arya … Dröttning?" It did not escape him that she had chosen to greet him first.

"Dröttning," she confirmed. "My people chose to give me my mother's title, and I chose to accept."

Above them, Saphira and the green dragon brought their heads close together and sniffed one another. Saphira was taller; the green dragon had to stretch his neck to reach her.

As much as Eragon wanted to talk with Arya, he could not help staring at the green dragon. "And him?" he asked, motioning upward.

Arya smiled, and then she surprised him by taking his hand and leading him forward. The green dragon snorted and lowered his head until it hung just above them, smoke and steam rising from the depths of his crimson nostrils.

"Eragon," she said, and she placed his hand on the dragon's warm snout, "this is Fírnen. Fírnen, this is Eragon."

Eragon looked up into one of Fírnen's brilliant eyes; the bands of muscle within the dragon's iris were the pale green and yellow of new

blades of grass.

I am glad to meet you, Eragon-friend-Shadeslayer, said Fírnen. His mental voice was deeper than Eragon expected, deeper even than that of Thorn or Glaedr or any of the Eldunarí from Vroengard. *My Rider has told me much about you*. And the dragon blinked once, with a small, sharp sound like a shell bouncing against a stone.

In Fírnen's wide, sunlit mind, planked as it was with transparent shadows, Eragon could feel the dragon's excitement.

Wonder swept through Eragon, wonder that such a thing had come to pass. "I am glad to meet you as well, Fírnen-finiarel. I never thought that I would live to see you hatched and free of Galbatorix's spells."

The emerald dragon snorted softly. He looked proud and full of energy, like a stag in fall. Then he returned his gaze to Saphira. Between the two of them, much passed; through Saphira, Eragon could feel the flow of thoughts, emotions, and sensations, slow at first, but then swelling into a torrent.

Arya smiled slightly. "They seem to have taken to each other."

"That they have."

A mutual understanding guiding them, he and Arya walked out from under Saphira and Fírnen, leaving the dragons to themselves. Saphira did not sit as she normally did, but remained crouched, as if she were about to spring onto a deer. Fírnen did the same. The tips of their tails twitched.

Arya looked well: better, Eragon thought, than she had since their time together in Ellesméra. For lack of a more suitable word, he would have said she looked happy.

Neither of them spoke for a while as they watched the dragons. Then Arya turned toward him and said, "I apologize for not contacting you sooner. You must think badly of me for ignoring you and Saphira for so long and for keeping such a secret as Fírnen."

"Did you receive my letter?"

"I did." To his surprise, she reached inside the front of her tunic and removed a square of battered parchment that, after a few seconds, he recognized. "I would have answered, but Fírnen had already hatched and I did not want to lie to you, even by omission."

"Why keep him hidden?"

"With so many of Galbatorix's servants still on the loose, and so few dragons remaining, I did not want to risk anyone finding out about Fírnen until he was large enough to defend himself."

"Did you really think a human could have snuck into Du Weldenvarden and killed him?"

"Stranger things have happened. With the dragons yet on the brink of extinction, it was not a risk worth taking. If I could, I would keep

Fírnen in Du Weldenvarden for the next ten years, until he is so large that none would dare attack him. But he wished to leave, and I could not deny him. Besides, the time has come for me to meet with Nasuada and Orik in my new role."

Eragon could feel Fírnen showing and telling Saphira about the first time he caught a deer in the elves' forest. He knew that Arya was aware of the exchange as well, for he saw her lip twitch in response to an image of Fírnen hopping in pursuit of a startled doe after he tripped over a branch.

"And how long have you been queen?"

"Since a month after my return. Vanir doesn't know, however. I ordered the information kept from him and our ambassador to the dwarves so that I could concentrate on raising Fírnen without having to worry about the affairs of state that otherwise would have fallen to me.… You might like to know: I raised him on the Crags of Tel'naeír, where Oromis lived with Glaedr. It seemed only right."

Silence fell between them. Then Eragon gestured at Arya's diadem and at Fírnen and said, "How did all of this happen?"

She smiled. "On our return to Ellesméra, I noticed that Fírnen was beginning to stir within his shell, but I thought nothing of it, as Saphira had often done the same. However, once we reached Du Weldenvarden and passed through its wards, he hatched. It was nearly evening, and I was carrying his egg in my lap, as I used to carry Saphira's, and I was speaking to him, telling him of the world and reassuring him that he was safe, and then I felt the egg shake and …" She shivered and tossed her hair, a bright film of tears in her eyes. "The bond is everything I imagined it to be. When we touched … I always wanted to be a Dragon Rider, Eragon, so that I could protect my people and avenge my father's death at the hands of Galbatorix and the Forsworn, but until I saw the first crack appear in Fírnen's egg, I never allowed myself to believe that it might actually come to pass."

"When you touched, did—"

"Yes." She lifted her left hand and showed him the silvery mark on the palm, the same as his own gedwëy ignasia. "It felt like …" She paused, searching for the words.

"Like ice-cold water that tingled and snapped," he suggested.

"Exactly like that." Without seeming to notice, she crossed her arms, as if chilled.

"So you returned to Ellesméra," said Eragon. Now Saphira was telling Fírnen about when she and Eragon swam in Leona Lake while traveling to Dras-Leona with Brom.

"So we returned to Ellesméra."

"And you went to live on the Crags of Tel'naeír. But why become

queen when you were already a Rider?"

"It was not my idea. Däthedr and the other elders of our race came to the house on the crags, and they asked me to take up my mother's mantle. I refused, but they returned the next day, and the day after that, and every day for a week, and each time with new arguments for why I should accept the crown. In the end, they convinced me that it would be best for our people."

"Why you, though? Was it because you are Islanzadí's daughter, or was it because you had become a Rider?"

"It was not just because Islanzadí was my mother, although that was part of it. Nor was it just because I was a Rider. Our politics are far more complicated than those of the humans or the dwarves, and choosing a new monarch is never easy. It involves obtaining consent from dozens of houses and families, as well as several of the older members of our race, and every choice they make is part of a subtle game that we have been playing amongst ourselves for thousands of years.… There were many reasons why they wanted me to become queen, not all of them obvious."

Eragon shifted, glancing between Saphira and Arya, unable to reconcile himself to Arya's decision. "How can you be a Rider as well as a queen?" he asked. "The Riders aren't supposed to support any one race above the others. You told me that yourself. It would be impossible for all the different peoples of Alagaësia to trust us if we did. And how can you help rebuild our order and raise the next generation of dragons if you're busy with your responsibilities in Ellesméra?"

"The world is not as it used to be," she said. "Nor can the Riders remain apart as they once did. There are too few of us to stand alone, and it will be a long while before there are again enough of us to resume our former place. In any event, you have already sworn yourself to Nasuada and to Orik and Dûrgrimst Ingeitum, but not to us, not to the älfakyn. It is only right that we should have a Rider and dragon as well."

"You know that Saphira and I would fight for the elves as much as for the dwarves or the humans," he protested.

"I know, but others do not. Appearances matter, Eragon. You cannot change the fact that you have given your word to Nasuada and that you owe your loyalty to Orik's clan.… My people have suffered greatly over the past hundred years, and though it may not be apparent to you, we are not what we once were. As the fortunes of the dragons have declined, so too have our own. Fewer children have been born to us, and our strength has waned. Also, some have said that our minds are no longer as sharp as they used to be, although it is difficult to prove one way or another."

“The same is true of humans, or so Glaedr told us,” said Eragon.

She nodded. “He is right. Both of our races will take time to recover, and much will depend upon the return of the dragons. Moreover, even as Nasuada is needed to help guide the recovery of your race, so too do my own people need a leader. With Islanzadí dead, I felt obliged to take the task upon myself.” She touched her left shoulder, where her tattoo of the yawë glyph lay hidden. “I pledged myself to the service of my people when I was not much older than you. I cannot abandon them now, when their need is so great.”

“They will always have need of you.”

“And I will always answer their call,” she replied. “Do not worry; Fírnen and I shall not ignore our duties as a dragon and Rider. We will help you to patrol the land and settle what disputes we can, and wherever it seems best to raise the dragons, we shall visit and lend our assistance as often as we can, even if it be at the far southern end of the Spine.”

Her words troubled Eragon, but he did his best to hide it. What she promised would not be possible if he and Saphira did as they had decided during the flight there. Although everything Arya had said helped confirm that the path they had chosen was the right one, he worried that it was a path that Arya and Fírnen would be unable to follow.

He bowed his head then, accepting Arya’s decision to become queen and her right to make it. “I know you won’t neglect your responsibilities,” he said. “You never do.” He did not mean the statement unkindly; it was merely a statement of fact, and one for which he respected her. “And I understand why you did not contact us for so long. I probably would have done the same in your place.”

She smiled again. “Thank you.”

He motioned toward her sword. “I take it Rhunön reworked Támerlein to better fit you?”

“She did, and she grumbled about it the whole while. She said the blade was perfect the way it was, but I am well pleased with the changes she made; the sword balances as it should in my hand now, and it feels no heavier than a switch.”

As they stood watching the dragons, Eragon tried to think of a way to tell Arya of their plans. Before he could, she said, “You and Saphira have been well?”

“We have.”

“What else of interest has occurred since you wrote?”

Eragon thought for a minute, then told her in brief about the attempts on Nasuada’s life, the uprisings in the north and the south, the birth of Roran and Katrina’s daughter, Roran’s ennoblement, and the list of treasures they had recovered from within the citadel. Lastly,

he told of their return to Carvahall and their visit to Brom's final resting place.

While he spoke, Saphira and Fírnen began to circle each other, the tips of their tails whipping back and forth faster than ever. They both had their jaws slightly open, baring their long white teeth, and they were breathing thickly through their mouths and uttering low, whining grunts, the likes of which Eragon had never heard before. It looked almost as if they were going to attack each other, which worried him, but the feeling from Saphira was not one of anger or fear. It was—

I want to test him, said Saphira. She slapped her tail against the ground, causing Fírnen to pause.

Test him? How? For what?

To find out if he has the iron in his bones and the fire in his belly to match me.

Are you sure? he asked, understanding her intent.

She again slapped her tail against the ground, and he felt her certainty and the strength of her desire. *I know everything about him—everything but this. Besides*—she displayed a flash of amusement—*it's not as if dragons mate for life*.

Very well.… But be careful.

He had barely finished speaking when Saphira lunged forward and bit Fírnen on his left flank, drawing blood and causing Fírnen to snarl and spring backward. The green dragon growled, appearing uncertain of himself, and retreated before Saphira as she prowled toward him.

Saphira! Chagrined, Eragon turned to Arya, intending to apologize.

Arya did not seem upset. To Fírnen, and to Eragon as well, she said, *If you want her to respect you, then you have to bite her in return*.

She raised an eyebrow at Eragon, and he responded with a wry smile, understanding.

Fírnen glanced at Arya and hesitated. He jumped back as Saphira snapped at him again. Then he roared and lifted his wings, as if to make himself appear larger, and he charged Saphira—and nipped her on a hind leg, sinking his teeth into her hide.

The pain Saphira felt was not pain.

Saphira and Fírnen resumed circling, growling and yowling with increasing volume. Then Fírnen jumped at her again. He landed on Saphira's neck and bore her head to the ground, where he held her pinned and gave her a pair of playful bites at the base of her skull.

Saphira did not struggle as fiercely as Eragon would have expected, and he guessed that she had allowed Fírnen to catch her, as it was not something even Thorn had managed to do.

"The courting of dragons is no gentle affair," he said to Arya.

"Did you expect soft words and tender caresses?"

“I suppose not.”

With a heave of her neck, Saphira threw Fírnen off and scrambled backward. She roared and clawed at the ground with her forefeet, and then Fírnen lifted his head toward the sky and loosed a rippling pennant of green fire twice the length of his own body.

“Oh!” exclaimed Arya, sounding delighted.

“What?”

“That’s the first time he has breathed fire!”

Saphira released a blast of fire herself—Eragon could feel the heat from over fifty feet away—and then she crouched and jumped into the sky, climbing straight upward. Fírnen followed an instant later.

Eragon stood with Arya as they watched the glittering dragons ascend into the heavens, spiraling around each other with flames streaming from their mouths. It was an awe-inspiring sight: savage and beautiful, and frightening. Eragon realized he was watching an ancient and elemental ritual, one that was part of the very fabric of nature itself and without which the land would wither and die.

His connection with Saphira grew tenuous as the distance between them increased, but he could still sense the heat of her passion, which darkened the edges of her vision and blotted out all thoughts save those driven by the instinctual need that all creatures, even the elves, are subject to.

The dragons shrank until at last they were no more than a pair of sparkling stars orbiting each other in the immensity of the sky. As far away as they were, Eragon still received a few flashes of thoughts and feelings from Saphira, and though he had experienced many such moments with the Eldunarí when they had shared their memories with him, his cheeks grew hot, as did the tips of his ears, and he found himself unable to look directly at Arya.

She too seemed affected by the dragons’ emotions, although differently than he; she stared after Saphira and Fírnen with a faint smile, and her eyes shone brighter than usual, as if the sight of the two dragons filled her with pride and happiness.

Eragon let out a sigh, and then squatted and began to draw in the dirt with a stalk of grass.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” he said.

“No,” said Arya.

They remained that way for a number of minutes: she standing, he squatting, and all silence around them, save for the sound of the lonely wind.

At last Eragon dared look up at Arya. She looked more beautiful than ever. But more than that, he saw his friend and ally; he saw the woman who had helped save him from Durza, who had fought alongside him against countless enemies, who had been imprisoned

with him under Dras-Leona, and who, in the end, had killed Shruikan with the Dauthdaert. He remembered what she had told him about her life in Ellesméra when she was growing up, her difficult relationship with her mother, and the many reasons that had driven her to leave Du Weldenvarden and serve as an ambassador for the elves. He thought too of the hurts she had suffered: some from her mother, others from the isolation she had experienced among the humans and the dwarves, and still more when she had lost Faolin and then endured Durza's tortures in Gil'ead.

All those things he thought of, and he felt a deep sense of connection with her, and a sadness too, and a sudden desire came upon him to capture what he saw.

While Arya meditated upon the sky, Eragon looked about until he found a piece of the slatelike rock projecting from the earth. Making as little noise as possible, he dug out a slab with his fingers and brushed off the dirt until the stone was clean.

It took him a moment to remember the spells he had once used, and then to modify them so as to extract the colors needed from the earth around him. Speaking the words silently, he incanted the spell.

A stir of motion, like a swirl of muddy water, disturbed the surface of the tablet. Then colors—red, blue, green, yellow—bloomed on the slate and began to form lines and shapes even as they intermingled to form other, subtler shades. After a few seconds, an image of Arya appeared.

Once it was complete, he released the spell and studied the fairth. He was pleased with what he saw. The image seemed to be a true and honest representation of Arya, unlike the fairth he had made of her in Ellesméra. The one he held now had a depth that the other one had lacked. It was not a perfect image with regard to its composition, but he was proud that he had been able to capture so much of her character. In that one image, he had managed to sum up everything he knew about her, both the dark and the light.

He allowed himself to enjoy his sense of accomplishment for a moment more, then he threw the tablet off to the side, to break it against the ground.

"Kausta," said Arya, and the tablet curved through the air and landed in her hand.

Eragon opened his mouth, intending to explain or to apologize, but then he thought better of it and said nothing.

Holding up the fairth, Arya stared at it with an intent gaze. Eragon watched her closely, wondering how she would react.

A long, tense minute passed.

Then Arya lowered the fairth.

Eragon stood and held out his hand for the tablet, but she made no

move to return it. She appeared troubled, and his heart sank; the fairth had upset her.

Looking him straight in the eye, she said in the ancient language, "Eragon, if you are willing, I would like to tell you my true name."

Her offer left him dumbstruck. He nodded, overwhelmed, and, with great difficulty, managed to say, "I would be honored to hear it."

Arya stepped forward and placed her lips close to his ear, and in a barely audible whisper she told him her name. As she spoke, the name rang within his mind, and with it came a rush of understanding. Some of the name he knew already, but there were many parts that surprised him, parts that he realized must have been difficult for Arya to share.

Then Arya stepped back and waited for his response, her expression studiously blank.

Her name raised numerous questions for Eragon, but he knew that it was not the time to ask them. Rather, he needed to reassure Arya that he did not think any less highly of her because of what he had learned. Nor did he. If anything, her name had increased his regard, for it had shown him the true extent of her selflessness and her devotion to duty. He knew that if he reacted badly to her name—or even said the wrong thing without intending to—he could destroy their friendship.

He met Arya's gaze full-on and said, also in the ancient language, "Your name … your name is a good name. You should be proud of who you are. Thank you for sharing it with me. I am glad to call you my friend, and I promise that I will always keep your name safe.… Will you, now, hear mine?"

She nodded. "I will. And I promise to remember and protect it for so long as it remains yours."

A sense of import came over Eragon. He knew there was no going back from what he was about to do, which he found both frightening and exhilarating. He moved forward and did as Arya had done, placing his lips by her ear and whispering his name as softly as he could. His whole being vibrated in recognition of the words.

He backed away, suddenly apprehensive. How would she judge him? Fair or foul? For judge him she would; she could not help it.

Arya released a long breath and looked at the sky for a while. When she turned to him again, her expression was softer than before. "You have a good name as well, Eragon," she said in a low voice. "However, I do not think it is the name you had when you left Palancar Valley."

"No."

"Nor do I think it is the name you bore during your time in Ellesméra. You've grown much since we first met."

"I've had to."

She nodded. "You are still young, but you are no longer a child."

"No. That I am not."

More than ever, Eragon felt drawn to her. The exchange of names had formed a bond between them, but of what sort he was unsure, and his uncertainty left him with a sense of vulnerability. She had seen him with all his flaws and she had not recoiled, but had accepted him as he was, even as he accepted her. Moreover, she had seen in his name the depth of his feelings for her, and that too had not driven her away.

He debated whether to say anything on the subject, but he could not let it go. After gathering up his courage, he said, "Arya, what is to become of us?"

She hesitated, but he could see that his meaning was clear to her. Choosing her words with care, she said, "I don't know.… Once, as you know, I would have said, 'nothing,' but … Again, you are still young, and humans often change their minds. In ten years, or even five, you may no longer feel as you now do."

"My feelings won't change," he said with utter certainty.

She searched his face for a long, tense while. Then he saw a change in her eyes, and she said, "If they don't, then … perhaps in time …" She put a hand on the side of his jaw. "You cannot ask more of me now. I do not want to make a mistake with you, Eragon. You are too important for that, both to me and to the whole of Alagaësia."

He tried to smile, but it came out more as a grimace. "But … we don't have time," he said, his voice choked. He felt sick to his stomach.

Arya's brow furrowed, and she lowered her hand. "What do you mean?"

He stared at the ground, trying to think how to tell her. In the end, he just said it as simply as he could. He explained the difficulty he and Saphira had had in finding a safe place for the eggs and the Eldunarí, and then he explained Nasuada's plan to form a group of magicians to keep watch over every human spellcaster.

He spent several minutes talking, and concluded by saying, "So Saphira and I have decided that the only thing we can do is leave Alagaësia and raise the dragons elsewhere, far away from other people. It's what's best for us, for the dragons, for the Riders, and all the other races of Alagaësia."

"But the Eldunarí—" said Arya, appearing shocked.

"The Eldunarí can't stay either. They would never be safe, not even in Ellesméra. As long as they remain in this land, there will be those who will try to steal them or use them to further their own designs. No, we need a place like Vroengard, a place where no one can find the

dragons to hurt them and where the younglings and the wild dragons cannot hurt anyone themselves." Eragon tried to smile again, but gave it up as hopeless. "That is why I said we have no time. Saphira and I intend to leave as soon as we can, and if you stay … I do not know if we will ever see each other again."

Arya glanced down at the fairth she still held, troubled.

"Would you give up your crown to come with us?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

She lifted her gaze. "Would you give up charge of the eggs?"

He shook his head. "No."

For a time, they were silent, listening to the wind.

"How would you find candidates for the Riders?" she asked.

"We'll leave a few eggs behind—with you, I suppose—and once they hatch, they and their Riders will come join us, and we'll send you more eggs."

"There must be another solution besides you and Saphira and every Eldunarí abandoning Alagaësia!"

"If there were, we would take it, but there isn't."

"What of the Eldunarí? What of Glaedr and Umaroth? Have you spoken to them of this? Do they agree?"

"We haven't spoken to them, but they will agree. That I know."

"Are you sure about this, Eragon? Is it really the only way—to leave behind everything and everyone you have ever known?"

"It's necessary, and our departure was always meant to be. Angela foretold it when she cast my fortune in Teirm, and I've had time to accustom myself to the idea." He reached out and touched Arya on the cheek. "So, I ask again: will you come with us?"

A film of tears appeared on her eyes, and she hugged the fairth against her chest. "I cannot."

He nodded and took his hand away. "Then … we will part ways." Tears welled in his own eyes, and he struggled to retain his composure.

"But not yet," she whispered. "We still have some time together. You will not leave immediately."

"No, not immediately."

And they stood next to each other, gazing into the sky and waiting for Saphira and Fírnen to return. After a while, her hand touched his, and he grasped it, and though it was a small comfort, it helped dull the ache in his heart.

A Man of Conscience

Warm light streamed through the windows along the right of the hallway, illuminating patches of the far wall where banners, paintings, shields, swords, and the heads of various stags hung between the dark, carved doors that dotted the wall at regular intervals.

As Eragon strode toward Nasuada's study, he gazed out the windows at the city. From the courtyard, he could still hear the bards and musicians performing by the banquet tables laid out in Arya's honor. The celebrations had been ongoing since she and Fírnen had returned to Ilirea with him and Saphira the previous day. But now they were beginning to wind down and, as a result, he had finally been able to arrange a meeting with Nasuada.

He nodded to the guards outside the study, then let himself into the room.

Inside, he saw Nasuada reclined on a padded seat, listening to a musician strumming on a lute and singing a beautiful, if mournful, love song. On the end of the seat sat the witch-child, Elva, engrossed with a piece of embroidery, and in a nearby chair, Nasuada's handmaid, Farica. And curled up on Farica's lap lay the werecat Yelloweyes in his animal form. He looked sound asleep, but Eragon knew from experience that he was probably awake.

Eragon waited by the door until the musician finished.

"Thank you. You may go," said Nasuada to the player. "Ah, Eragon. Welcome."

He bowed slightly to her. Then, to the girl, he said, "Elva."

She eyed him from under her brow. "Eragon." The werecat's tail twitched.

"What is it you wish to discuss?" asked Nasuada. She took a sip from a chalice resting on a side table.

"Perhaps we could speak in private," said Eragon, and motioned with his head toward the glass-paneled doors behind her, which opened onto a balcony overlooking a quadrangle with a garden and fountain.

Nasuada considered for a moment, then rose from her seat and swept toward the balcony, the train of her purple dress trailing behind her.

Eragon followed, and they stood side by side, gazing at the spouting water of the fountain, cool and gray within the shadow cast by the side of the building.

“What a beautiful afternoon,” said Nasuada as she took a deep breath. She looked more at peace than when he had last seen her, only a few hours before.

“The music seems to have put you in a good mood,” he observed.

“No, not the music: Elva.”

He cocked his head. “How so?”

A strange half smile graced Nasuada’s face. “After my imprisonment in Urû’baen—after what I endured … and lost—and after the attempts on my life, the world seemed to lose all color for me. I did not feel myself, and nothing I did could stir me from my sadness.”

“I thought as much,” he said, “but I did not know what to do or say that might help.”

“Nothing. Nothing you could have said or done would have helped. I might have gone on like that for years, if not for Elva. She told me … she told me what I needed to hear, I suppose. It was the fulfillment of a promise she made me, long ago, in the castle at Aberon.” Eragon frowned and glanced back into the room, where Elva sat poking at her embroidery. For all they had gone through together, he still did not feel as if he could trust the girl, and he feared that she was manipulating Nasuada for her own selfish ends.

Nasuada’s hand touched his arm. “You don’t need to worry about me, Eragon. I know myself too well for her to unbalance me even if she tried. Galbatorix couldn’t break me; do you think she could?”

He looked back at her, his expression grim. “Yes.”

She smiled again. “I appreciate your concern, but in this, it’s unfounded. Let me enjoy my good mood; you can put your suspicions to me at a later time.”

“All right.” Then he relented a bit and said, “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you. As am I.… Are Saphira and Fírnen still cavorting about as they were earlier? I don’t hear them anymore.”

“They are, but they’re above the overhang now.” His cheeks warmed somewhat as he touched Saphira’s mind.

“Ah.” Nasuada placed her hands—one atop the other—upon the stone balustrade, the uprights of which were carved into the shape of flowering irises. “Now, why did you wish to meet? Have you arrived at a decision with regard to my offer?”

“I have.”

“Excellent. Then we may proceed apace with our plans. I have already—”

“I’ve decided not to accept.”

“What?” Nasuada looked at him with incredulity. “Why? To whom else would you entrust the position?”

“I don’t know,” he said gently. “That’s something you and Orrin will

have to figure out on your own."

Her eyebrows rose. "You won't even help us choose the right person? And you expect me to believe that you would follow orders from anyone but me?"

"You misunderstand," he said. "I don't want to lead the magicians, and I won't be joining them either."

Nasuada stared at him for a moment; then she walked over and closed the glass-paneled doors to the balcony so that Elva, Farica, and the werecat could not overhear their conversation. Turning back to him, she said, "Eragon! What are you thinking! You know you have to join. All of the magicians who serve me have to. There can't be any exceptions. Not one! I can't have people think that I'm playing favorites. It would sow dissent among the ranks of the magicians, and that is exactly what I *don't* want. As long as you are a subject of my realm, you have to abide by its laws, or my authority means *nothing*. I shouldn't have to tell you that, Eragon."

"You don't. I'm well aware of it, which is why Saphira and I have decided to leave Alagaësia."

Nasuada put a hand on the railing, as if to steady herself. For a time, the splashing of the water below was the only sound.

"I don't understand."

So, once more, as he had with Arya, he set forth the reasons why the dragons, and therefore he and Saphira, could not stay in Alagaësia. And when he finished, he said, "It never would have worked for me to take charge of the magicians. Saphira and I have to raise the dragons and train the Riders, and that must take precedence before all else. Even if I had the time, I couldn't lead the Riders and still answer to you—the other races would never stand for it. Despite Arya's choice to become queen, the Riders have to remain as impartial as possible. If *we* start to play favorites, it will destroy Alagaësia. The only way I would consider accepting the position would be if the magicians were to include those of every race—even the Urgals—but that's not likely to happen. Besides, it would still leave the question of what to do about the eggs and the Eldunarí."

Nasuada scowled. "You can't expect me to believe that, with all your power, you can't protect the dragons here in Alagaësia."

"Maybe I could, but we cannot depend on magic alone to safeguard the dragons. We need physical barriers; we need walls and moats and cliffs too high for man, elf, dwarf, or Urgal to scale. More important, we need the safety that only distance can provide. We have to make it so difficult to reach us that the challenges of the journey will discourage even our most determined enemies from attempting it. But ignore that. Assuming that I could protect the dragons, the problem would still remain of how to keep them from hunting livestock—ours

as well as the dwarves' and Urgals'. Do you want to have to explain to Orik why his flocks of Feldûnost keep disappearing, or do you want to have to keep appeasing angry farmers who have lost their animals? … No, leaving is the only solution."

Eragon looked down at the fountain. "Even if there were a place for the eggs and the Eldunarí in Alagaësia, it wouldn't be right for me to stay."

"Why is that?"

He shook his head. "You know the answer as well as I. I've become *too* powerful. As long as I'm here, your authority—and that of Arya, Orik, and Orrin—will always be in doubt. If I asked them to, most everyone in Surda, Teirm, and your own kingdom would follow me. And with the Eldunarí to help me, there is no one who can stand against me, not even Murtagh or Arya."

"You would never turn against us. That's not who you are."

"No? In all the years I shall live—and I might live a very long time—do you honestly believe that I will never choose to interfere with the workings of the land?"

"If you do, I'm sure it will be for a good reason, and I'm sure we will be grateful for your help."

"Would you? No doubt I would believe my reasons were just, but that's the trap, isn't it? The belief that I know better and that because I have this power at my disposal, I have a responsibility to act." Remembering her words from before, he echoed them back to her: "For the good of the many. If I was wrong, though, who could stop me? I could end up becoming Galbatorix, despite my best intentions. As it is, my power makes people tend to agree with me. I've seen it in my dealings throughout the Empire.… If you were in my position, would you be able to resist the temptation to meddle, just a little, in order to make things better? My presence here unbalances things, Nasuada. If I am to avoid becoming what I hate, then I have to leave."

Nasuada lifted her chin. "I could order you to stay."

"I hope you don't. I would prefer to leave in friendship, not anger."

"So you will answer to no one but yourself?"

"I will answer to Saphira and to my conscience, as I always have."

The edge of Nasuada's lip curled. "A man of conscience—the most dangerous kind in the world."

Once more, the sounds of the fountain filled the gap in their conversation.

Then Nasuada said, "Do you believe in the gods, Eragon?"

"Which gods? There are many."

"Any of them. All of them. Do you believe in a power higher than yourself?"

"Other than Saphira?" He smiled in apology as Nasuada frowned.

“Sorry.” He thought seriously for a minute, then said, “Perhaps they exist; I don’t know. I saw … I’m not sure what I saw, but I may have seen the dwarf god Gûntera in Tronjheim when Orik was crowned. But if there are gods, I don’t think very highly of them for leaving Galbatorix on the throne for so long.”

“Perhaps you were the gods’ instrument for removing him. Did you ever consider that?”

“Me?” He laughed. “I suppose it could be, but either way, they certainly don’t care very much whether we live or die.”

“Of course not. Why should they? They are gods.… Do you worship any of them, though?” The question seemed of particular importance to Nasuada.

Again Eragon thought for a while. Then he shrugged. “There are so many, how could I know which ones to choose?”

“Why not the creator of them all, Unulukuna, who offers life ever lasting?”

Eragon could not help but chuckle. “As long as I don’t fall sick and no one kills me, I may live for a thousand years or more, and if I live that long, I can’t imagine I would want to continue on after death. What else can a god offer me? With the Eldunarí, I have the strength to do most anything.”

“The gods also provide the chance to see those we love again. Don’t you want that?”

He hesitated. “I do, but I don’t want to *endure* for an eternity. That seems even more frightening than someday passing into the void, as the elves believe.”

Nasuada appeared troubled. “So you do not hold yourself accountable to anyone other than Saphira and yourself.”

“Nasuada, am I a bad person?”

She shook her head.

“Then trust me to do what I believe is right. I hold myself accountable to Saphira and the Eldunarí and all of the Riders who are yet to be, and also to you and Arya and Orik and everyone else in Alagaësia. I need no master to punish me in order to behave as I ought. If I did, I would be no more than a child who obeys his father’s rules only because he fears the whip, and not because he actually means good.”

She gazed at him for several seconds. “Very well, then, I will trust you.”

The splashing of the fountain once more achieved prominence. Overhead, the light from the sinking sun picked out cracks and flaws in the underside of the stone shelf.

“What if we need your help?” she asked.

“Then I’ll help. I won’t abandon you, Nasuada. I’ll bind one of the

mirrors in your study with a mirror of my own, so that you will always be able to reach me, and I'll do the same for Roran and Katrina. If trouble arises, I'll find a way to send assistance. I may not be able to come myself, but I *will* help."

She nodded. "I know you will." Then she sighed, unhappiness plain on her face.

"What?" he asked.

"It was all going so well. Galbatorix is dead. The last of the fighting has settled down. We were going to finally solve the problem of the magicians. You and Saphira were going to lead them and the Riders. And now … I don't know what we'll do."

"It'll sort out; I'm sure. You'll find a way."

"It would be easier with you here.… Will you at least agree to teach the name of the ancient language to whomever we choose to lead the magicians?"

Eragon did not have to think about it, since he had already considered the possibility, but he paused while he tried to find the right words. "I could, but in time, I think we would come to regret it."

"So you won't."

He shook his head.

Frustration crossed her face. "And why not? What are your reasons now?"

"The name is too dangerous to bandy about lightly, Nasuada. If a magician full of ambition but lacking scruples got hold of it, he or she could wreak an incredible amount of havoc. With it, they could destroy the ancient language. Not even Galbatorix was mad enough to do that, but an untrained, power-hungry magician? Who knows what might happen? Right now, Arya, Murtagh, and the dragons are the only ones besides me who know the name. Better to leave it at that."

"And when you go, we will be dependent upon Arya, should we have need of it."

"You know she will always help. If anything, I would worry about Murtagh."

Nasuada seemed to turn inward. "You needn't. He's no threat to us. Not now."

"As you say. If your goal is to keep the spellcasters in check, then the name of the ancient language is one piece of information that is better to withhold."

"If that is truly the case, then … I understand."

"Thank you. There's something else you should know as well."

Nasuada's expression grew wary. "Oh?"

He told her, then, about the idea that had recently occurred to him concerning the Urgals. When he finished, Nasuada was quiet for a while. Then she said, "You take much upon yourself."

“I have to. No one else can.… Do you approve? It seems the only way to ensure peace in the long run.”

“Are you sure it’s wise?”

“Not entirely, but I think we have to try.”

“The dwarves as well? Is that really necessary?”

“Yes. It’s only right. It’s only fair. And it will help maintain the balance among the races.”

“What if they don’t agree?”

“I’m sure they will.”

“Then do as you see fit. You don’t need my approval—you’ve made that clear enough—but I agree that it seems necessary. Otherwise, twenty, thirty years from now, we may be facing many of the problems our ancestors faced when they first arrived in Alagaësia.”

He bowed his head slightly. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

“When do you plan on leaving?”

“When Arya does.”

“So soon?”

“There’s no reason to wait longer.”

Nasuada leaned against the railing, her eyes fixed on the fountain below. “Will you return to visit?”

“I’ll try, but … I don’t think so. When Angela cast my fortune, she said I would never return.”

“Ah.” Nasuada’s voice sounded thick, as if she were hoarse. She turned and faced him directly. “I’m going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

She pressed her lips together, as if struggling not to cry. Then she stepped forward and embraced him. He hugged her back, and they stood like that for several seconds.

They parted then, and he said, “Nasuada, if you ever tire of being queen, or you want a place to live in peace, come join us. You’ll always be welcome in our hall. I cannot make you immortal, but I could prolong your years far beyond what most humans enjoy, and they would be spent in good health.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the offer, and I won’t forget it.” However, he had a feeling that she would never be able to bring herself to leave Alagaësia, no matter how old she was. Her sense of duty was too strong.

Then he asked, “Will you give us your blessing?”

“Of course.” She took his head between her hands, kissed him upon his brow, and said, “My blessings upon you and Saphira. May peace and good fortune be with you wherever you go.”

“And with you,” he said.

She kept her hands upon him for another moment; then she released him, and he opened the glass door and exited through her study,

leaving her standing alone upon the balcony.

Blood Price

As Eragon made his way down a flight of steps on his way toward the main entrance of the building, he happened upon the herbalist, Angela, sitting cross-legged in the dark alcove of a door. She was knitting what appeared to be a blue and white hat with strange runes along its lower part, the meaning of which was lost on him. Next to her lay Solembum, his head propped up in her lap and one of his heavy paws resting atop her right knee.

Eragon stopped, surprised. He had not seen either of them since—it took him a moment to remember—since shortly after the battle in Urû'baen. Thereafter, they had seemed to disappear.

"Greetings," said Angela without looking up.

"Greetings," replied Eragon. "What are you doing here?"

"Knitting a hat."

"That I can see, but why here?"

"Because I wanted to see you." Her needles clacked with swift regularity, their motion as entrancing as the flames of a fire. "I heard tell that you, Saphira, the eggs, and the Eldunarí are leaving Alagaësia."

"As you predicted," he retorted, frustrated that she had been able to discover what ought to have been the deepest secret. She could not have eavesdropped upon him and Nasuada—his wards would have prevented it—and so far as he knew, no one had told her or Solembum about the existence of the eggs or the Eldunarí.

"Well, yes, but I didn't think to see you off."

"How did you find out? From Arya?"

"Her? Ha! Hardly. No, I have my own ways of gathering information." She paused in her knitting and looked up at him, her eyes twinkling. "Not that I'll share them with you. I have to keep *some* secrets, after all."

"Humph."

"Humph yourself. If you're going to be that way, I'm not sure why I bothered coming."

"I'm sorry. I'm just feeling a bit … uneasy." After a moment, Eragon said, "Why did you want to see me?"

"I *wanted* to say farewell and to wish you luck on your journey."

"Thank you."

"Mmh. Try not to let yourself get too wrapped up in your head wherever you settle. Make sure you get out in the sun often enough."

"I will. What of you and Solembum? Will you stay here for a while and watch over Elva? You mentioned you would."

The herbalist snorted in a very unladylike fashion. "Stay? How can I stay when Nasuada seems intent on spying on every magician in the land?"

"You heard about that as well?"

She gave him a look. "I *disapprove*. I *disapprove* very much. I will not be treated like a child who has done something naughty. No, the time has come for Solembum and me to relocate to more friendly climes: the Beor Mountains, perhaps, or Du Weldenvarden."

Eragon hesitated for a moment and then said, "Would you like to come with Saphira and me?"

Solembum opened one eye and studied him for a second before closing it again.

"That's very kind of you," said Angela, "but I think we will decline. At least, for the time being. Sitting around guarding the Eldunarí and training new Riders seems boring … although, raising a clutch of dragons is sure to prove exciting. But no; for the time being, Solembum and I will stay in Alagaësia. Besides, I want to keep an eye on Elva for the next few years, even if I can't watch over her in person."

"Haven't you had your fill of interesting events?"

"Never. They're the spice of life." She held up her half-finished hat. "How do you like it?"

"It's nice. The blue is pretty. But what do the runes say?"

"Raxacori—Oh, never mind. It wouldn't mean anything to you anyway. Safe travels to you and Saphira, Eragon. And remember to watch out for earwigs and wild hamsters. Ferocious things, wild hamsters."

He smiled despite himself. "Safe travels to you as well, and to you, Solembum."

The werecat's eye opened again. *Safe travels, Kingkiller*.

Eragon left the building and picked his way through the city until he arrived at the house where Jeod and his wife, Helen, now lived. It was a stately hall, with high walls, a large garden, and bowing servants stationed within the entryway. Helen had done exceedingly well. By provisioning the Varden—and now Nasuada's kingdom—with much-needed supplies, she had quickly built up a trading company larger than the one Jeod had once owned in Teirm.

Eragon found Jeod washing up in preparation for their evening meal. After refusing an offer to dine with them, Eragon spent a few minutes explaining to Jeod the same things he had explained to Nasuada. At first Jeod was surprised and somewhat upset, but in the

end, he agreed that it was necessary for Eragon and Saphira to leave with the other dragons. As with Nasuada and the herbalist, Eragon also invited Jeod to accompany them.

"You tempt me sorely," said Jeod. "But my place is here. I have my work, and for the first time in a long while, Helen is happy. Ilirea has become our home, and neither of us wants to pick up and move elsewhere."

Eragon nodded, understanding.

"But you … you're going to travel where few but the dragons or Riders have ever gone. Tell me, do you know what lies to the east? Is there another sea?"

"If you travel far enough."

"And before that?"

Eragon shrugged. "Empty land for the most part, or so the Eldunarí say, and I have no reason to think that's changed in the past century."

Then Jeod moved closer to him and lowered his voice. "Since you are leaving … I will tell you this. Do you remember when I told you about the Arcaena, the order devoted to preserving knowledge throughout Alagaësia?"

Eragon nodded. "You said that Heslant the Monk belonged to them."

"As do I." At Eragon's look of surprise, Jeod made a sheepish gesture and ran his hand through his hair. "I joined them long ago, when I was young and looking for a cause to serve. I've provided them with information and manuscripts throughout the years, and they've helped me in return. Anyway, I thought you should know. Brom was the only other person I've told."

"Not even Helen?"

"Not even her.… Anyway, when I finish writing my account of you and Saphira and the rise of the Varden, I'll send it to our monastery in the Spine, and it will be included as a number of new chapters in *Domia abr Wyrda*. Your story will not be forgotten, Eragon; that much, at least, I can promise you."

Eragon found the knowledge strangely affecting. "Thank you," he said, and grasped Jeod by the forearm.

"And you, Eragon Shadeslayer."

Afterward, Eragon made his way back to the hall, where he and Saphira had been living along with Roran and Katrina, who were waiting to eat with him.

All through supper, the talk was of Arya and Fírnen. Eragon held his tongue about his plans for departure until after the food was gone and the three of them—and the baby—had retired to a room overlooking the courtyard, where Saphira lay napping with Fírnen. There they sat

drinking wine and tea and watching as the sun descended toward the distant horizon.

When an appropriate amount of time had passed, Eragon broached the subject. As he expected, Katrina and Roran reacted with dismay and tried to convince him to change his mind. It took Eragon nearly an hour to lay out his reasons to them, for they argued every point and refused to concede until he answered their objections in exacting detail.

Finally, Roran said, "Blast it, you're family! You can't leave!"

"I have to. You know it as well as I do; you just don't want to admit it."

Roran struck his fist against the table between them and then strode over to the open window, the muscles in his jaw clenching.

The baby squalled, and Katrina said, "Shh, now," and patted her on the back.

Eragon joined Roran. "I know it isn't what you want. I don't want it either, but I have no choice."

"Of course you have a choice. You of all people have a choice."

"Aye, and this is the right thing to do."

Roran grunted and crossed his arms.

Behind them, Katrina said, "If you leave, you won't be able to be an uncle to Ismira. Is she supposed to grow up without ever knowing you?"

"No," said Eragon, going back to her. "I'll still be able to talk with her, and I'll see to it that she's well protected; I may even be able to send her presents from time to time." He knelt and held out a finger, and the girl wrapped a hand around it and tugged with precocious strength.

"But you won't be here."

"No … I won't be here." Eragon gently extricated his finger from Ismira's grip and returned to stand by Roran. "As I said, you could join me."

The muscles in Roran's jaw shifted. "And give up Palancar Valley?" He shook his head. "Horst and the others are already preparing to return. We'll rebuild Carvahall as the finest town in the whole Spine. You could help; it would be like before."

"I wish I could."

Below, Saphira uttered a throaty gurgle and nuzzled the side of Fírnen's neck. The green dragon snuggled closer to her.

In a low voice, Roran said, "Is there no other way, Eragon?"

"Not that Saphira or I can think of."

"Blast it—it's not right. You shouldn't have to go live by yourself in the wilderness."

"I won't be entirely alone. Blödhgarm and a few other elves will be

going with us."

Roran made an impatient gesture. "You know what I mean." He gnawed on the corner of his mustache and leaned on his hands against the stone lip underneath the window. Eragon could see the sinews in his thick forearms knotting and flexing. Then Roran looked at him and said, "What will you do once you get to wherever you're going?"

"Find a hill or a cliff and build a hall atop it: a hall large enough to house all the dragons and keep them safe. And you? Once you rebuild the village, what then?"

A faint smile appeared on Roran's face. "Something similar. With the tribute from the valley, I plan to build a castle atop that hill we always talked about. Not a big castle, mind you; just a bit of stonework with a wall, enough to hold off any Urgals who might decide to attack. It'll probably take a few years, but then we'll have a proper way to defend ourselves, unlike when the Ra'zac came with the soldiers." He cast a sideways glance at Eragon. "We'd have room for a dragon as well."

"Would you have room for *two* dragons?" Eragon gestured toward Saphira and Fírnen.

"Maybe not.… How does Saphira feel about having to leave him?"

"She doesn't like it, but she knows it's necessary."

"Mmh."

The amber light from the dying sun accentuated the planes of Roran's face; somewhat to Eragon's surprise, he saw the beginnings of lines and wrinkles on his cousin's brow and around his eyes. He found the signs of encroaching age sobering. *How quickly life passes*.

Katrina laid Ismira in a cradle. Then she joined them at the window and placed a hand on Eragon's shoulder. "We'll miss you, Eragon."

"And I you," he said, and touched her hand. "We don't have to say goodbye quite yet, though. I'd like the three of you to come with us to Ellesméra. You would enjoy seeing it, I think, and that way we could spend another few days together."

Roran swiveled his head toward Eragon. "We can't travel all the way to Du Weldenvarden with Ismira. She's too young. Returning to Palancar Valley is going to be difficult enough; a side trip to Ellesméra is out of the question."

"Not even if it was on dragonback?" Eragon laughed at their surprised expressions. "Arya and Fírnen have agreed to carry you to Ellesméra while Saphira and I fetch the dragon eggs from where they're hidden."

"How long would the flight to Ellesméra take?" asked Roran, frowning.

"A week or so. Arya intends to visit King Orik in Tronjheim on the way. You would be warm and safe the whole while. Ismira wouldn't

be in any danger."

Katrina looked at Roran, and he at her, and she said, "It would be nice to see Eragon off, and I've always heard tell of how beautiful the elves' cities are.…"

"Are you sure you would be up to it?" asked Roran.

She nodded. "As long as you're there with us."

Roran was silent for a moment; then he said, "Well, I suppose Horst and the others can go on ahead without us." A smile appeared under his beard, and he chuckled. "I never thought to see the Beor Mountains or to stand in one of the elves' cities, but why not, eh? We might as well while we have the chance."

"Good, that's settled, then," said Katrina, beaming. "We're going to Du Weldenvarden."

"How will we get back?" asked Roran.

"On Fírnen," said Eragon. "Or I'm sure Arya would give you guards to escort you to Palancar Valley, if you would prefer to travel by horse."

Roran grimaced. "No, not by horse. If I never have to ride another horse in my life, it would be too soon by half."

"Oh? Then I take it you don't want Snowfire anymore?" said Eragon, raising an eyebrow as he named the stallion he had given Roran.

"You know what I mean. I'm glad to have Snowfire, even if I haven't had need of him for a while."

"Mm-hmm."

They stood by the window for another hour or so—as the sun set and the sky turned purple and then black and the stars came out—planning their upcoming trip and discussing the things Eragon and Saphira would need to take with them when they left Du Weldenvarden for the lands beyond. Behind them, Ismira slept peacefully in her cradle, her hands balled up in tiny fists beneath her chin.

Early the next morning, Eragon used the polished silver mirror in his room to contact Orik in Tronjheim. He had to wait for a few minutes, but eventually Orik's face appeared before him, the dwarf running an ivory comb through his unbraided beard.

"Eragon!" Orik exclaimed with obvious delight. "How are you? It's been too long since last we spoke."

Feeling a bit guilty, Eragon agreed. Then he told Orik of his decision to leave and the reasons why. Orik stopped combing and listened without interrupting, his expression serious throughout. When Eragon finished, Orik said, "I will be sad to see you go, but I agree, this is what you must do. I have thought about this myself—worried about

where the dragons might live—but I kept my concerns to myself, for the dragons have as much right to share the land as we do, even if we do not like it when they eat our Feldûnost and burn our villages. However, raising them elsewhere will be for the best."

"I am glad you approve," said Eragon. He talked to Orik about his idea for the Urgals, then, which involved the dwarves as well. This time Orik asked many questions, and Eragon could see that he was doubtful about the proposal.

After a long silence wherein Orik stared down into his beard, the dwarf said, "If you had asked this of any of the grimstnzborithn before me, they would have said no. Had you asked me at any time before we invaded the Empire, I would also have said no. But now, after having fought alongside the Urgals, and after having seen in person how helpless we were before Murtagh and Thorn and Galbatorix and that monster Shruikan … now I no longer feel the same." He gazed up through his bushy eyebrows at Eragon. "It may cost me mine crown, but on behalf of knurlan everywhere I will accept—for their own good, whether or not they realize it."

Again Eragon felt proud to have Orik as his foster brother. "Thank you," he said.

Orik grunted. "My people never desired this, but I am grateful for it. When will we know?"

"Within a few days. A week at most."

"Will we feel anything?"

"Maybe. I'll ask Arya. Either way, I'll contact you again once it's done."

"Good. Then we will speak later. Safe travels and sound stone, Eragon."

"May Helzvog watch over you."

* * *

The following day, they departed Ilirea.

It was a private event, devoid of fanfare, for which Eragon was grateful. Nasuada, Jörmundur, Jeod, and Elva met them outside the city's southern gate, where Saphira and Fírnen sat side by side, pushing their heads against one another while Eragon and Arya inspected their saddles. Roran and Katrina arrived a few minutes later: Katrina carrying Ismira swaddled in a blanket, and Roran carrying two packs full of blankets, food, and other supplies, one slung over each shoulder.

Roran gave his packs to Arya, and she tied them atop Fírnen's saddlebags.

Then Eragon and Saphira said their last farewells, which was harder for Eragon than for Saphira. His were not the only eyes with tears,

however; both Nasuada and Jeod wept as they embraced him and offered him and Saphira their good wishes. Nasuada also said farewell to Roran, and she again thanked him for his help against the Empire.

At last, as Eragon, Arya, Roran, and Katrina were about to climb onto the dragons, a woman called out, "Hold there!"

Eragon paused with his foot atop Saphira's right foreleg and looked to see Birgit striding toward them from the city gates, gray skirts billowing, and her young son, Nolfavrell, trailing after her with a helpless expression on his face. In one hand, Birgit carried a drawn sword. In the other, a round wooden shield.

Eragon's stomach sank.

Nasuada's guards moved to intercept the two of them, but Roran shouted, "Let them pass!"

Nasuada signaled to the guards and they stepped aside.

Without slowing, Birgit walked over to Roran.

"Birgit, please don't," said Katrina in a low voice, but the other woman ignored her. Arya watched them unblinkingly, her hand on her sword.

"Stronghammer. I always said that I would have my compensation from you for my husband's death, and now I have come to claim it, as is my right. Will you fight me, or will you pay the debt that is yours?"

Eragon went to stand by Roran. "Birgit, why are you doing this? Why now? Can't you forgive him and let old sorrows rest?"

Do you want me to eat her? asked Saphira.

Not yet.

Birgit ignored him and kept her gaze fixed on Roran.

"Mother," said Nolfavrell, tugging on her skirts, but she showed no reaction to his plea.

Nasuada joined them. "I know you," she said to Birgit. "You fought with the men during the war."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"What quarrel have you with Roran? He has proved himself a fine and valuable warrior on more than one occasion, and I would be most displeased to lose him."

"He and his family were responsible for the soldiers killing my husband." She looked at Nasuada for a moment. "The Ra'zac *ate* him, Your Majesty. They ate him and they sucked the marrow from his bones. I cannot forgive that, and I *will* have my compensation for it."

"It was not Roran's fault," said Nasuada. "This is unreasonable, and I forbid it."

"No, it's not," said Eragon, though he hated to. "By our custom, she has the right to demand a blood price from everyone who was responsible for Quimby's death."

"But it wasn't Roran's fault!" exclaimed Katrina.

“But it was,” said Roran in a low voice. “I could have turned myself over to the soldiers. I could have led them away. Or I could have attacked. But I didn’t. I chose to hide, and Quimby died as a result.” He glanced at Nasuada. “This is a matter we must settle among ourselves, Your Majesty. It is a matter of honor, even as the Trial of the Long Knives was for you.”

Nasuada frowned and looked to Eragon. He nodded, so with reluctance, she stepped back.

“What will it be, Stronghammer?” asked Birgit.

“Eragon and I killed the Ra’zac in Helgrind,” said Roran. “Is that not enough?”

Birgit shook her head, her determination never wavering. “No.”

Roran paused then, the muscles in his neck rigid. “Is this what you really want, Birgit?”

“It is.”

“Then I will pay my debt.”

As Roran spoke, Katrina uttered a wail and thrust herself between him and Birgit, still holding their daughter in her arms. “I won’t let you! You can’t have him! Not now! Not after everything we’ve gone through!”

Birgit’s face remained as stone, and she made no move to retreat. Likewise, Roran showed no emotion as he grasped Katrina by the waist and, without apparent effort, lifted her off to the side. “Hold her, would you?” he said to Eragon in a cold voice.

“Roran …”

His cousin gave him a flat stare, then turned back to Birgit.

Eragon grabbed hold of Katrina’s shoulders to keep her from flinging herself after Roran, and he exchanged a helpless look with Arya. She glanced toward her sword, and he shook his head.

“Let go of me! Let go!” shouted Katrina. In her arms, the baby began to scream.

Never taking his eyes off the woman before him, Roran undid his belt and dropped it to the ground, along with his dagger and his hammer, which one of the Varden had found in the streets of Ilirea soon after Galbatorix’s death. Then Roran pulled open the front of his tunic and bared his hair-covered chest.

“Eragon, remove my wards,” he said.

“I—”

“Remove them!”

“Roran, no!” shouted Katrina. “Defend yourself.”

He’s mad, thought Eragon, but he dared not interfere. If he stopped Birgit, he would shame Roran, and the people of Palancar Valley would lose all respect for his cousin. And Roran, Eragon knew, would rather die than allow that to happen.

Nevertheless, Eragon had no intention of letting Birgit kill Roran. He would let her have her price, but no more. Speaking softly in the ancient language—so that none might hear the words he used—he did as Roran had asked, but he also placed three new wards upon his cousin: one to protect the spine within his neck from being severed; one to keep his skull from being broken; and one to safeguard his organs. All else Eragon felt confident he could heal if necessary, as long as Birgit did not start cutting off limbs.

"It is done," he said.

Roran nodded and to Birgit said, "Take your price of me, then, and let this be an end to the quarrel between us."

"You will not fight me?"

"No."

Birgit eyed him for a moment; then she threw her shield onto the ground, crossed the few remaining feet that separated her from Roran, and placed the edge of her sword against Roran's breast. In a voice loud enough for only Roran to hear—though Eragon and Arya did as well with their catlike acuity—she said, "I loved Quimby. He was my life, and he died because of you."

"I'm sorry," Roran whispered.

"Birgit," pleaded Katrina. "Please …"

No one moved, not even the dragons. Eragon found himself holding his breath. The hiccupping crying of the baby was the loudest sound.

Then Birgit lifted the sword from Roran's breast. She reached down to take his right hand and drew the edge of the sword across his palm. Roran winced as the blade cut into his hand, but he did not pull away.

A crimson line appeared upon his skin. Blood filled his palm and spilled dripping to the ground, where it soaked into the trampled earth, leaving a dark blotch upon the dirt.

Birgit ceased pulling on the sword and held it motionless against Roran's palm for a moment more. Then she stepped back and lowered the scarlet-edged sword to her side. Roran closed his fingers around his palm, blood flowing between them, and pressed his hand against his hip.

"I have had my price," said Birgit. "Our quarrel is at an end."

Then she turned, picked up her shield, and strode back to the city, with Nolfavrell dogging her heels.

Eragon released Katrina, and she rushed to Roran's side. "You fool," she said, a bitter note in her voice. "You stubborn, pigheaded fool. Here, let me see."

"It was the only way," said Roran, as if from far away.

Katrina frowned, her face hard and strained as she examined the cut on his hand. "Eragon, you should heal this."

"No," said Roran with sudden sharpness. He closed his hand again.

“No, this is one scar I’ll keep.” He looked around. “Is there a strip of fabric I can use as a bandage?”

After a moment of confusion, Nasuada pointed to one of her guards and said, “Cut off the bottom part of your tunic and give it to him.”

“Wait,” said Eragon as Roran started to wrap the strip around his hand. “I won’t heal it, but at least let me cast a spell to keep the cut from getting infected, all right?”

Roran hesitated. Then he nodded and held out his hand toward Eragon.

It took Eragon only a few seconds to mouth the spell. “There,” he said. “Now it won’t turn green and purple and swell up as large as a pig’s bladder.”

Roran grunted, and Katrina said, “Thank you, Eragon.”

“Now, shall we leave?” asked Arya.

The five of them climbed onto the dragons, Arya helping Roran and Katrina safely into the saddle on Fírnen’s back, which had been modified with loops and straps to hold additional passengers. Once they were properly seated atop the green dragon, Arya raised a hand. “Farewell, Nasuada! Farewell, Eragon and Saphira! We will expect you in Ellesméra!”

Farewell! said Fírnen in his deep voice. He spread his wings and jumped skyward, flapping quickly to lift the weight of the four people on his back, helped by the strength of the two Eldunarí Arya was taking with her.

Saphira roared after him, and Fírnen replied with a trumpeted bugle before arrowing his way toward the southeast and the distant Beor Mountains.

Eragon twisted around in his saddle and waved to Nasuada, Elva, Jörmundur, and Jeod. They waved in return, and Jörmundur shouted, “Best of luck to the both of you!”

“Goodbye,” cried Elva.

“Goodbye!” shouted Nasuada. “Be safe!”

Eragon replied in kind, and then he turned his back to them, unable to bear the sight any longer. Saphira crouched underneath him and sprang into the air as they began the first leg of their long, long journey.

Saphira circled as she gained altitude. Below, Eragon saw Nasuada and the others standing in a clump by the city walls, Elva holding up a small white kerchief, which fluttered in the gusts of wind from Saphira’s passage.

Promises, New and Old

From Ilirea, Saphira flew to the nearby estate where Blödhgarm and the elves under his command were packing the Eldunarí for transport. The elves would ride north with the Eldunarí to Du Weldenvarden, and thence through the vast forest to the elven city of Sílthrim, which sat upon the shore of Ardwen Lake. There the elves and the Eldunarí would wait for Eragon and Saphira to return from Vroengard. Then together they would begin their journey out of Alagaësia, following the Gaena River as it flowed eastward through the forest and onto the plains beyond. All of them, that was, save Laufin and Uthinarë, who had elected to stay behind in Du Weldenvarden.

The elves' decision to accompany them had surprised Eragon, but he was grateful for it nevertheless. As Blödhgarm had said, "We cannot abandon the Eldunarí. They need our help, as will the younglings once they hatch."

Eragon and Saphira spent a half hour discussing the safe transport of the eggs with Blödhgarm, and then Eragon gathered up the Eldunarí of Glaedr, Umaroth, and several of the older dragons; he and Saphira would need their strength on Vroengard.

Upon taking their leave of the elves, Saphira and Eragon set off to the northwest, Saphira flapping at a steady, unhurried pace compared with that of their first trip to Vroengard.

As she flew, a sadness fell upon Eragon, and for a time he felt despondent and self-pitying. Saphira too was sad—she because of having parted from Fírnen—but the day was bright and the winds were calm, and their spirits soon lifted. Still, a faint sense of loss colored everything Eragon beheld, and he gazed at the land with renewed appreciation, knowing that he would likely never see it again.

Many leagues across the verdant grasslands Saphira flew, her shadow frightening the birds and the beasts below. When night came, they did not continue onward, but stopped and made camp by a rivulet that lay at the bottom of a shallow gully and sat watching the stars turning above them and talking of all that had been and all that might be.

Late the next day, they arrived at the Urgal village that had sprung up near the lake Fläm, where Eragon knew they would find Nar Garzhvog and the Herndall, the council of dams who ruled their people.

Despite Eragon's protests, the Urgals insisted upon throwing an enormous feast for him and Saphira, so he spent the evening drinking with Garzhvog and his rams. The Urgals made a wine out of berries and tree bark that Eragon thought was even stronger than the strongest of the dwarves' mead. Saphira enjoyed it more than he—to him, it tasted like cherries gone bad—but he drank it anyway to please their hosts.

Many of the female Urgals came up to him and Saphira, curious to meet them, as few of the Urgal women had joined in the fight against the Empire. They were somewhat slimmer than their men but just as tall, and their horns tended to be shorter and more delicate, although still massive. With them were Urgal children: the younger ones lacking horns, the older ones with scaly nubs upon their foreheads that protruded between one and five inches. Without their horns, they looked surprisingly like humans, despite the different color of their skin and their eyes. It was obvious that some of the children were Kull, for even the younger ones towered over their compatriots and, sometimes, their parents. So far as Eragon could tell, there was no pattern that determined which parents bore Kull and which did not. The parents who were Kull themselves, it seemed, bore Urgals of ordinary stature just as often as giants like themselves.

All that evening, Eragon and Saphira caroused with Garzhvog, and Eragon fell into his waking dreams while listening to an Urgal chanter recite the tale of Nar Tulkhqa's victory at Stavarosk—or so Garzhvog told him, for Eragon could understand nothing of the Urgals' tongue, other than that it made the dwarves' sound as sweet as honeyed wine.

In the morning, Eragon found himself blotched with a dozen or more bruises, the result of the friendly knocks and cuffs he had received from the Kull during their feasting.

His head throbbing, and his body as well, he and Saphira went with Garzhvog to speak with the Herndall. The twelve dams held court in a low, circular hut filled with the smoke of burning juniper and cedar. The wicker doorway was barely large enough for Saphira's head, and her scales cast chips of blue light across the dark interior.

The dams were exceedingly old, and several were blind and toothless. They wore robes patterned with knots similar to the woven straps that hung outside each building, and which bore the crest of the inhabitants' clan. Each of the Herndall carried a stick carved with patterns that held no meaning for Eragon but which he knew were not meaningless.

With Garzhvog translating, Eragon told them the first part of his plan to forestall future conflict between the Urgals and the other races, which was for the Urgals to hold games every few years, games of strength, speed, and agility. In them, the young Urgals would be

able to win the glory they needed in order to mate and earn a place for themselves within their society. The games, Eragon proposed, would be open to every race, which would also provide the Urgals a means to test themselves against those who had long been their foes.

"King Orik and Queen Nasuada have already agreed to this," said Eragon, "and Arya, who is now queen of the elves, is also considering it. I believe that she too will grant the games her blessing."

The Herndall consulted among themselves for several minutes; then the oldest, a white-haired dam whose horns had worn away to almost nothing, spoke. Garzhvog again translated: "Yours is a good idea, Firesword. We must speak with our clans to decide upon the best time for these contests, but this we will do."

Pleased, Eragon bowed and thanked them.

Another of the dams spoke then. "We like this, Firesword, but we do not think this will stop the wars between our peoples. Our blood runs too hot for games alone to cool."

And that of dragons does not? asked Saphira.

One of the dams touched her horns. "We do not question the fierceness of your kind, Flametongue."

"I know that your blood runs hot—hotter than most," said Eragon. "That is why I have another idea."

The Herndall listened in silence as he explained, though Garzhvog stirred, as if uneasy, and uttered a low grunt. When Eragon finished, the Herndall did not speak or move for several minutes, and Eragon began to feel uncomfortable under the unblinking stare of those who could still see.

Then the rightmost Urgal shook her stick, and a pair of stone rings attached to it rattled loudly in the smoke-filled hut. She spoke slowly, the words thick and muddied, as if her tongue was swollen. "You would do this for us, Firesword?"

"I would," said Eragon, and bowed again.

"If you do, Firesword and Flametongue, then you will be the greatest friend the Urgralgra have ever had, and we will remember your names for the rest of time. We will weave them into every one of our thulqna, and we will carve them onto our pillars, and we will teach them to our younglings when their horns bud."

"Then your answer is yes?" asked Eragon.

"It is."

Garzhvog paused and—speaking for himself, Eragon thought—he said, "Firesword, you do not know how much this means to my people. We will always be in your debt."

"You owe me nothing," said Eragon. "I only wish to keep us from having to go to war."

He talked with the Herndall for a while longer, discussing the

particulars of the arrangement. Then he and Saphira made their farewells and resumed their journey to Vroengard.

As the rough-hewn huts of the village shrank behind them, Saphira said, *They will make good Riders.*

I hope you are right.

The rest of their flight to Vroengard Island was uneventful. They encountered no storms over the sea; the only clouds that barred their way were thin and wispy and posed no danger to them or the gulls with whom they shared the sky.

Saphira landed on Vroengard before the same half-ruined nesting house where they had stayed during their previous visit. There she waited while Eragon walked into the forest and wandered among the dark, lichen-encrusted trees until he found several of the shadow birds he had encountered before and, after them, a patch of moss infested with the hopping maggots Nasuada had told him Galbatorix called burrow grubs. Using the name of names, Eragon gave both of the animals a proper title in the ancient language. The shadow birds he called *sundavrblaka* and the burrow grubs *íllgrathr*. The second of the two names amused him in a grim sort of way, as it meant "bad hunger."

Satisfied, Eragon returned to Saphira, and they spent the night resting and talking with Glaedr and the other Eldunarí.

At dawn, they went to the Rock of Kuthian. They spoke their true names, and the graved doors within the mossy spire opened, and Eragon, Saphira, and the Eldunarí descended to the vault below. In that deep-set cavern, lit by the lake of molten stone that lay beneath the roots of Mount Erolas, the guardian of the eggs, Cuaroc, helped them place each egg into a separate casket. Then they piled the caskets near the center of the chamber, along with the five Eldunarí who had stayed within the cavern to help protect the eggs.

With Umaroth's help, Eragon cast the same spell he had once before and placed the eggs and hearts into a pocket of space that hung behind Saphira, where neither she nor he could touch it.

Cuaroc accompanied them out of the vault. The metal feet of the dragon-headed man clanged loudly against the tunnel floor as he climbed to the surface alongside them.

Once they were outside, Saphira grasped Cuaroc between her talons —for he was too large and heavy to sit comfortably upon her back— and she took flight, rising above the circular valley that lay in the heart of Vroengard.

Across the sea, dark and shining, flew Saphira. Then over the Spine, the peaks like blades of ice and snow, and the rifts between them like rivers of shadow. She diverted north and crossed over Palancar Valley

—so that she and Eragon might have one last look at their childhood home, if only from high above—and then over the Bay of Fundor, which was scalloped with lines of foam-crested waves, like so many rolling mountains. Ceunon, with its steep, many-layered roofs and sculptures of dragon heads, was their next landmark of note, and soon afterward, the leading edge of Du Weldenvarden appeared, the pines tall and strong.

Nights they spent camped by streams and ponds, the light of their fires reflecting off Cuaroc's polished metal body, while frogs and insects chorused about them. In the distance, they ofttimes heard the howls of hunting wolves.

Once at Du Weldenvarden, Saphira flew for an hour toward the center of the great forest, whereupon the elves' wards stopped her from proceeding any farther. Then she landed and walked through the invisible barrier of magic, Cuaroc striding alongside her, and again took flight.

League after league of trees sailed by underneath them, with little variation save for clusters of deciduous trees—oaks and elms and birch and aspen and languorous willows—which often lined the waterways below. Past a mountain, the name of which Eragon had forgotten, and the elven city of Osilon, and then trackless acres of pines, each unique and yet nearly identical to its countless brethren.

At last, in late evening, when both the moon and the sun hung low upon opposing horizons, Saphira arrived at Ellesméra and glided down to land amid the living buildings of the elves' largest, and proudest, of cities.

Arya and Fírnen were waiting for them, along with Roran and Katrina. As Saphira drew near, Fírnen reared and spread his wings, uttering a joyful roar that frightened birds into the air for a league around. Saphira answered in kind as she settled onto her hind legs and gently placed Cuaroc on the ground.

Eragon unbuckled his legs and slid down off Saphira's back.

Roran ran up, grasped him by the forearm, and clapped him on the shoulder while Katrina hugged him on the other side. Laughing, Eragon said, "Ah! Stop, let me breathe! So, how do you like Ellesméra?"

"It's beautiful!" said Katrina, smiling.

"I thought you were exaggerating," said Roran, "but it's every bit as impressive as you said. The hall we've been staying in—"

"Tialdarí Hall," said Katrina.

Roran nodded. "That. It's given me some ideas as to how we should rebuild Carvahall. And then there's Tronjheim and Farthen Dûr …" He shook his head and uttered a low whistle.

Eragon laughed again and started walking along the forest path

toward the western edge of Ellesméra, they leading him. Arya joined them, looking every bit as much a queen as her mother once had. "Well met by moonlight, Eragon. Welcome back."

He looked at her. "Well met indeed, Shadeslayer."

She smiled at his use of the title, and the dusk beneath the swaying trees seemed to grow brighter.

Once Eragon had removed Saphira's saddle, she and Fírnen took flight—although Eragon knew Saphira was exhausted from their journey—and together they disappeared in the direction of the Crags of Tel'naeír. As they departed, Eragon heard Fírnen say, *I caught three deer for you this morning. They are waiting for you on the grass by Oromis's hut.*

Cuaroc set off in pursuit of Saphira, for the eggs were still with her, and it was his duty to protect them.

Through the great boles of the city, Roran and Katrina led Eragon until they arrived at a clearing edged with dogwood and hollyhocks, where tables sat laden with a vast assortment of food. Many elves, garbed in their finest tunics, greeted Eragon with soft cries, mellifluous laughter, and snatches of song and music.

Arya took her place at the head of the banquet, and the white raven, Blagden, rested upon a carved perch nearby, croaking and spouting occasional scraps of verse. Eragon sat by Arya's side, and they ate and drank and made merry until late in the night.

When the feast began to draw to a close, Eragon snuck away for a few minutes and ran through the darkened forest to the Menoa tree, guided more by his senses of smell and hearing than by sight.

The stars appeared overhead as he emerged from beneath the angled boughs of the great pine trees. He paused, then, to slow his breathing and collect himself before picking his way across the bed of roots that surrounded the Menoa tree.

He stopped at the base of the immense trunk and placed his hand against the creviced bark. Reaching out with his mind toward the slow consciousness of the tree that had once been an elf woman, he said:

Linnëa … Linnëa … Awake! I must needs speak with you! He waited but detected no response from the tree; it was as if he were attempting to communicate with the sea or the air or the earth itself. *Linnëa, I must speak to you!*

A sigh of wind seemed to pass through his mind, and he felt a thought, faint and distant, a thought that said, *What, O Rider …?*

Linnëa, when last I was here, I said that I would give you whatever you wanted in exchange for the brightsteel under your roots. I am about to leave Alagaësia, so I have come to fulfill my obligation ere I go. What would you have of me, Linnëa?

The Menoa tree did not answer, but its branches stirred slightly,

needles fell pattering onto the roots about the clearing, and a sense of amusement emanated from its consciousness.

Go …, whispered the voice, and then the tree withdrew from Eragon's mind.

He stood where he was for another few minutes, calling her name, but the tree refused to respond. In the end, Eragon left, feeling as if the matter was still unsettled, although the Menoa tree obviously thought otherwise.

The next three days, Eragon spent reading books and scrolls—many of which had come from Galbatorix's library and which Vanir had sent onward to Ellesméra at Eragon's request. In the evenings, he dined with Roran, Katrina, and Arya, but otherwise he kept to himself and did not see even Saphira, for she remained with Fírnen on the Crags of Tel'naeír and showed little interest in anything else. At night, the roars and bellows of the dragons often echoed across the forest, distracting him from his studies and making him smile when he touched Saphira's thoughts. He missed Saphira's companionship, but he knew that she had only a short time to spend with Fírnen, and he begrudged her not her happiness.

On the fourth day, when he had learned all he could from his reading, he went to Arya and presented his plan to her and her advisers. It took him the better part of the day to convince them that what he had in mind was necessary and, moreover, that it would work.

Once he had, they broke to eat. As dusk began to creep across the land, they assembled in the clearing around the Menoa tree: he, Saphira and Fírnen, Arya, thirty of the elves' oldest and most accomplished spellcasters, Glaedr and the other Eldunarí that Eragon and Saphira had brought with them, and the two Caretakers: the elf women Iduna and Nëya, who were the living embodiment of the pact between the dragons and the Riders.

The Caretakers disrobed, and—in accordance with the ancient rituals—Eragon and the others began to sing, and as they sang, Iduna and Nëya danced, moving together so that the dragon tattooed across them seemed to become a single, unified creature.

At the height of the song, the dragon shimmered, and then it opened its jaws and stretched its wings and leaped forward, pulling itself off the elves' skin and rising above the clearing until only its tail remained touching the intertwined Caretakers.

Eragon called to the glowing creature, and when he had its attention, he explained to it what he wanted and asked if the dragons would agree.

Do as you will, Kingkiller, said the spectral creature. *If it will help*

ensure peace throughout Alagaësia, we do not object.

Then Eragon read from one of the books of the Riders, and he spoke the name of the ancient language in his mind. The elves and the dragons who were present lent him the strength of their bodies, and the energy from them coursed through him like a great whirling tempest. With it, Eragon cast the spell he had spent days perfecting, a spell such as had not been cast for hundreds of years: an enchantment like unto the great old magics that ran deep within the veins of the earth and the bones of the mountains. With it, he dared to do what had been done only once before.

With it, he forged a new compact between the dragons and the Riders.

He bound not just the elves and the humans to the dragons, but also the dwarves and the Urgals, making it so that any one of them could become a Rider.

As he spoke the final words of the mighty enchantment, and thus sealed it into place, a tremor seemed to run through the air and the earth. He felt as if everything around them—and everything in the world perhaps—had shifted ever so slightly. The spell exhausted him, Saphira, and the other dragons, but upon its conclusion, a sense of elation filled him, and he knew that he had accomplished a great good, the greatest, perhaps, of his entire life.

Arya insisted on throwing another feast to mark the occasion. Tired though he was, Eragon participated with good cheer, happy to enjoy her company and that of Roran, Katrina, and Ismira.

In the midst of the feast, however, the food and music suddenly became too much for him, and he excused himself from the table where he sat with Arya.

Are you all right? asked Saphira, looking over from her place by Fírnen.

He smiled at her from across the clearing. *I just need some quiet. I'll be back soon*. He slipped away and walked slowly among the pines, breathing deeply of the cool night air.

A hundred feet from where the tables lay, Eragon saw a thin, high-shouldered elf man sitting against a massive root, his back to the nearby celebration. Eragon altered his path to avoid disturbing him, but as he did so, he caught a glimpse of the elf's face.

It was no elf at all, but the butcher Sloan.

Eragon stopped, caught by surprise. In all that had gone on, he had forgotten that Sloan—Katrina's father—was in Ellesméra. He hesitated for a moment, debating, and then with quiet steps walked over to him.

As he had the last time Eragon had seen him, Sloan wore a thin black strip of cloth tied around his head, covering the empty sockets where his eyes had once been. Tears seeped out from under the cloth,

and his brow was furrowed and his lean hands clenched.

The butcher heard Eragon approach, for he turned his head in Eragon's direction and said, "Who goes there? Is that you, Adarë? I told you, I need no help!" His words were bitter and angry, but there was also grief in them such as Eragon had not heard from him before.

"It's me, Eragon," he said.

Sloan stiffened, as if touched with a red-hot brand. "You! Have you come to gloat at my misery, then?"

"No, of course not," said Eragon, appalled by the thought. He dropped into a crouch several feet away.

"Forgive me if I don't believe you. It's often hard to tell if you're trying to help or hurt a person."

"That depends on your point of view."

Sloan's upper lip curled. "Now there's a weaselly elf-answer, if ever I heard one."

Behind him, the elves struck up a new song on lute and pipe, and a burst of laughter floated toward Eragon and Sloan from the party.

The butcher motioned over his shoulder with his chin. "I can hear her." Fresh tears rolled out from under the strip of cloth. "I can hear her, but I can't see her. And your blasted spell won't let me talk to her."

Eragon remained silent, unsure what to say.

Sloan leaned his head against the root, and the knob in his throat bobbed. "The elves tell me that the child, Ismira, is strong and healthy."

"She is. She's the strongest, loudest baby I know. She'll make a fine woman."

"That's good."

"How have you spent your days? Have you kept up with your carving?"

"The elves keep you informed of my activities, do they?" As Eragon tried to decide how to answer—he did not want Sloan to know he had visited him once before—the butcher said, "I guessed as much. How do you think I spend my days? I spend them in darkness, as I have ever since Helgrind, with nothing to do but twiddle my thumbs while the elves pester me about this and that and never give me a moment's peace!"

Again laughter sounded behind them. Within it, Eragon could make out the sound of Katrina's voice.

A fierce scowl contorted Sloan's face. "And then you had to go and bring *her* to Ellesméra. It wasn't enough just to exile me, was it? No, you had to torture me with the knowledge that my only child and grandchild are here, and that I'll never be able to see them, much less meet them." Sloan bared his teeth, and he looked as if he might spring

forward at Eragon. “You’re a right heartless bastard, you are.”

“I have too many hearts,” said Eragon, though he knew the butcher would not understand.

“Bah!”

Eragon hesitated. It seemed kinder to let Sloan believe that Eragon had meant to hurt him rather than to tell him that his pain was merely the result of Eragon’s forgetfulness.

The butcher turned his head away, and more tears rolled down his cheeks. “Go,” he said. “Leave me. And never trouble me again, Eragon, or I swear one of us will die.”

Eragon poked at the needles on the ground, then he stood and stared down at Sloan. He did not want to leave. What he had done to Sloan by bringing Katrina to Ellesméra felt wrong and cruel. Guilt gnawed at Eragon, growing stronger second by second, until at last he reached a decision, whereupon calm settled over him again.

Speaking no louder than a whisper, he used the name of the ancient language to alter the spells he had placed on Sloan. It took him over a minute, and as he neared the end of his incantations, Sloan growled between clenched teeth, “Stop your accursed muttering, Eragon, and begone. Leave me, blast you! Leave me!”

Eragon did not leave, however, but began a new spell. He drew upon the knowledge of the Eldunarí and of the Riders whom many of the older dragons had been paired with, and he sang a spell that nurtured and fostered and restored what had once been. It was a difficult task, but Eragon’s skill was greater than it had once been, and he was able to accomplish what he wished.

As Eragon sang, Sloan twitched, and then he began to curse and scratch with both hands at his cheek and brow, as if an itch had seized him.

“Blast you! What are you doing to me!”

Ending his incantation, Eragon squatted back down and gently removed the strip of cloth around Sloan’s head. Sloan hissed as he felt the strip being pulled away, and he reached up to stop Eragon, but was too slow and his hands closed on empty air.

“You would take my dignity as well?” said Sloan, hate in his voice.

“No,” said Eragon. “I would give it back. Open your eyes.”

The butcher hesitated. “No. I can’t. You’re trying to trick me.”

“When have I ever done that? Open your eyes, Sloan, and look upon your daughter and granddaughter.”

Sloan trembled, and then, slowly, ever so slowly, his eyelids crept upward and revealed, instead of empty sockets, a pair of gleaming eyes. Unlike those he had been born with, Sloan’s new eyes were blue as the noonday sky and of startling brilliance.

Sloan blinked, his pupils shrinking as they adjusted to the meager

light within the forest. Then he jolted upright and twisted to peer over the top of the root at the festivities taking place between the trees beyond. The glow from the elves' flameless lanterns lit his face with a warm light, and by it, he seemed suffused with life and joy. The transformation in his expression was amazing to behold; Eragon felt tears in his own eyes as he watched the older man.

Sloan continued to stare over the root, like a parched traveler seeing a great river before him. In a hoarse voice, he said, "She's beautiful. They're both so beautiful." Another burst of laughter rang forth. "Ah … she looks happy. And Roran too."

"From now on, you can look at them if you want," said Eragon. "But the spells upon you still won't let you talk with them or show yourself to them or contact them in any way. And if you try, I'll know."

"I understand," murmured Sloan. He turned, and his eyes focused on Eragon with unsettling force. His jaw worked up and down for a few seconds, as if he were chewing on something, and then he said, "Thank you."

Eragon nodded and stood. "Goodbye, Sloan. You'll not see me again, I promise."

"Goodbye, Eragon." And the butcher twisted round to gaze once more into the light of the elven feast.

LEAVE-TAKING

A week passed: a week of laughter and music and long walks amid the wonders of Ellesméra. Eragon took Roran, Katrina, and Ismira to visit Oromis's hut on the Crags of Tel'naeír, and Saphira showed them the sculpture of licked stone she had made for the Blood-oath Celebration. As for Arya, she spent a day guiding them about the many gardens in the city, so they might see some of the more spectacular plants the elves had collected and created throughout the ages.

Eragon and Saphira would have been happy to stay in Ellesméra for another few weeks, but Blödhgarm contacted them and informed them that he and the Eldunarí under his charge had arrived at Ardwen Lake. And though neither Eragon nor Saphira wished to admit it, they knew it was time to leave.

It cheered them, however, when Arya and Fírnen announced that they would fly with them, at least until the edge of Du Weldenvarden and maybe a bit farther.

Katrina decided to stay behind with Ismira, but Roran asked to accompany them on the first part of their journey, for as he said, "I'd like to see what the far side of Alagaësia looks like, and traveling with you is faster than having to ride all the way out there on a horse."

At dawn the next day, Eragon said his farewells to Katrina, who cried the whole while, and to Ismira, who nursed on her thumb and stared at him without comprehension.

Then they set out, Saphira and Fírnen flying side by side as they headed eastward over the forest. Roran sat behind Eragon, holding him by the waist, while Cuaroc dangled from Saphira's talons, his body reflecting the sunlight as brightly as any mirror.

After two and a half days, they sighted Ardwen Lake: a pale sheet of water larger than the whole of Palancar Valley. On its western bank stood the city of Sílthrim, which neither Eragon nor Saphira had visited before. And bobbing in the water by the city's wharves was a long white ship with a single mast.

The vessel looked as Eragon knew it would, for he recognized it from his dreams, and a sense of inexorable fate settled upon him as he gazed at it.

This was always meant to be, he thought.

They spent the night in Sílthrim, which was much like Ellesméra, although smaller and more densely built. While they rested, the elves

loaded the Eldunarí onto the ship, along with food, tools, cloth, and other useful supplies. The ship's crew was composed of twenty elves who wished to help with the raising of the dragons and the training of future Riders, as well as Blödhgarm and all of his remaining spellcasters, save Laufin and Uthinarë, who at that point took their leave.

In the morning, Eragon modified the spell that kept the eggs hidden above Saphira and removed two of them, which he gave to the elves Arya had chosen to safeguard the unborn dragons. Along with the eggs went three of the Eldunarí—dragons who had decided to remain among the elves, both to serve as mentors for Fírnen and the dragons yet to hatch, and because they preferred, for reasons of their own, to remain in Alagaësia.

Of the two eggs, one would go to the dwarves and one to the Urgals, and hopefully the dragons within would see fit to choose Riders from their designated race. If not, then they would exchange places, and if they still did not find Riders for themselves … well, Eragon was not quite sure what to do then, but he was confident Arya would think of something. Once the eggs hatched, they and their Riders would answer to Arya, Fírnen, and the three Eldunarí until they were old enough to join Eragon, Saphira, and the rest of their kin in the east.

Then Eragon, Arya, Roran, Cuaroc, Blödhgarm, and the other elves traveling with them boarded the ship, and they set sail across the lake, while Saphira and Fírnen circled high overhead.

The ship was named the *Talíta*, after a reddish star in the eastern sky. Light and narrow, the vessel needed only a few inches of water to float. It moved without sound and hardly needed steering, as it seemed to know exactly where its helmsman wished to go.

For days, they floated through the forest, first across Ardwen Lake and then, later, down the Gaena River, which was swollen with the spring snowmelt. As they passed through the green tunnel of branches, birds of many kinds sang and flew about them, and squirrels—both red and black—would scold them from the tops of the trees or would sit watching on branches that hung just out of reach.

Eragon spent most of his time with either Arya or Roran and only flew with Saphira on rare occasions. For her part, Saphira kept with Fírnen, and he often saw them sitting on the bank, their paws overlapping and their heads resting side by side on the ground.

During the days, the light in the forest was gold and hazy; during the nights, the stars twinkled brightly and the waxing moon provided enough illumination to sail by. The warmth and the haze and the constant rocking of the *Talíta* made Eragon feel as if he were half-

asleep, lost in the remembrance of a pleasant dream.

Eventually, as of course it had to, the forest ended, and they sailed out onto the fields beyond. The Gaena River turned south then and carried them alongside the forest to Eldor Lake, the waters of which were even larger than those of Ardwen Lake.

There the weather turned, and a storm sprang up. Tall waves pummeled the ship, and for a day, they were all miserable as a cold rain and a fierce wind battered them. The wind was at their back, however, and it sped their progress considerably.

From Eldor Lake, they entered onto the Edda River and sailed southward past the elven outpost of Ceris. After that, they left the forest behind entirely, and the *Talíta* glided on the river, across the plains, seemingly of its own volition.

From the moment they had emerged from within the trees, Eragon had expected Arya and Fírnen to leave. But neither said anything about departing, and Eragon was content not to ask them their plans.

Farther south they went, across more and more empty land. Looking about them, Roran said, “It’s rather desolate, isn’t it?” and Eragon had to agree.

At last they arrived at the easternmost settlement in Alagaësia: a small, lonely collection of wooden buildings by the name of Hedarth. The dwarves had built the place for the sole purpose of trading with the elves, for there was nothing of value in the area save the herds of deer and wild oxen visible in the distance. The buildings stood at the juncture where the Âz Ragni poured into the Edda, more than doubling its size.

Eragon, Arya, and Saphira had passed through Hedarth once before, in the opposite direction, when they had traveled from Farthen Dûr to Ellesméra after the battle with the Urgals. Thus Eragon knew what to expect when the village came into sight.

However, he was puzzled to see hundreds of dwarves waiting for them at the head of a makeshift pier that extended into the Edda. His confusion turned to delight when the group parted and Orik strode forth.

Raising his hammer, Volund, over his head, Orik shouted, “You didn’t think I would let mine own foster brother leave without saying a proper goodbye, now did you?!”

Grinning, Eragon cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back, “Never!”

The elves docked the *Talíta* long enough for everyone to disembark, save Cuaroc, Blödhgarm, and two other elves who stayed to guard the Eldunarí. The water where the rivers met was too rough for the ship to hold its position without scraping against the pier, so the elves then

cast off and sailed farther down the Edda, in search of a calmer place to lay anchor.

The dwarves, Eragon was astounded to see, had brought to Hedarth four of the giant boars from the Beor Mountains. The Nagran were spitted on trees as thick as Eragon's leg and were roasting over pits of glowing coals.

"I killed that one myself," Orik said proudly, pointing to the largest of the boars.

Along with the rest of the feast, Orik had brought three wagons of the dwarves' finest mead specifically for Saphira. Saphira hummed with pleasure when she saw the barrels. *You will have to try it as well*, she told Fírnen, who snorted and extended his neck, sniffing curiously at the barrels.

When evening came and the food was cooked, they sat at the rough-hewn tables the dwarves had built just that day. Orik banged his hammer against his shield, silencing the crowd. Then he picked up a piece of meat, put it in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

"Ilf gauhnith!" he proclaimed. The dwarves shouted with approval, and the feast began in earnest.

At the end of the evening, when everyone had eaten their fill—even the dragons—Orik clapped his hands and called for a servant who brought out a casket filled with gold and gems. "A small token of our friendship," Orik said as he gave it to Eragon.

Eragon bowed and thanked him.

Then Orik went to Saphira and, with a twinkle in his eye, he presented her with a gold and silver ring that she might wear on any of the claws of her forefeet. "It is a special ring, for it will not scratch, nor will it stain, and as long as you wear it, your prey will not hear you approaching."

The gift pleased Saphira immensely. She had Orik place the ring on the middle talon of her right paw, and throughout the evening, Eragon caught her admiring the band of gleaming metal.

At Orik's insistence, they stayed the night in Hedarth. Eragon hoped to leave early the following morning, but as the sky began to brighten, Orik invited him, Arya, and Roran to breakfast. After breakfast, they fell to talking, and then they went to see the rafts the dwarves had used to float the Nagran from the Beor Mountains to Hedarth, and before long it was nearly dinnertime again, and Orik succeeded in convincing them to stay for one last meal.

With the dinner, as with the feast the previous day, the dwarves provided song and music, and listening to the performance of a particularly skilled dwarf bard delayed the departure of their party even further.

"Stay another night," Orik urged. "It's dark and no time for

traveling."

Eragon glanced up at the full moon and smiled. "You forget, it's not so dark for me as it is for you. No, we must go. If we wait any longer, I fear we will never leave."

"Then go with mine blessings, brother of mine heart."

They embraced, and then Orik had horses brought for them—horses the dwarves kept stabled in Hedarth for the elves who came to trade.

Eragon raised his arm in farewell to Orik. Then he spurred his steed forward and galloped with Roran and Arya and the rest of the elves away from Hedarth and down the game trail that ran along the southern bank of the Edda, where the air was sweet with the aroma of willows and cottonwoods. Above, the dragons followed, twining around each other in a playful, spiraling dance.

Outside Hedarth, Eragon reined in his mount, as did the others, and they rode on at a slower, more comfortable pace, talking softly amongst themselves. Eragon discussed nothing of importance with Arya or Roran, nor they with him, for it was not the words that mattered but rather the sense of closeness they shared in the confines of the night. The mood between them felt precious and fragile, and when they spoke, it was with greater kindness than usual, for they knew their time together was drawing to an end, and none wished to mar it with a thoughtless phrase.

They soon arrived at the top of a small hill and gazed down from it upon the *Talíta*, which sat waiting for them on the far side.

The ship appeared as Eragon knew it would. As it must.

By the light of the pale moon, the vessel looked like a swan ready to take flight from the wide, slow-moving river and carry him into the vast unknown. The elves had lowered its sails, and the sheets of fabric gleamed with a faint sheen. A single figure stood at the tiller, but otherwise the deck was empty.

Past the *Talíta*, the flat, dark plain extended all the way to the distant horizon: a daunting expanse broken only by the river itself, which lay upon the land like a strip of hammered metal.

A tightness formed in Eragon's throat, and he pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, as if to hide himself from the sight.

They slowly rode down the hill and through the whispering grass to the pebble beach by the ship. The hooves of the horses sounded sharp and loud against the stones.

There Eragon dismounted, as did the others. Unbidden, the elves formed two lines leading to the ship, one facing the other, and they planted the ends of their spears in the ground by their feet and stood thus, statue-like.

Eragon looked them over, and the tightness in his throat increased, making it difficult to breathe properly.

Now is the moment, said Saphira, and he knew she was right.

Eragon untied the casket of gold and gems from the back of his horse's saddle and carried it to Roran.

"This is where we part, then?" Roran asked.

Eragon nodded. "Here," he said, giving the casket to Roran. "You should have this. You can make better use of it than I.… Use it to build your castle."

"I'll do that," said Roran, his voice thick. He placed the casket under his left arm, and then he embraced Eragon with his right, and they held each other for a long moment. Afterward, Roran said, "Be safe, Brother."

"You too, Brother.… Take care of Katrina and Ismira."

"I will."

Unable to think of anything else to say, Eragon touched Roran once more on the shoulder, then turned away and went to join Arya where she stood waiting for him by the two rows of elves.

They stared at each other for a handful of heartbeats, and then Arya said, "Eragon." She had drawn her cowl as well, and in the moonlight, he could see little of her face.

"Arya." He looked down the silvery river and then back at Arya, and he gripped the hilt of Brisingr. He was so full of emotion, he trembled. He did not want to leave, but he knew he must. "Stay with me—"

Her gaze darted up. "I cannot."

"… stay with me until the first curve in the river."

She hesitated, then nodded. He held out his arm, and she looped hers through his, and together they walked onto the ship and went to stand by the prow.

The elves behind them followed, and once they were all on board, they pulled up the gangplank. Without wind or oars, the ship moved away from the stony shore and began to drift down the long, flat river.

On the beach, Roran stood alone, watching them go. Then he threw back his head and uttered a long, aching cry, and the night echoed with the sound of his loss.

For several minutes, Eragon stood next to Arya, and neither spoke as they watched the first curve in the river approach. At last, Eragon turned to her, and he pushed the cowl away from her face, so that he could see her eyes.

"Arya," he said. And he whispered her true name. A tremor of recognition ran through her.

She whispered his true name in response, and he too shivered at hearing the fullness of his being.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but Arya forestalled him by

placing three of her fingers upon his lips. She stepped back from him then and raised one arm over her head.

"Farewell, Eragon Shadeslayer," she said.

And then Fírnen swept down from above and snatched her off the deck of the ship, buffeting Eragon with the gusts of air from his wings.

"Farewell," Eragon whispered as he watched her and Fírnen fly back toward where Roran still stood upon the distant shore.

Then Eragon finally allowed the tears to spill from his eyes, and he clutched the railing of the ship and wept as he left behind all that he had ever known. Above, Saphira keened, and her grief mingled with his as they mourned what could never be.

In time, however, Eragon's heart slowed, and his tears dried, and a measure of peace stole over him as he gazed out at the empty plain. He wondered what strange things they might encounter within its wild reaches, and he pondered the life he and Saphira were to have—a life with the dragons and Riders.

We are not alone, little one, said Saphira.

A smile crept across his face.

And the ship sailed onward, gliding serenely down the moonlit river toward the dark lands beyond.

On the Origin of Names:

To the casual observer, the various names an intrepid traveler will encounter throughout Alagaësia might seem but a random collection of labels with no inherent integrity, culture, or history. However, as with any land that different cultures—and in this case, different species—have repeatedly colonized, Alagaësia acquired names from a wide array of unique sources, among them the languages of the dwarves, elves, humans, and even Urgals. Thus we can have Palancar Valley (a human name), the Anora River and Ristvak'baen (elven names), and Utgard Mountain (a dwarf name) all within a few square miles of each other.

While this is of great historical interest, practically it often leads to confusion as to the correct pronunciation. Unfortunately, there are no set rules for the neophyte. You must learn each name upon its own terms, unless you can immediately place its language of origin. The matter grows even more confusing when you realize that in many places the resident population altered the spelling and pronunciation of foreign words to conform to their own language. The Anora River is a prime example. Originally *anora* was spelled *äenora*, which means *broad* in the ancient language. In their writings, the humans simplified the word to *anora*, and this, combined with a vowel shift wherein *äe* (ay-eh) was said as the easier *a* (uh), created the name as it appears in Eragon's time.

To spare readers as much difficulty as possible, I have compiled the following list, with the understanding that these are only rough guidelines to the actual pronunciation. The enthusiast is encouraged to study the source languages in order to master their true intricacies.

PRONUNCIATION:

Aiedail—AY-uh-dale
Ajihad—AH-zhi-hod
Alagaësia—al-uh-GAY-zee-uh
Albitr—ALL-bite-ur
Arya—AR-ee-uh
Blödhgarm—BLAWD-garm
Brisingr—BRISS-ing-gur
Carvahall—CAR-vuh-hall
Cuaroc—coo-AR-ock
Dras-Leona—DRAHS-lee-OH-nuh
Du Weldenvarden—doo WELL-den-VAR-den
Ellesméra—el-uhs-MEER-uh
Eragon—EHR-uh-gahn
Farthen Dûr—FAR-then DURE (*dure* rhymes with *lure*)
Fírnen—FEER-nin
Galbatorix—gal-buh-TOR-icks
Gil'ead—GILL-ee-id
Glaedr—GLAY-dur
Hrothgar—HROTH-gar
Islanzadí—iss-lan-ZAH-dee
Jeod—JODE (rhymes with *load*)
Murtagh—MUR-tag (*mur* rhymes with *purr*)
Nasuada—nah-soo-AH-dah
Niernen—nee-AIR-nin
Nolfavrell—NOLL-fah-vrel (*noll* rhymes with *toll*)
Oromis—OR-uh-miss
Ra'zac—RAA-zack
Saphira—suh-FEAR-uh

Shruikan—SHREW-kin

Sílthrim—SEAL-thrim (*síl* is a hard sound to transcribe; it's made by flicking the tip of the tongue off the roof of the mouth)

Teirm—TEERM

Thardsvergûndnzmal—thard-svair-GOON-dinz-mahl

Trianna—TREE-ah-nuh

Tronjheim—TRONJ-heem

Umaroth—oo-MAR-oth

Urû'baen—OO-roo-bane

Vrael—VRAIL

Yazuac—YAA-zoo-ack

Zar'roc—ZAR-rock

The Ancient Language:

Agaetí Blödhren—Blood-oath Celebration (held once a century to honor the original pact between elves and dragons)

älfa—elf (plural is *älfya*)

älfakyn—the race of elves

Atra du evarínya ono varda.—May the stars watch over you.

Atra esterní ono thelduin, Eragon.—May good fortune rule over you, Eragon.

audr—up

böllr—a round object; an orb

brisingr—fire (*see also* istalrí)

Dauthdaert—Death Spear: name given to the lances the elves made for killing dragons

Deloi sharjalví!—Earth, move!

Domia abr Wyrda—Dominance of Fate (book)

draumr kópa—dream stare

dröttning—queen

dröttningu—princess (roughly; it's not an exact translation)

du—the

Du Fells Nángoröth—The Blasted Mountains

Du Vrangr Gata—The Wandering Path

Du Weldenvarden—The Guarding Forest

ebrithil(ar)—master(s)

Eka aí fricai un Shur'tugal.—I am a Rider and a friend.

Eka elrun ono, älfya, wiol förn thornessa.—I thank you, elves, for this gift.

elda—a gender-neutral honorific suffix of great praise, attached with a hyphen

Elrun ono.—Thank you.

Erisdar—the flameless lanterns both the elves and the dwarves use (named after the elf who invented them)

fairth—a picture taken by magical means on a shingle of slate

fell—mountain

finiarel—an honorific suffix for a young man of great promise, attached with a hyphen.

flauga—fly (v.)

frethya—hide (v.)

gánga—go

gánga aptr—go backward

gánga fram—go forward

gánga raehta—go right

gedwëy ignasia—shining palm

Guliä waíse medh ono, Argetlam.—Luck be with you, Silverhand.

Helgrind—The Gates of Death

hvitr—white

íllgrathr—bad hunger

islingr—light-bringer/illuminator

istalrí—fire (*see also* brisingr)

jierda—break; hit

kausta—come

kverst—cut

Kverst malmr du huildrs edtha, mar frëma né thön eka threyja!—Cut the metal holding me, but no more than I desire!

ládrin—open

letta—stop

Liduen Kvaedhí—Poetic Script

mäe—a fragment of a word that Eragon never finished saying

naina—make bright

Naina hvitr un böllr.—Make round white light.

Nam iet er Eragon Sundavar-Vergandí, sönr abr Brom.—My name is Eragon Shadeslayer, son of Brom.

Nïdhwal—dragon-like creatures that live in the sea, related to the Fanghur

niernen—orchid

Ono ach *néiat* threyja eom verrunsmal edtha, O snalglí.—You do *not* want to fight me, O snalglí.

Sé ono waíse ilia.—May you be happy.

Sé onr sverdar sitja hvass.—May your swords stay sharp.

Shur'tugal—Dragon Rider

slytha—sleep

snalglí—a race of giant snails

Stenr rïsa.—Stone, rise.

Stenr slauta!—Stone reverberate (sound)! (*slauta* is difficult to translate; it is a sharp, cleaving sound, like that of cracking stone, but it can also mean to make such a sound)

Stydja unin mor'ranr.—Rest in peace.

sundavrblaka—shadow-flapper

svit-kona—a formal honorific for a woman of great wisdom

thelduin—rule over

theyna—be silent

thrautha—throw

Thrysta vindr.—Compress the air.

thurra—dry (v.)

un—and

Vae weohnata ono vergarí, eka thäet otherúm.—We will kill you, I swear it.

Vaer Ethilnadras—a brown, free-floating seaweed with gas-filled

bladders along the joints of its branching stem

vaetna—scatter/dispel

valdr—ruler

vëoht—slow

verma—heat (v.)

vrangr—awry; wandering

Waíse néiat!—Be not!

yawë—a bond of trust

The Dwarf Language:

Az Ragni—The River

Az Sweldn rak Anhûin—The Tears of Anhûin

barzûl—curse someone with ill fate

Beor—cave bear (elf word)

derûndânn—greetings

dûr—our

dûrgrimst—clan (literally, “our hall,” or “our home”)

Erôthknurl—a stone of earth (literally, “earthstone”; plural is *Erôthknurln*)

Fanghur—dragon-like creatures that are smaller and less intelligent than their cousins, the dragons; related to the Nïdhwal (native to the Beor Mountains)

Farthen Dûr—Our Father

Feldûnost—Frostbeard (a species of goat native to the Beor Mountains)

grimstborith—clan chief (literally, “hall chief”; plural is *grimstborithn*)

grimstcarvlorss—arranger of the house

grimstnzborith—ruler of the dwarves, whether king or queen (literally, “halls’ chief”)

Ilf gauhnith!—a peculiar dwarf expression that means “It is safe and good!” Commonly uttered by the host of a meal, it is a holdover from days when poisoning of guests was prevalent among the clans.

Ingeitum—fire workers; smiths

knurla—dwarf (literally, “one of stone”; plural is *knurlan*)

Nagra—giant boar; native to the Beor Mountains (plural is *Nagran*)

thardsvergûndnzmal—something that appears other than it actually is; a fake or counterfeit; a sham

Tronjheim—Helm of Giants

Vor Orikz korda!—By Orik’s hammer!

The Nomad Language:

no—an honorific suffix attached with a hyphen to the main name of someone you respect

The Urgal Language:

drajl—spawn of maggots

nar—a title of great respect

thulqna—woven straps the Urgals use to display the crests of their clans

Uluthrek—Mooneater

Urgralgra—Urgals’ name for themselves (literally, “those with horns”)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kvetha Fricaya. Greetings, Friends.

What a long road this has been. It's difficult to believe that the end has finally arrived. Many times, I doubted whether I would ever finish this series. That I did is due in no small part to the help and support of a great many people.

I do not exaggerate when I say that writing *Inheritance* has been the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. For a variety of reasons—personal, professional, and creative—this book presented more of a challenge than any of the previous ones. I'm proud to have completed it, and I'm prouder still of the book itself.

Looking back on the series as a whole, I find it impossible to sum up my feelings. The Inheritance cycle has consumed twelve years of my life—nearly half of it, to date. The series has changed me and my family, and the experiences I have had as a result would take another four books to recount. And now to let it go, to say goodbye to Eragon, Saphira, Arya, Nasuada, and Roran and to move on to new characters and new stories … It's a daunting prospect.

I don't intend to abandon Alagaësia, however. I've put too much time and effort into building this world, and at some point in the future, I will return to it. That may not occur for another few years, or it might happen next month. At the moment, I can't say. When I do return to it, I hope to address a few of the mysteries that I left unresolved in this series.

Speaking of which, I'm sorry to have disappointed those of you who were hoping to learn more about Angela the herbalist, but she wouldn't be half so interesting if we knew everything about her. However, if you ever meet my sister, Angela, you can always try asking her about her character. If she's in a good mood, she might tell you something interesting. If not … well, you'll probably get a funny quip nevertheless.

Right, then. Onward to the thanks:

* * *

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the inspiration to use a slate mine in the chapters on Aroughs. And to author Terry Brooks, who has been both a friend and a mentor to me. (I highly recommend his Magic Kingdom of Landover series.)

And thanks to Mike Macauley, who has set up and run one of the best fan sites out there (shurtugal.com) and who, with Mark Cotta Vaz, wrote *The Inheritance Almanac*. Without Mike's efforts, the community of readers would be much smaller and poorer than it is now. Thanks, Mike!

My heartfelt gratitude goes to my Spanish friend, Alex Vivaut, who not only runs the eragons.com website, but who hosts the best Alagaësia parties! A million thanks, Alex!

A special mention goes to Reina Sato, a fan whose reaction upon encountering escargot for the first time led me to create the snalglí on Vroengard. Reina, the snalglí are for you.

As always, my final thanks go to you, the reader. Thank you for staying with me through this story; I hope the stars shine brightly over you through the rest of your life.

And … that's it. I have no more words to add to this series. I have said what needed to be said. The rest is silence.

Sé onr sverdar sitja hvass.

Christopher Paolini
November 8, 2011

CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI's abiding love of fantasy inspired him to write the Inheritance cycle, which quickly became an internationally bestselling series. Christopher draws inspiration for the world of Eragon and his dragon, Saphira, from the natural beauty that surrounds his home in Montana: the tumultuous weather, the roaring Yellowstone River, and the soaring Beartooth Mountains.

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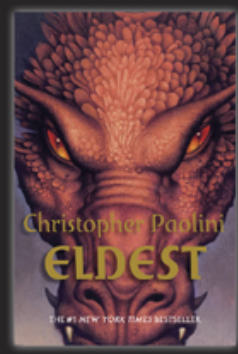

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